

DISTRICT 202 COMMUNITY COLUMN

By Dr. John Harper
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Public school districts do a lot of work.

But at the end of the day, we have two basic responsibilities: to educate our community's children, and to be good stewards of the community's resources.

This is an intertwined and complex process. Our ability to deliver a strong, challenging education to our students depends on the resources our community provides. At the same time we must use those resources wisely. We must make sure that every dollar is spent thoughtfully, knowing that each dollar is a gift whenever it comes to us, but especially during a difficult economy.

District 202 has done a great job of meeting both responsibilities. Yet, despite our best efforts, we anticipate a \$9.2 million debt in our operating funds this fiscal year. Some people will read this and naturally ask how that can be, if we have been as careful with our money as we claim.

There are many shades of gray – or green, as the case may be -- in this topic. But the simplest answer, and the biggest piece of this puzzle, is our phenomenal growth over the last 10 years.

Put bluntly, growth – and especially residential growth -- rarely, if ever, pays for itself.

District 202 has grown from about 3,300 students in 1990 to nearly 30,000 this year. Over that same time we have had to build 25 new schools. Each new school requires teachers and staff. Our regular staff has increased from a few hundred in 1990 to about 3,400 this year. Construction funds cannot be used for salaries. So those expenses must be paid from a separate tax rate which cannot be increased without voter approval.

However, generally speaking, houses do not generate enough taxes to pay the cost of educating the children who live in them.

For example, the “average” house in District 202 has a market value of about \$263,000. Based on the district's 2007 tax rate of \$4.51 per \$100 of equalized assessed value, that “average” house produces about \$3,875 in local property taxes to the school district. By comparison, District 202 spends about \$8,350 to educate each of our nearly 30,000 students.

What's more, 85 percent of our local tax base is residential. Non-residential property doesn't produce any children. But there isn't enough of it in our district to offset the immense cost associated with our growth over the last few years.

The Board of Education and district administration have already been working for several months to reduce costs in numerous ways – reconfiguring staffing patterns, minimizing the hiring of new staff, allowing classroom sizes to increase slightly, and limiting administrative salaries and benefits.

Last year we also hired a residency officer who ensures that everyone who has children in our schools is actually living in and paying taxes to our district. This position has already saved district 202 taxpayers several hundred thousand dollars.

And, we're investigating hiring a truancy officer to improve attendance, which in turn will increase our share of state funding.

This is where our parents and taxpayers can help: we can get about \$810,000 more in state funding by increasing our average daily attendance by a mere 1 percent. Please make sure that your children are in school every possible day. Not only will they do better academically, but our district will benefit from the extra revenue.

Our budget deficit certainly is not great news. But, we can meet this challenge as a community, by doing what is best for our children. Together, we are preparing learners for the future.

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Plainfield Community Consolidated School District 202