

A letter from the Superintendent of Schools Dr. Patrick T. O'Toole



Customizing Learning,
Nurturing Potential...
Delivering Excellence

May 13, 2016

Dear Upper St. Clair Families:

Since the recession of 2008-09, constructing a school budget has been an almost impossible challenge for the 500 school districts in Pennsylvania. Almost daily, there is media coverage of one or more school districts having to cut staff and programs while also considering tax increases.

The main driver of these budget problems is the state-mandated Public School Employees' Retirement System (PSERS) payments. This pension fund has been underfunded since the great recession of 2008-09 to the point that districts now pay approximately 30 percent of its total payroll to this fund. The commonwealth reimburses 50 percent of this amount, leaving little money for Pennsylvania to distribute to schools for basic education services. As a result, local taxpayers are forced to pick up the tab and, thus, services are being cut.

Sadly, all of this is happening at a time in our nation's history when education has never been more important.

At USC, we have had to increase local taxes to balance the budget. We have also benefited greatly from the cooperation of our unions and staff who agreed to take pay cuts and freezes to help the district's financial status. And, we have had to eliminate staff positions. Still, budget shortfalls must be addressed for now and the future. To this end, I am recommending to the School Board additional attritional staffing cuts of 11.5 positions (5.5 faculty and 6 support staff), the result of not replacing staff that retire or resign. These staffing decisions have been finalized during a relatively short period of time between the receipt of teacher retirement notifications approved on April 12, 2016, and the budget presentation on May 9, 2016.

The elementary teaching staff cuts (2.5) are the result of lower enrollments. Our enrollment K to 4 has declined from 1,478 in 2012 to 1,343 projected for 2016 (a nine percent decline). Even with the cuts, our average elementary school class size will be 22 students. We will also retain 8.5 of the 9 resource teachers.

We are recommending the reduction of one Family and Consumer Science (FACS) teacher. In 2016, the FACS position at Boyce would be suspended as part of a multi-year restructuring of the Expressive Arts classes (grades 5-8). After 2016, we will select two grade levels in grades 5 to 8 to continue to offer FACS. Presently, FACS is taught in all four middle school grade levels as well as via numerous electives offered to our high school students in the areas of food preparation, child development, practical living and more.

Based on feedback that I am receiving, there is strong interest by parents to keep FACS at Boyce. However, the allocation of instructional time for FACS needs to be reduced from four

years to two years in order for the district to include additional up-to-date Expressive Arts instruction. In fact, we are recommending the addition of a new design-thinking, problem-based, expressive arts course at Boyce that will be supported by private and grant funding. This pilot class will expose students to STEAM experiences that create interest and skills in the processes of creativity, innovation, and higher-level thinking.

We are also recommending the reduction of our World Language staff from 18 to 17 in the district. The reduction will be at the elementary and/or middle levels in order to move a staff member to the high school where the retirement of a German teacher created a vacancy.

Another recommendation is the transfer of a high school social studies teacher to Fort Couch where there is an opening due to a resignation. We are recommending that we not replace the high school social studies position in 2016-17. This move will result in some students in grades 9 to 11 possibly having to wait a year to enroll in an elective of their choosing.

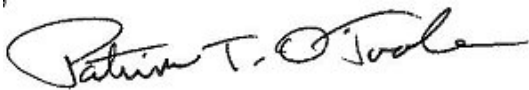
In addition to these teaching positions, we will be recommending the reduction of 6 support staff positions. Presently, we are offering an early retirement incentive to these staff members that we anticipate will result in a reduction of positions without the district having to furlough staff.

We realize that some of these recommendations will not be viewed favorably as they will result in changes to some programs and personnel within our schools. Education is a people business – more than 75 percent of our budget is salaries and benefits. The only significant way to balance the budget for both short and long term is to reduce our personnel expenditures. We are committed to doing so in the most responsible, least disruptive ways possible. Make no mistake, these are tough decisions; however, we have an obligation to create a path forward that protects USC's educational program AND is financially sustainable for years to come.

With these reductions, we will be able to balance our budget, even with the significant increase in pension costs. Moreover, our future financial projections would be much better than at any time in the last seven years.

It is our hope that someday the state and federal government can figure out a way to fund schools in a fair, sustainable, and adequate way while reducing expensive mandates, most of which do little to improve education.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Patrick T. O'Toole". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Patrick" being the most prominent.

Patrick T. O'Toole, Ed.D.
Superintendent of Schools