

Superintendent's State of the District Report Prepared by: Dr. Pamela Swanson January 28, 2014

Good evening everyone,

This is my third "State of the District" report for Adams County School District 50, and I always look forward to the opportunity to speak at length...hopefully not too long...about our accomplishments, challenges, and future direction.

My bottom line message is that while we are continuing to move forward and we have many success stories to share, we still need to do more.

Our children have one chance at a quality education, and we cannot rest until all District 50 students are achieving at the highest individual potential to be successful in school and beyond. To do this requires that all of us, students, teachers, parents, support staff, and administrators all push ourselves to the next level.

We have a model before us that we can relate to as we rally with the rest of Colorado in the "United in Orange" campaign...behind the Denver Broncos this week. This is Super Bowl Week and on Sunday we will gather around our TV's to watch the Broncos play the Seahawks. Peyton Manning would be the first to tell you, the team is not playing for the title because of one person or one play during the season. Achieving success requires hard teamwork...and not all of it glamorous.

I could come up with more Super Bowl analogies, but I won't. The reason...what we are doing in our classrooms is not always glamorous, it certainly is not a one-time event, and in the end...educating our children and the future's workforce, is far more important than a football game.

STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT:

Tonight, I want to talk about where we are and where we are going. Our focus is, and will continue to be, on student success and achievement.

Over the past few years, we have diligently worked to move from a district identified as "Turnaround" or "Priority Improvement" by the state, to an organization known as a "Performance" district.

For three consecutive years, we have shown growth in reading, writing and math. Almost half of our schools are now rated at a “Performance” level. With our Competency Based System, we are finding and fixing the learning gaps of our students who for too long were simply passed along to the next grade because it was the easiest path and socially acceptable.

Our staff and I will attest to the fact that at times, this has been hard and frustrating work. The latest data show that our graduation rate is rising and our dropout rate is declining. In both instances, our rate of improvement is progressing faster than the state. In fact, in some of our subgroups, we are exceeding the state averages in graduation rates.

I am proud of our efforts and have stressed to our staff the need to have students do well on this spring’s state mandated tests so that we can proudly say to our community and state that the education we provide is high-quality, second to none, and equips our graduates for the demands of our ever changing high-tech economy.

While I absolutely believe student progress needs to be measured and feel passionately that our students must be able to compete with students across the state, nation, and world, I am concerned about issues of educational equity in Colorado and accreditation and funding systems that do not fully account for the complex interaction between poverty and achievement.

It is one thing to be critical about our circumstances and another to volunteer our voices in a solution seeking tone. We are certainly in the latter category. District 50 is currently taking, and will continue to take a leadership role in working with other districts, willing legislators, and the Colorado Department of Education to shine a light on accountability systems and policies that recognize our unique challenges. Instead of waiting for well-intentioned educational policy to be foisted upon us, we are actively seeking to influence the development of future policy.

I believe we are in a unique position of being able to speak freely at any level, because no one can argue that we are making excuses. In fact, we are humble about our progress to date. We absolutely know we need to achieve at a faster rate, and we have identified barriers that we hope to discuss, as the opportunities arise.

I commend our hardworking staff because we certainly earn every point we get in our present assessment mandates and I further believe we are beating the odds.

STUDENT SUCCESS AND AREAS OF INNOVATION:

Of course, the first measure of success is in the daily classroom instruction and learning, but I also want to highlight some other achievements over the past year that gauge how our students are doing.

Last year’s graduating class received approximately \$1,000,000 in scholarships, including a prestigious Daniels Scholar.

Last spring's production of "In the Heights" received rave reviews and 10 "Bobby G" nominations in competition with other high school theater productions. The "Bobby G" is the high school equivalent of Broadway's Tony Awards, and our nominations were the second highest of any school.

In the world of sports, our high school girls' softball team and boys' varsity football and soccer teams qualified for the state playoffs.

Those are just a few examples of how our kids are thriving and receiving a well-rounded education.

Very quickly, I would like to call your attention to three areas of district innovation aimed at improving our educational system. Two are underway now, and another is under consideration.

COLORADO STEM ACADEMY

A year and a half ago, the administration put forward a proposal to design a Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) school to provide our community with an additional educational choice. We know the job market will demand these skills of our students. I thank the Board of Education for supporting the concept and appropriating the funds to bring this magnet school to realization.

Colorado STEM Academy opened earlier this year to grades three through six and will expand to three through seven next year, and onto eighth grade the year following to build a pipeline to Westminster High School's STEM programs and into the postsecondary and workforce options beyond high school.

STEM's motto is "Preparing Today's Students for Life," and that is exactly what we are doing. When all the information is collected, we expect to show that this is a high performing school and will continue to serve families from inside and outside the school district who are looking for a STEM focus.

PROGRESSIVE MATH INITIATIVE

This past year the Board of Education continued to support our work to provide every student with a rigorous and high quality mathematics education by approving an integrated math curriculum for all students from kindergarten through graduation. The Progressive Math Initiative, or PMI, is changing the way math is taught across the district. PMI uses free online curriculum and hand held student responders to supplement regular classroom instruction. It gives teachers and students instant feedback on student progress and allows for accelerated learning by students who do not have to wait for classmates to catch up to their level.

Assessment results from our fall and winter Scantron testing are providing an early indication that the program is positively impacting the acquisition of math concepts and knowledge, a trend we believe will continue and be validated through future state assessments.

PK-8 SCHOOL

As a district, we are committed to providing our students a path to a high school diploma and the skills necessary to be post-secondary and workforce ready. The administration is exploring the viability of

the development of a PreK-8th grade program at Scott Carpenter Middle School. We realize many students leave the district during the transition from fifth to sixth grades. The proposed PK-8 model would be the first in the school district to eliminate this transition, providing a seamless educational experience from elementary to middle school. Parents in the Scott Carpenter and F.M. Day Elementary community are enthusiastic about the idea. However, and this is important, there are many complex issues that will still need to be worked out, including boundary changes and the costs associated with converting a middle school into a viable PK-8 learning environment. We are currently working closely with our district's demographer and representative stakeholder groups to thoughtfully proceed with any recommendations, which brings me to the next major challenge we are facing and something our staff, families, and community can relate to...balancing the budget

DISTRICT FINANCES

As we all know, last November voters rejected a mill levy override, which would have resulted in 5.25 million dollars. We knew before even putting the measure on the ballot that it would be a tough sell and as the overwhelming defeat of Amendment 66 showed us, voters across the state...not just in our community...are skeptical of any tax increase at this time.

The defeat of 3B means that some very difficult financial decisions will need to be made as we move through the budget development process this spring. This should not come as a surprise to anyone because, as we told voters, the mill levy was about maintaining the status quo. While our bond rating and other financial indicators are positive due to the school district's fiscal prudence, we now have to begin to shore up expenditures with ongoing revenue streams, as opposed to relying on one-time money in the school district's fund balance.

Early projections indicate we may see additional money from the State of Colorado, but those numbers will not be finalized until May and as the old adage goes, "Plan for the worst and hope for the best". It is still not clear if any significant adjustments will be made to the school finance formula, but I have been meeting with area superintendents to ensure that our needs are considered as proposals move forward to the legislature.

At this point, I anticipate recommending to the Board of Education that we do not cut 5.25 million dollars all in one fiscal year. That would be devastating to our system with all the challenges before us. Although it will still be very difficult, making budget cuts over a two-year period would allow us to adjust internally and take into consideration any positive adjustments we may receive from the state. As we move forward with budget development, a target of adjusting next year's budget by approximately 2.5 million dollars is weighing into the planning and input processes. Departments are already hard at work on next year's budgets and looking for ways to cut costs, but frankly, we made the obvious cuts a long time ago. The fact is, the vast majority of our budget goes to salaries, PERA and benefits for our hard working staff, because after all, our end products are competent graduates.

The numbers speak for themselves and our Financial Services Department has been very transparent in the budgeting process. That's not just me talking. Our Chief Financial Officer, Sandi McClure, was recently awarded a prestigious honor by the Governmental Finance Officers Association. The Distinguished Budget Presentation Award requires our budget to meet very specific criteria that serves multiple purposes:

1. A Policy Document
2. A Financial Plan
3. An Operations Guide
4. A Communications Device

Unfortunately, Sandi's award does not come with any money, because we could certainly use it!

BOCES

On a related financial note, there is another area of uncertainty that will need to be addressed in the coming year. To manage financial risks, District 50 is a longstanding member of the Adams County Board of Cooperative Services (BOCES) Self Insurance Pool. It was formed in 1979 and includes Adams County School Districts 1, 12, 14, 27J, and 50. The joint arrangement provides coverage for workers compensation, and liability and property insurance.

Due to recent changes in membership, the viability of BOCES, as we now know it, is not clear. Discussions are underway to find the best possible solution so that our risk management strategy remains sound.

As we move forward in the budgeting process, we will be seeking additional input and communicating along the way.

FACILITIES

As we are looking for ways to make the most of every dollar in the district, we are also taking a very hard look at our facilities.

As I mentioned earlier, Scott Carpenter Middle School may be converted to a PK-8 school, a move that would require significant renovation of that building, while opening up new possibilities for the use of F.M. Day Elementary. But those are just two of many buildings that we are exploring how best to use.

Roughly 79% of our buildings are more than 50 years old, so renovations and improvements are an ongoing challenge, but I am proud to tell you, we are meeting those challenges to the best of our ability.

This past year, we remodeled Colorado STEM Academy. We brought air conditioning to Tennyson Knolls Elementary. We were finally able to overhaul the lighting system in the Ranum auditorium so we

can make full use of that facility. Very importantly, we continue to make safety upgrades in all of our buildings that provide for secured entrances and video surveillance.

I want to commend our Maintenance and Operations Department for their hard work.

Those efforts will continue in 2014 as we upgrade our heating and cooling systems at Mesa, Metz, Fairview, and Sunset Ridge Elementary Schools. As we closely monitor costs, we are also hopeful that we will be able to address one more elementary school. We have also scheduled a roof replacement for Tennyson Knolls.

It is important to note that the remaining 2006 Bond Election dollars that also built Hodgkins Elementary and Westminster High School have enabled us to do this long overdue work.

In addition, we have also been looking at efficient and innovative ways to consolidate our district owned buildings that we make available to our important community partners.

As we move forward, we still have remaining challenges with some of the district's unused facilities and how to make improvements beyond the remaining Bond dollars and our shrinking capital improvement budgets. I recommend that this year we reengage our Facilities and Fiscal Advisory Committees to help us as we develop our long-range facilities plans.

SAFETY

The safety and well-being of our students remains our highest priority. The tragic shooting of Claire Davis at Arapahoe High School High reminds us that while schools are actually, by in-large, a very safe place for our children, we need to remain vigilant and pro-active.

I applaud the state legislature for its bipartisan plan to provide permanent funding for the "Safe to Tell" program by moving it into the Attorney General's office. The "Safe to Tell" hotline has proven a valuable tool in alerting authorities about student threats and helping to prevent student suicides.

In addition, I can assure everyone, our "Lock Down and Lock Out" drills are taken very seriously by staff and students so that everyone knows what to do in case of an emergency. As I mentioned earlier, we are continuing to invest in security upgrades for our schools and safety training for our students and staff.

We are doing everything humanly possible to ensure that students are safe when they are attending school

Marijuana

Parents should also know that District 50 made a very conscious decision to be out front and pro-active on the issue of legalized marijuana in Colorado. Our children ... like young people across the state ... are

not immune to the effects of the voters' decision to legalize the use of marijuana by people over the age of 21.

The use of Marijuana by young people is not only illegal, it is unhealthy. The drug ... which is more potent than ever ... impacts the developing brain, which is not fully formed until the age of about 25.

With the help of Principal Michael Lynch, the district has made information and resources available to our community. Westminster High School has had guest speakers talk about the issue and our partners at CAAT, The Westminster Area Community Awareness Action Team, are addressing this issue at their 24th annual youth conference scheduled for March first.

PARTNERSHIPS

CAAT is just one of our community partners that do so much to make this a stronger community. I want to acknowledge all of the organizations as well as individuals who work to make our young people's lives better.

Hyland Hills

In particular, I want to mention our partnership with Hyland Hills which benefits thousands of children in the school district. Their support has ensured that, in spite of tight budgets, our middle school students still have access to after school athletic programs that keep our children healthy and provide a positive environment for children when their parents are at work. Hyland Hills has employed more of our students during the summers and after school at places like Water World and Adventure Golf than any other single employer in the local area.

This year we also partnered with the Hyland Hills Foundation to host the first ever, Westminster High School/Ranum High School Alumni Golf Tournament. The tournament raised money for both the Hyland Hills Foundation and the District 50 Education Foundation while also serving as a great opportunity to pull this community together. At the end of the day ... Whether they are Warriors or Raiders, our alums are first and foremost graduates of District 50.

Colorado Statewide Parent Coalition

I also want to acknowledge our important partnership with Richard Garcia and the Colorado Statewide Parent Coalition. The coalition is now working with us in thirteen of our schools including Westminster High School to develop effective Parent Leadership Teams. We know that students and schools do much better when parents are connected at as many levels as possible.

Our Academic Parent-Teacher Teams or APTT's are bringing important change to parent/teacher conferences by allowing parents to learn more about their children in the context of the entire classroom. APTT's also allow parents to connect with each other and share learning strategies. Just as students learn and improve by interactions with their peers, the same holds true for parents.

THE FUTURE

As we look to the future, I can't help but think how lucky we as a district are to have such strong ties to the past to help guide us. Our Board of Education is now entirely made up of Westminster High School graduates. Even more remarkable, we have a graduate from the 1960's, the 1970's, the 1980's, the 1990's and a graduate from the class of 2000. They have all seen the changes and challenges in District 50.

While they come from different backgrounds and perspectives, they are all committed to ensuring that the students that follow them have the same opportunities for success they had.

In the end, that is the goal that we should all strive for. When we reach that place we can all look at each other ... take a deep breath, and say "job well done," and then get back to work.

And as I wrap up this evening, I would like to end where I started with this report that is, with our most important work, student achievement. District 50 is no longer alone in this reform effort called Competency Based Education. Just last spring the state of Colorado adopted Competency Based Graduation requirements, and this has now risen to a national conversation. Just today, some of us were at CDE discussing our district's efforts and next generation learning. Some of our partners namely, the Colorado Legacy Foundation and the Rose Foundation recently sent us this video clip that captures their visit to one of our schools – Sherrelwood Elementary.

- [Show Clip](#) -

Thank you for your time and the opportunity to serve as your Superintendent of Schools.