



# RIVER VALLEY SCHOOL DISTRICT

*Home of the Blackhawks*



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TO:            Senator Marklein & Representative Novak (via email)

FROM:        Brian Krey, Business Manager, River Valley School District

DATE:        March 10, 2021

SUBJECT:    RIVER VALLEY SCHOOL DISTRICT UPDATE

## **Introduction**

The Covid-19 pandemic has impacted public schools across Wisconsin for nearly a year. This pandemic has created unique challenges for districts to ensure high quality instruction is available for every student. The River Valley School District has risen to meet the challenge through best practice, innovation, and adapting to meet the changing needs of our students and the expectations of our community.

We began the year on September 1, 2020 serving students and families by offering in-person instruction and simultaneous virtual instruction to all students. Our District has taken every precaution necessary to ensure our students and staff are learning and teaching in a safe, comfortable and productive environment during the pandemic. In addition, in-person instruction while simultaneously offering virtual instruction has come at an additional cost to our District. This has been a historic challenge that we are proud to say that our entire staff has risen to and completely delivered in educating our students.

One of the most significant challenges of the pandemic has been the communication of accurate and timely information to our students/parents and our community. As a result of the pandemic and modifications that we have made to our instructional delivery, we believe that a number of misperceptions exist about the operation of our school district during the 2020-21 school year. I hope to provide clarity on the operations of our District, additional costs related to educating students during the pandemic, and the prior & ongoing need for adequate funding for schools.

## **River Valley School District Is Providing Face-to-Face Instruction**

All River Valley Schools have offered a face-to-face learning option as well as a virtual option since the first day of the 2020-21 school year. While our district was required to serve students in a virtual/distance learning format for the Spring of 2020, we heard the clear expectation from our community that River Valley Schools offer a dual choice (face-to-face learning and virtual learning environments) to be available to any student/family for 2020-21. This learning model of simultaneous in-person and virtual instruction has created a significant increase in workloads for our teachers and staff.

To help inform the decision making process, the district leadership team collaborated with many individuals within our district as well as several outside resources/partners in designing the metrics that would govern our



ability to evaluate safety protocols necessary to provide a face-to-face learning environment for our students and staff. Outside sources like Sauk Prairie Healthcare, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), Sauk/Iowa/Richland County Public Health Departments have been instrumental in establishing local protocols for mitigation, contact tracing, and prevention that have kept our schools safe during the school year. All decision-making was guided by the local school board, community, and administration.



### **Increased Costs & CARES Act Grant**

When asked in 2020, a superintendent from southeast Wisconsin articulated that it is much more expensive to educate children during a pandemic while districts are prioritizing safe learning environments and high quality instructional practices. Mitigation strategies necessary to keep our students and staff safe have necessitated higher spending during the 2020-21 school year than our normal operational budget typically allows.

Our District has increased spending on cleaning supplies, cleaning equipment, technology, internet for families, utilities, and personal protective equipment (PPE). We have purchased new sinks, paper towel dispensers and water bottle filling stations to ensure these items are non-touch in common areas throughout our school buildings.

As mentioned earlier, our current staff has gone above and beyond the call of duty to ensure all students are provided quality instruction. While hiring additional staff to assist with day to day or virtual instruction could have lessened the burden on our district, we did not add any staff during the pandemic due to our financial forecast.

The district did receive \$148,720.21 in CARES Act/ESSER funding, but this money was for one-time expenditures related to educating students during the pandemic. River Valley utilized these funds on technology (document & web cams for dual instruction), plexiglass barriers, PPE, disinfecting supplies, hand sanitizer, additional recess supplies for student cohorts, and professional development for our staff on best practices related to virtual instruction and learning. At the time of this letter, River Valley has approximately \$5,000 remaining. CARES Act/ESSER funding has been helpful, but these funds are a one-time allocation designed to cover specific one-time Covid-19 related costs and do not provide sustainable funding for our ongoing operational costs in 2021-22, 2022-23, and beyond. These funds were greatly appreciated, but are not sufficient to cover the additional costs associated with instruction of students during the pandemic.

### **2021-2023 Biennial Budget & Funding Formula**

While the pandemic has impacted nearly every aspect of our society, we are optimistic that life for our children and our community will begin to normalize as we approach the 2021-22 school year. We are planning for some mitigation measures to remain in place until the infection rate and danger to our students and staff is addressed. However, as we plan for our 2021-22 budget, we face the same funding challenges that were present prior to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The District financial outlook, based on the current funding formula anticipates deficits between \$3.5 million and \$5 million between the 2022-2023 and 2024-2025 school years. While Governor Evers budget does not completely solve our school funding issue, it does decrease our annual deficits from \$3.5-5 million to \$3.3-\$4.4 million over the 2022-2023 through 2024-2025 school years.

Due to an antiquated and failed funding formula that guaranteed 66% ( $\frac{2}{3}$ ) funding from the state when it began (River Valley currently receives 37% in funding from the state), the River Valley School District is in need of as much help as possible. 

The River Valley School District was fortunate to have an operational referendum supported in April 2019 which provided \$2.4 million for the current school year and \$3.2 million for the 2021-2022 school year. Without these referendum dollars, River Valley would not be able to provide many of our academic and elective classes or programs while class sizes would be significantly higher.

Another operational referendum will be required to ensure our students are provided a quality education moving forward. Unfortunately, River Valley is not alone as operational referendums to continue 'business as usual' in our schools have impacted 81% of school districts since 1993. In addition, 38% of these school districts have passed at least two operational referendums. River Valley will have to enter "Round 2" of funding by referendum when the current referendum expires at the conclusion of the 2021-2022 school year.

The state of Wisconsin (\$12,285) has now fallen behind the national average (\$12,773) in per pupil spending. According to the Wisconsin Policy Forum, state and local taxes as a share of income reached their lowest level since 1970. In addition, Wisconsin ranked 49th in the percentage of increase in per-pupil spending between 2011-2018 (Wisconsin Policy Forum). Between 2011-2018, the increase per pupil was 4.3%, while the national average was 18.9%. This 4.3% increase includes referendums passed by school districts (Wisconsin Policy Forum). Operating by referendum is not sustainable, and this is not a problem that is unique to River Valley. According to the Wisconsin Policy Forum, between 2008 and 2018, 189 school districts passed 387 referendums to raise school taxes.

The time is now to ensure that the legislature makes a necessary and significant investment in our public schools.

### **Summary**

In closing, the River Valley School District and our leadership team have assembled detailed information regarding our 2020-21 finances, our instructional delivery practices for the 2020-21 (current) school year, a detailed understanding of our collaborative decision-making process, and other information and resources that have informed our approach to education during this challenging year. I ask our Senators and State Representatives in the State Legislature to advocate for increases in general state aid, per pupil revenue limit increases, and an increase in Special Education aid/reimbursement, and for long term solutions so that we do not have to continue funding our district by referendum.

Your friend in education,

Brian Krey

References:

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<https://dpi.wi.gov/sfs/reporting/safr/referendum/overview>