

State of Saratoga School

A question has been asked why I am not doing more for the referendum. I would like everyone to understand that there has been an Ethics Law in place since 2003 that allows me only to provide facts about our district. I cannot help organize any referendum campaign, whether it be for the referendum or against the referendum. The new law requires citizens to do this work. I have offered to speak to any group of people that would like information about the proposed project in a factual manner. I am available every Wednesday evening in my office until 7:00 for any community member that has questions or would like to tour the building. A fact sheet about the referendum has been sent home to every parent and the District web site has been updated with information about the referendum. A fact sheet will also be mailed to every residence in our district. We hosted one well attended open house, have another scheduled for March 20 and a final open house will be on April 11. We have signed up a deputy registrar in the district office to register parents.

I have been the Superintendent at Saratoga School for two years and 9 months. I would like to take this opportunity to provide some facts about the district over that time period. I will mention working together and cooperating often because it is not my intention to stress my personal accomplishments, but to stress that it has taken all of us helping each other to achieve results.

By working together and cooperating, the Education Fund balance of the district has gone from \$-9,745 to approximately \$900,000 at the end of this fiscal year. Why did the Education Fund have a negative balance? Because, the district had been deficit spending over \$200,000 each year since July of 2001, despite healthy tax base increases. How have we achieved this significant increase in fund balance? By working together as board members, administration, and staff to understand the problem and do what was necessary to improve. We now must maintain a balance in this fund for the education of our students, but not to the point of over taxing the community.

By working together and cooperating, we have developed a very positive working relationship between the Board of Education, administration, and staff. When I came to the district the relationship between staff, administration, and school board was strained due to prior contract negotiations and other issues. I want to thank the Board of Education and staff members for working together during the past two contract negotiations to do what was best for the District. By cooperating we have been able to meet the needs of our staff, add medical insurance benefits for our staff, and remain fiscally responsible to our taxpayers.

By working together and cooperating, we have established several Intergovernmental Agreements that help students, save tax dollars, and make the schools more efficient. I estimate that these agreements have saved over \$1,000,000 for the community. These are dollars that can be spent on the education of our students. The intention of these

agreements is not to consolidate schools, but to save tax dollars and improve the education of the students in our community. I will summarize four agreements.

1) We have had a School to School Agreement in place with Morris Elementary to provide lunches for Saratoga students since 2001. Although this was in place before I came to Saratoga, I think it is worth reviewing. Prior to 2001 Saratoga students brought sack lunches to school each day. The students whose families qualified for free or reduced lunches due to their economic situation, received a hot lunch in a Styrofoam container. It is good that they received a free or reduced lunch; however, the container identified the students to every other student and staff member in the school. Thank you to everyone at Morris Elementary for their efforts in this regard and thank you to the Boards of Education and administration of both districts for allowing this to continue so that our school has a lunch program.

2) We have an Intergovernmental Agreement in place with Morris Elementary so that Saratoga's students that do not speak English are taught by teachers specifically trained in this area. Prior to that Intergovernmental Agreement I am sad to say that those students most likely fell through the cracks at our school.

3) We have an Intergovernmental Agreement in place with Morris High School, Morris Elementary, Coal City Unit District, Seneca High School, and Mazon Elementary regarding special education transportation. We work together to transport our special education students to the facilities that they need to attend. This agreement saves \$100's of thousands of tax dollars each year.

4) We have an Intergovernmental Agreement in place with Morris High School, Morris Elementary, and Nettle Creek regarding building related contracts for required inspections and other services such as asbestos and bleacher inspections. This agreement allows us to save tax dollars by coordinating our inspections and services together.

Saratoga and Morris Elementary work together in areas of Building and Grounds and Transportation so that we can operate more efficiently. If one of our buses breaks down our staffs are able to work together so that the education process is inconvenienced as little as possible. We also work together in these areas so that we can learn from the expertise of others. One example of that is if Morris Elementary is able to cut utility expenses in half, which they have, it is prudent to learn how that was accomplished in order to save Saratoga tax dollars.

That ends my summary of our Intergovernmental Agreements. Thank you to all Boards of Education and Administrations for working together to allow these Intergovernmental Agreements that save tax dollars and benefit the students.

Now, moving on to what else we have done at Saratoga besides the increase in the Education Fund balance, fostering a positive working relationship between the Board, administration, and staff, and instituting Intergovernmental Agreements that help the students and taxpayers.

It is my policy to always be available to help people understand when they have questions. There have been many instances where taxpayers have asked me to provide information or reports about our school finances, policies, or curriculum. I feel it is my responsibility to answer those questions, and am more than happy to provide information in those instances. We have begun to put financial reports on our web site to help people understand about the finances of our school. The State Board of Education web site also has a great deal of financial and other information about school districts.

We have formed a Saratoga Staff Advisory Committee that meets monthly to provide for open communication between staff and administration. Ideas and concerns are brought forward and by working together, solutions are achieved to improve our school. Thank you to all who participate.

We have worked together with members of the Building / Life Safety Advisory Committee and architects to develop a Master Facility Plan and more specifically to determine what Phase I of this plan should encompass. We are hoping to be able to address the facility needs in the older part of the school and provide additional space for our increasing enrollment after the election on April 17th. Thank you to all who have participated.

We are in the process of forming a committee of administrators and staff members in order to specifically identify what we can do better to help under-achieving students. We must do a better job of working with those students and families. Our goal will be to institute methods that will allow our students greater achievement.

We are in the process of preparing to work with Morris High School, Morris Elementary and the City of Morris regarding a possible extension of the TIF. By working together we will be able to have an end result that is in the best interests of the school districts and the City whether it be an extension or not.

Before I end I want to mention my own contract with the District. I have chosen over the last two years to lower my salary so that I received the same increase as the rest of the staff. Although many of you would think that's crazy, I chose to do that as the leader of the District to show that I mean what I say about working together and cooperating. To explain with a cliché, in my opinion, it would not be right to "talk the talk" but not "walk the walk".

Thank you for allowing me to take this opportunity to talk about some of the positive things that have happened over the past three years. Once again, I want to thank the Saratoga Board of Education and the Boards of Educations and Administrations of the other districts that I have mentioned to allow us to be more productive and efficient for the students and taxpayers.

Now very briefly I would like to address the recent newspaper articles. An administrator's job in any school district is to do what is best for the students and

taxpayers of their district. In reference to the recent Morris Elementary financial recovery newspaper article, it appears to me that they were “brainstorming ideas” if you will, when the subject of school facilities was discussed. There has not been a dialogue between districts about this topic. As you know Saratoga is seeking a referendum because we have no empty classrooms in our building, and with continuing enrollment increases, we need more classrooms, additional gym space, and larger music rooms. There is very little else that can be said because those are the facts.

As a side note, speaking of school facilities and the events of the last three years, within hours after the fire at Saratoga last winter, the administration at Morris Elementary offered to house up to 350 of our students by the next week. We were fortunate; however, that we were able to continue to occupy our school. We appreciate the generosity of Morris Elementary and their willingness to help when we needed it.

Can we do better? Yes, we definitely can. The only way that we will improve is to continue to work together. I hope the accomplishments of the last three years are an indication that cooperation works for everyone. I wish to continue to work with people as I have in the past to do what is best for the students and taxpayers in our community.

Respectfully,

Kathy Perry
Superintendent