

■ POLK ■ DES MOINES ■

# TAXPAYERS

■ ASSOCIATION ■

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## 2009 Statement to the Ankeny School District

The Association would like to thank Dr. Hansel for taking time out of his schedule to talk with the Association about the proposed budget for the upcoming fiscal year. The Association would also like to publicly thank Dr. Hansel and Dr. Wendt for meeting with us throughout the past year. As a result of our conversations, the truly excellent booklet assembled by Dr. Hansel that contains a host of great data, and the information put together by the Association staff, the Ankeny Committee of the Polk-Des Moines Taxpayers Association voted to SUPPORT the proposed budget for FY2009/2010 even though it contains a .26/\$1000 increase in the property tax levy.

For all of the information provided to the Association on the proposed budget, we still have questions concerning the federal stimulus money. It was frustrating to learn that everyone involved still has questions and the District may not have many of the answers from the Federal and State levels until after the start of the new fiscal year.

An examination of all of the various levies that make up the Total Levy shows that there were major changes in a number of them. The Association appreciates the hard work, tough decisions, and multiple cost-savings measures that were implemented to mitigate the large increase in the Cash Reserve Levy. The Association's members also supported the District's change in its Early Retirement policy, even though the higher than average number of applicants this year as a result of that policy change did cause an increase in the Management Levy to cover those costs.

The opening paragraph states that the Association strives to foster intergovernmental cooperation. The Association wishes to thank the Board and Administration for implementing changes that have been found to be successful in neighboring districts. Idea sharing that goes both ways with other school districts, the collaboration with the City of Ankeny on school-owned property, the use of the old Police Station and possibly other facilities by the District, and working closely with other taxpayer supported agencies such as DMACC bring undeniable benefits to the District and the taxpayers.

Hearing about a review of the Special Education program was encouraging. Association members know that the deficits incurred in this program affect the General Fund, and that this issue is a concern in the other metro districts. Our members continue to urge the Board and Administration to control costs in every expenditure category and institute best practices in facilities, education, and finances so that all stakeholders benefit. We believe that the District has taken some good steps, but this endeavor is an on-going process, for as difficult as the upcoming year will be, the Association expects that FY2010/2011 will be even more challenging.

This fall there will be a referendum to sell bonds to finance a new elementary building. The Association recognizes the need for more elementary space. However, the conversation between the District and the Association on this issue has just started, and we look forward to having further serious discussions on the District's needs and wants. The Association has found, on its part, the many meetings between Dr. Wendt, Dr. Hansel, and our members to be very informative. The candor and the give-and-take relationship are very much appreciated.

## 2009 Statement to the Des Moines Public Schools

The Association appreciated talking with Dr. Sebring and CFO Patti Schroeder on the proposed budget, as we have appreciated talking with them and COO Bill Good throughout the past twelve months. Based on our discussion, the proposals laid out in the budget notebook, and the Association's analysis of the available data on Revenues and Expenditures, the Des Moines Committee of the Polk-Des Moines Taxpayers Association voted to SUPPORT the proposed FY2010 Budget, realizing that the Board's vote tonight only sets the maximum tax rate - a .17/\$1000 decrease in the levy - and maximum budgeted amounts.

The purpose of a \$49 billion stabilization fund, which is part of the education stimulus, is to protect schools from damaging cuts and layoffs while preserving the momentum toward reform. CFOs and Business Managers in every District were crunching numbers to determine just how much relief to expect. Yet not one district the Association talked to is sure, at this time, exactly how much they will receive, or under what conditions and regulations. The Association understands that the detail we would like to see in the budget on Stimulus Package funds is not possible, and that there will be budget amendments later in the year as the Federal funds arrive and the situation with the rules becomes clearer. These funds must not be used piecemeal but, instead, be integrated into the overall plan.

Since its creation in 1921, the Association has seen county, municipal, and school district budgets through many economic ups and downs, including the Great Depression. The current economic downturn provides one of the most challenging situations to any government's ability to operate. The Association's forecast is that the 2010/2011 budget year will be even more challenging. This then, is the perfect time to make the changes necessary to move education forward in the Des Moines Independent School District. Complacency, by any interest group, is not an option. Doing things because "that's the way we've always done it" is not acceptable. Superintendent Sebring, CFO Schroeder, and COO Good have our confidence. It is up to them to eliminate weak programs or practices and mobilize the District's resources with potential long-term benefits. The Board must do their part to provide leadership. The Board needs to focus on goals, policy, and establishing executive limitations as they agreed to do under Policy Governance, and not waste their time or the public's time on items that have an immaterial impact on the budget.

One of the ways to enhance education is to partner with other governmental, non-profit, or business organizations. The District is involved in a number of partnerships and deserves recognition for those successes. The Association urges the Administration to redouble their efforts in this area and the Board to support those endeavors.

Your students are also a resource. We were encouraged to hear that they are involved in many programs that utilize their talents and time to benefit the entire district. There are many possible opportunities where they can both learn and provide value to other organizations, their classmates, and the District through various enterprises or community service.

The legislature has the ability to make decisions that can significantly affect the District. Some of these should help, such as allowing an increase in the number of charter schools. Others could be detrimental, such as changing the law under which negotiations are currently done. The Association urges the Board and the Administration to plan for different scenarios, and be prepared to quickly change as trials appear. The better and earlier you are prepared for the future, the better you can deal with the tests you will face.

The Association was aware that Bill Good uses benchmarking and performance measures to help him run the Operations side as efficiently as currently possible. We were pleased to learn that the District benchmarks its self against the UEN. That's a good start. Since the best run organizations in the US benchmark themselves against the best, high performing districts with similar demographics across the nation also need to be included in your comparisons. Well-run organizations know that they can only get better if they look for and implement good ideas, whatever the source may be.

The 2009-2010 Proposed Budget and Financial Statements report, which was issued by the Business and Finance Department, explains how the budget relates to goals and how receipts from various sources require expenditures restricted to the specific purpose of the funds. It provides to the public an excellent foundation for better understanding the budget.

Thank you for your attention to these remarks. We look forward to continuing the talks between our members and the District.

## **2009 Statement to the Urbandale School District**

The Association would like to thank Board President Ripperger, Superintendent Robinson and his staff for meeting with us on April 3, 2009 to discuss the Urbandale Community School District's current financial condition and the proposed budget for FY2009/2010. Based on the data assembled by the Association and the conversation with those who attended on behalf of the District, the Urbandale Committee of the Polk-Des Moines Taxpayers Association voted to SUPPORT the proposed budget.

We are pleased that in these challenging times, the tax levy rate was able to remain constant due to using sales tax dollars to pay down debt service which then allowed a \$3.65/\$1000 increase in the general fund portion of the total levy. If under changed financial conditions it is necessary to once again increase the debt service levy, the members of the Association expect to see a corresponding decrease in the general fund.

The Association was very pleased to learn that the District was able to control their health insurance costs so that the increase was only 1%. As the costs for health care and insurance increase, controlling them is an important factor in keeping expenditure increases in the personnel category at an acceptable level. . We encourage the Board to continue to be vigilant for ongoing ideas for cost savings in all areas.

Cooperation between governments is an important issue with the Association. It is apparent that the lines of communication between the Urbandale District and the City of Urbandale are fully open and you are to be commended for the ongoing cooperation. The Association however will not allow you to rest on your laurels. We urge you to continue to seek areas of collaboration between yourself and the other local governments.

The demographics of the student population of the Urbandale District have changed over time, reflecting the changes happening in the entire state. This change brings challenges as well as opportunities. It is the responsibility of the Board to prepare for these types of changes. The Association believes that this Board and administration has an outstanding record in accepting and managing for the changes in our society.

An important part of dealing with challenges is contingency planning. The Association urges the Board to take the time that is required to be prepared for additional tests, whether they come from the legislature, the local demographics or the demands of the local, state or national economy.

The Association wishes to thank the Board and administration for the ongoing cooperation that we have enjoyed for these last several years. The communication and openness is appreciated.

## 2009 STATEMENT TO THE WEST DES MOINES SCHOOL DISTRICT

The Association would like to thank Dr. Narak and his staff for meeting with the members of the Association on April 3<sup>rd</sup>. The exchange covered the published property tax increase, the Special Education deficit with the reduction of FTE's in that area, and budgeting philosophy. Based on the discussion at that meeting and an analysis of the budget, the West Des Moines Committee of the Polk-Des Moines Taxpayers Association voted to SUPPORT the proposed budget for FY2009/2010.

The Association is extremely pleased that good planning and the judicious use of Sales Tax funds means that the District will be debt free in 2010. This was not an easy decision to make in light of the District's facility needs, but the Association agrees that it was the right one. Long-term planning, either financially or for facilities, is hard. The District is once again in the midst of facility planning. The Association cautions the Board that needs must take precedence over wants, and that opportunities for collaboration should be carefully considered.

Open enrollment has been a concern for the District for many years, demonstrated by the fact that an Open Enrollment report is a part of normal board business. You are to be congratulated for taking the initiative to not only stop the outflow, but to reverse it. Steps such as all day kindergarten and being proactive in the recruitment of families have helped.

The Association has long advocated cooperation among governments. We commended you for the steps that you have taken in the past. The Association will not allow you rest on your laurels, however. In this tough economic time, we urge that you continue to seek areas of collaboration between yourself and other local governments.

Last year in our comments, the Association agreed with Dr. Narak's and the other area superintendent's position on the possible changes to the laws governing negotiation. We continue to support this District, and all Districts, in their efforts to see that the law is not changed to the detriment of an administration's ability to bargain with their unions. These times are challenging enough financially without additional burdens being placed upon school districts.

In closing, the Association wants to commend the West Des Moines Community School District for having such a capable and professional administration. Dr. Narak and his staff communicate well with the public. They are very knowledgeable in the myriad of details that it takes to run a district well. They are proactive in dealing with issues that affect the school system. We appreciate their openness, their forthright manner, and their willingness to meet with us upon request.