

DISTRICT 202 COMMUNITY COLUMN

By Dr. John Harper
Superintendent of Schools
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For most school districts, a 1,900-student increase in enrollment in just one year would be an extraordinary, even nerve-wracking event.

After averaging more than 2,500 new students a year for the last several years, for District 202, growing this year by “only” 1,900 students was a bit of a relief.

That’s a bit of a joke, but the impact is serious. The “slowdown” in the housing market may not be good for the local economy, but it may mean a break for District 202 taxpayers.

Our staff regularly tracks the marketplace and talks to developers and the municipalities we serve, so that we can predict with reasonable certainty what will happen to our enrollment each year.

Because of the housing slowdown in this area, we anticipate that enrollment will increase by about 1,000 students each of the next two years while the marketplace absorbs the current housing inventory and the economy rebuilds and rebounds. Then, in about three years, we expect that our enrollment will once again begin to increase by 1,800 to 2,000 students each year.

District 202 intends to take advantage of this temporary lull to positively impact the taxpayers whose money pays for the services we provide to our students and community.

We have proposed several possible options to slightly alter and delay our school construction schedule. These changes would allow us to “catch up” with our growth by allocating current resources more efficiently and effectively. And equally importantly – certainly from a taxpayers’ perspective – a delayed construction schedule would also delay another education fund referendum for a year or two.

Two years ago, our community approved building nine new schools to accommodate our growing population. This year we opened our 15th and 16th elementary schools and our seventh middle school. Plainfield East High School and Bess Eichelberger Elementary will both open next fall, leaving another middle school and three more elementary schools to build.

New schools also require new staff. By law, construction funds cannot be used for payroll. And, as usual, existing revenues fall short of what is needed.

Through solid, conservative fiscal practices, we have cut expenses, controlled costs and stretched every dollar to the breaking point. But at some point, we will have to ask taxpayers for more money to hire more teachers. Local property taxes, which comprise about 80 percent of our revenue, simply do not keep up with our operational expenses.

The Board of Education will begin discussing this issue at its next meeting on February 25, 2008. This issue presents a delicate challenge, one for which our Board members are certainly qualified, being taxpayers themselves. We appreciate our community’s support and will always strive to be good stewards of its assets.

Working together, District 202 administration and the Board of Education will respect the faith our community has given us by protecting its fiscal interests and efficiently using our resources to help all of our students learn and grow.

Dr. John Harper
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Plainfield Community Consolidated School District 202