



# Update from the Superintendent

To: Parents and Guardians  
From: Bill Husfelt, Superintendent  
Date: April 4, 2021

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As an educator, I am a staunch advocate of background knowledge, facts, accurate information and detailed research.

That being said, I am deeply disturbed about the incredible amount of misinformation circulating currently about the School Board's referendum on April 20<sup>th</sup> asking voters to consider a one millage increase in property taxes to fund several important initiatives for our district. I cannot, and will not, ever tell anyone HOW to vote but I do sincerely hope that informed decisions will be made based upon the real truth and the facts and not distortions, half-truths and misinformation.

In fact, I am so determined to get the truth out that I've held informational meetings with many employees to try to ensure that they understand the complexities of school finance, our budget, the "why" behind the millage increase and what BDS could, and could not, do with the funds if the millage is approved by voters. In all of those meetings, I have never asked an employee to vote "yes" but have encouraged them to make sure they are making educated decisions based upon the facts.

To help spread accurate information, we've developed a link on our website called "Millage: The Facts" and there you can find previous presentations I've made, historical salary and benefits information, details about programs the millage could fund and why we can't use half-cent sales tax money or other funds to accomplish these goals.

While we're on the topic of a half-cent sales tax, I do want everyone to know that, if it was my choice, we'd be asking for a half-cent sales tax instead of a property tax increase. I firmly believe in the premise behind the sales tax in that everyone (including tourists) contributes to that and I believe it's a fair, and equitable, funding mechanism.

However, the legislature doesn't allow us to ask for a half-cent sales tax for the items we need to fund and so a property tax is literally our only choice, per the law, in Florida.

Interestingly enough, 21 other counties in the state have also approved property tax millage increases to help their school districts so we're not alone in A. considering this funding mechanism or B. asking voters to approve it. In fact, neighboring Walton County Schools collect approximately \$11 million, via a referendum, to help with their salaries.

Unfortunately, I can't name a specific raise amount we'd like to approve for our employees because that's not my decision (that rests with the School Board) and because specific dollar amounts following a board vote have to be negotiated with both unions.

What I can tell you is that it costs about \$1.4 million to institute a 1 percent raise for ALL employees (everyone from teachers, to classroom paraprofessionals, to bus drivers, maintenance employees, administrators and others) and that I will recommend that the board set aside \$10 million from the \$14.4 million we estimate the millage increase could raise for employee salaries. You can do the math to see how much of an impact we could have if the board approves my recommendation.

I should note that we estimate the millage increase will generate about \$18 million but, as statute dictates and we always do, charters must receive their fair share which, based upon enrollment, is currently about 20 percent. So \$3.6 million right off the top will go to charters for their use and then BDS would retain \$14.4 million approximately.

If voters approve the millage increase, I will be recommending that we spend our \$14.4 million in the following ways:

1. \$10 million, pending board approval, for employee raises.
2. \$1.5 million to offer free, full-day pre-kindergarten classes to qualifying students.
3. \$1.5 million to ensure we maintain needed mental health services for students and staff after our federal grant runs out. This funding will not keep staffing at its current level but we believe the need is declining and so we can meet the need with fewer staff/services.
4. \$1.4 million to augment the safety and security budget the state provides. This will enable us to keep our professionally-trained, sworn law enforcement officers at each school site.

I wish school districts had more flexibility in their funding so that some of these expenses could be funded other ways but the truth is, the hands of school districts across the state are tied since most of our funding comes to us as pre-designated "categoricals" with little to no flexibility. In next week's message, I plan to elaborate more about the intricacies of school funding to help everyone better understand. I also want to clear up some misinformation being shared about pandemic-related additional federal funding that we expect. Unfortunately, this federal funding CANNOT be used for recurring expenses like salaries and raises. It can be used for pandemic-related tutoring and additional learning opportunities for students, however, and so I am grateful to have extra money to pay teachers and other employees for extra work. As we all know, however, extra money for extra work is NOT the same thing as a raise!

Thank you for taking the time to read this and for visiting our website to find out more information about why we're asking voters to consider this referendum.

Happy Easter, stay safe and God Bless!