

Just last week, the School Board approved a budget of nearly \$700 million, and I know that's a vast number that comes with high expectations for all of us. However, you should know that the overall budget is currently somewhat artificially inflated with federal and state COVID-relief funds set to expire and millions of dollars in work tied to our ongoing recovery from Hurricane Michael. But still, that's a lot of money.

While I have only been the Superintendent for about seven weeks, I have quickly become aware of the overall inadequacy of our salary schedule and how we compensate the valued members of our Team of Teams. I am committed to doing all I can, with the help of the School Board, to rectify that as quickly as possible.

I know you join me in wanting our teachers, support staff members and administrators to be fairly and adequately compensated for their vital work. I know you want us to be able to hire the very best, most highly qualified staff members to work with your children. And I know you understand that it will take time to accomplish those meaningful and critical goals in an organization of our size, with more than 3,500 employees.

So, I want to take a few minutes this week to share my overall salary philosophy with you to help ensure we're on the same page.

In many public venues since taking office, I have shared how disappointed I am personally in any sort of celebration that BDS achieved a minimum starting salary last year of \$15 for all support employees. While I don't want to take away from that milestone, it saddens me greatly that some of the key people in our organization are not making a living wage. With inflation and the cost of everything on the rise, it's certainly a challenge to meet the needs of a family on \$15 an hour.

You may not even realize that more than 1,500 men and women who drive our buses, service our buses, fix our air conditioners, answer our phones, work directly with our students and literally (hence the name) support every aspect of our organization are now paid \$15 an hour equally and without regard to their years of experience, job responsibilities or professional training.

Please know, however, that my respect for these support employees does not detract from my equal commitment to our teachers and administrators, who are also incredibly important to our work.

As the spouse of a retired and dedicated teacher, the needs of our instructional staff are very near and dear to my heart, and I want to do all I can for them regarding salaries as well. I am incredibly grateful for the commitment from Governor Ron DeSantis that helped us increase starting teacher salaries from \$36,000 to \$47,800 in under four years. That's a HUGE commitment to teachers, and we're very appreciative. At the same time, however, I know that our veteran teachers have not enjoyed the same increase because the state's money was explicitly designated for beginning teachers.

Now that we've surpassed the state's minimum teacher salary of \$47,500, we can employ the state's funding for teacher raises in the manner we deem most appropriate locally. We're currently engaged in that process with the Association of Bay County Educators (the union representing the instructional staff).

I can't go into many details about the intricacies of bargaining, but I can tell you that we're attempting to right the ship a little bit regarding our teachers. We should not have a salary

schedule where teachers with zero to 17 years of experience make the same amount of money, but that's where we find ourselves currently.

Likewise, we should not have a salary schedule that pays someone who answers the phones and greets our guests and stakeholders, and does a fantastic job at it, the same as someone responsible for the safety of 40 students while driving a bus for us. We should not have a valued and experienced classroom paraprofessional with years of professional development and training under his/her belt, making the same as someone just beginning in that position with zero experience. But, sadly, we do.

I want to leverage all the resources we have to do all the good we can for all of the incredible employees here. However, that will take time, patience and understanding as we re-prioritize, analyze our budget and determine our best path forward.

And, unfortunately, that means we simply cannot give our employees all the raises they so richly deserve this year. We didn't find ourselves in this position in just one year, and we won't be able to rectify it in just one year.

But we will celebrate achievements along the way, and I hope you will celebrate with us.

Education is a noble profession, and I consider everyone who works for BDS to be an educator because we all support our children in their journey as lifelong learners. I commit to you that we will begin to take steps immediately, in partnership with both unions, to implement new salary structures to help us attract and retain the best employees for our children. That work begins in earnest with a complete overhaul of our current approach and a new needs assessment and budget analysis.

In the meantime, as we work on this crucial task, thank you for your continued support and acknowledgment that adequately compensating those who work with our children is a high priority for our school system and our entire community. I know Bay County values education, and I look forward to your continued understanding and encouragement.