

February 24, 2010 4-Day Week Meeting Commentary Submitted by Mark Broin

The Lake Superior School District Board has voted to pursue an additional *Minnesota Department of Education* waiver to continue operating the district on a four-day school week schedule. Since there is no guarantee the waiver will be granted, it is crucially important for members of the Board, Administration and Staff to always keep the following obligations foremost in mind as they consider future options for the district's operations.

1. To provide a practically achievable and consistently improving program of high quality educational opportunity and outcome for every student in the district;
2. To assure the substantial public investment in physical facilities and support systems are managed in an appropriately responsible manner, in order to provide a safe, clean and well-maintained environment for effective student learning;
3. To exercise prudent, responsible, accountable and transparent fiscal management of the school district's financial funding and expenditures, and to do so in such a manner it is clear the district is committed to decision-making processes focused on successfully operating within the constraints of its budgetary resources.

It should be clear to everyone touched by the district's fiscal challenges, the previous waivers granted by the State were provided with the expectation the Board would address its financial circumstances within a reasonable period of time, and move the district back to a five-day school week. I believe the intent of the State's actions were very clear with regard to this goal.

It should also be clear, there was never any intention by the Department of Education to allow the district to prepare a case justifying staying on a four-day school week for any extended period of time beyond the initial waiver period, or for any reason other than mitigating financial issues. I think this rightfully reflected the Department's concern a four-day school week might pose a significant risk to successful educational outcomes for the district's students. In spite of a few reference analyses in support of isolated four-day week programs, I believe the Department of Education remains convinced the vast majority of current education policy and study is strongly in favor of a longer school week.

Now, within our district, there are a number of positive anecdotal claims, personal and family circumstance opinions, and optimistic interpretation of some of the academic performance results associated with the previous four-day week experience. One would expect this to be the case. There will always be those for whom any change will not be negative, and for whom some changes might be personally beneficial. But in this case, I believe, there are a far greater number of unheard voices who feel their input simply would make no difference; or are too busy just trying to keep their lives afloat; or simply don't understand what is going on; or haven't even been made aware they could have a voice in the matter. And, as things unfortunately and sometimes typically go, they are the ones who are usually most negatively affected by well-meaning but potentially misguided decision making.

At this juncture, it appears the State's expected outcome in granting our district the time to resolve its financial challenges has not been achieved, for whatever reason. It is also clear, when considering the current financial position the district is in, and the financial risks the district will be facing just a few years down the road, it is imperative that fiscal considerations, operational issues and program priorities be critically and immediately addressed.

The Board has now approved an additional local non-referendum levy of over \$600,000 in addition to increased General Fund spending since 2010 of over \$900,000 per year, and, with all good intent, has found itself unable to resolve its financial management challenges during the previous four-day week period. I am, therefore, of the opinion, that the Department of Education would find it reasonable to deny a return to the four-day week. That decision would force the district to inescapably confront the realities of the tough job necessary to reevaluate its operations and program priorities in a manner consistent with good long term financial management, and a strong focus on the educational fundamentals necessary to assure improved learning outcomes. I personally believe this is achievable.

However, I realize the circumstances the district is presently confronted with did not develop overnight, and cannot be solved overnight. That doesn't change my disappointment that more was not done during the past years of the four-day week, but what happened has happened. If, for some reason, the Department of Education sees fit to grant another waiver to allow the district some short-term breathing room, I would expect it to be the last. The legislature has been overly gracious during the past couple of years in enabling some districts, ours included, to address their financial challenges more easily than might otherwise have been the case. I don't expect their patience will last forever, and frankly, it shouldn't.

I am a reasonable man, and will support our board in their attempt to resolve the challenges facing the district, five-day week or not. All of us should. But only as long as we see it being done with respect for the circumstances of the district taxpayers given no choice but to invest in this effort; only as long as we see a focus on demanding measurable accountability for the delivery of constantly improving education outcomes to the our students; and only as long as clear, honest, accountable and transparent communication is being provided to the general public.

To achieve these ends, the district needs a plan. No, it needs several plans. It needs a plan to significantly improve educational outcomes within the budget it has to work with; it needs a plan to at least manage and report its fiscal performance on a regular basis and on a level taxpayers can understand; it needs a plan to assure students are being served by high quality and competent leaders, instructors and infrastructure; and it desperately needs a plan to improve and build upon its credibility within the community at large. If these things don't happen, the district will never find itself in a position to more easily and appropriately justify further investment in desperately needed and meaningful educational programs.