

Citizen's Budget Advisory Committee Recommendations to the Des Moines School Board

February, 19th 2013

In recent years, Des Moines Public Schools has faced significant budget shortfalls. This year it appears that the economy has changed for the better, and instead, we are forecasting a surplus of funds over last year's funding levels. Our mission is to provide a recommendation to the Des Moines School board as representatives of our diverse community, knowing that our first priority is a quality education for the children of Des Moines. Given these circumstances we recommend the following:

Focus on K-3 education

It is our understanding that early learning opportunities significantly increase the chances for children to complete middle school and to receive their high school diploma. We would ask the school board to instruct the district to invest in those K-3 strategies that provide the most meaningful return in a child's early learning development.

Build sustainable staff back into our schools

The district has lost more than 150 teaching positions due to budget shortfalls in the last 3 years, including counselors, math and reading remediation teachers, and art, music, and PE teachers. Good teachers are the most significant contributor to children's learning. Current staffing levels are inadequate to provide the quantity and quality of teaching our children need.

Technology Improvements

Des Moines Public Schools has not invested in basic technology platforms and systems in past years, focusing, as it should, on education. However, this lack of technology is hindering the District's ability to operate smoothly; affecting its ability to educate. Standard systems like Conference Calling, Remote Visual Meeting Platforms, Accounting systems, and Time Tracking need to be adapted and updated to improve operational efficiencies, as well as continued investment in advanced technologies that support teachers in assessing and tailoring their teaching to the needs of their students.

Communication

Des Moines Public Schools provides advanced academic offerings, exceptional community services, and a wide choice of learning environments from which to choose. Greater attention needs to be brought to those services and programs that make Des Moines an excellent environment for children and students of all ages to excel and prosper. We should strive to provide greater awareness of our competitive strengths and encourage the community at large to celebrate in our accomplishments.

English Language Learners

Des Moines has become the home of an incredibly diverse population. Over 5,000 students walk the hallways of our Des Moines schools without basic written and oral communication skills. And, by default, the DMPS inherits the challenge of bridging the gap for this new group of immigrants. It is imperative that the DMPS Board establish metrics, and leverage resources, in order to ensure that this new group of American citizens graduates with the ability to be successful in life.

Observations

The committee received an update on a variety of operational efficiency measures that have been implemented by the District. These measures have resulted in millions of dollars of savings, which in turn have been redirected to priority areas. The committee commends the work that has been done, and urges the District to not let up on these efforts even as it appears its financial condition has improved. Needs in the district still far exceed sustainable resources, meaning it is as important as ever to aggressively pursue opportunities for savings and re-allocation.

The committee engaged in considerable discussion around the question of long-term financial and strategic goals and the presence of what appear to be growing fund balances over the near term. The committee came to understand that balances may fluctuate, but in order to assure a stable, predictable operating environment, the key is to look ahead and keep ongoing spending within ongoing revenue. The committee therefore agrees with the spending targets the district has established for 0% and 2% allowable growth scenarios and would recommend that the board implement a strategic plan to achieve what they feel is critical to the future of the district.

Respectfully submitted for your consideration,

The Citizens Budget Advisory Committee

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