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Challenges facing Oldham County Schools

By Paul Upchurch, Oldham County Schools' Superintendent

Oldham County Schools have successfully continued our commitment to students over the past many years. Thanks to the community, the board of education, parents, teachers, administrators and the entire support staff we have moved forward improving in all areas that support ongoing excellence in both academic and extracurricular student achievement.

Beginning in the mid 1970s with the leadership of former Superintendent Dr. Robert Arvin and continuing with the leadership of Dr. Blake Haselton, our relentless commitment to be the best school system in Kentucky and in surrounding states coupled with a genuine desire to make all decisions based on what is in the best interest of students has resulted in a school district that has consistently performed among the best in the country. Below are examples of these accomplishments.

Kentucky's accountability goal is 100 by 2014 for all public schools.

Eleven of 17 Oldham County schools have surpassed the 100 mark in 2009.

ACT Composite Scores

2009 graduating seniors in Oldham County	22.1
2009 graduating seniors in 223 Kentucky high schools	19.4
2009 graduating seniors across the U.S.	21.1

The Oldham County Schools operate the business of the district through the general fund, which totals about \$77 million. All personnel expenses, instructional initiatives and district operational expenses are paid through this account. Each of the other accounts such as the building fund, capital outlay and food services total about \$25 million and are restricted for expenses designated only in those areas and can't be used in other areas.

For example, funds the state department of education has designated for school construction, improving athletic facilities, and renovating school buildings can't be used for expenses in the general fund such as building operational expenses, or salaries.

The information below calls attention to the consistent high performance of students and teachers while facing low levels of state support and low teacher salaries compared to other Kentucky districts.

The Oldham County Board of Education recognizes the need to consistently improve teacher salaries and to address a long-standing problem of high performance with below average pay. Our teachers have proven their dedication to students over many years by performing at the top of the state. Time is long overdue to address this issue.

How Oldham Ranks Among Kentucky Districts

Categories	Rank among 174 districts
General fund revenue	173rd (for 2008)
Average classroom salaries for 2008-09	98th
State test academic performance	1st (19 of past 20 years)

Currently we face financial circumstances that jeopardize our ability to continue to meet our commitment to students. For the past two years our district received no overall increase to revenue in the general operating fund.

During that time expenses have continued to increase, and funding from the state has been reduced, forcing major budget cuts over the last two fiscal years.

The superintendent and board of education have been able to maintain a balanced budget and compensate for the decreases in revenue by reducing \$2.2 million dollars of operating expenses to the general fund.

Although this has worked in the short term we can't continue this strategy and maintain the excellent learning environment and student achievement results that this district has enjoyed over the past 30 years.

What has the district cut in services to students to compensate for these funding cuts?

Cuts to Oldham County Schools' district budget for the 2009 and 2010 school years include an increase in student class size at each school, saving \$1,432,071; central office and other administrative positions reductions, saving \$286,377; ended the class size reduction program at La Grange Elementary, saving \$364,000; school resource officer reductions, saving \$60,000; program reductions at Buckner Alternative High School, saving \$ 80,000; ended arts center early bird classes for students, saving \$15,000; and teacher tuition support in critical shortage subject areas, saving \$25,000 – a total of \$2,262,448.

Funding received by the Oldham County Schools is generated annually through a combination of a per-pupil allocation, total growth in student enrollment and local tax rates. The per-pupil allocation from the state has decreased for the 2009-10 fiscal year. We've grown in enrollment by a total of 119 students over the past two years and the overall local tax rates have remained the same for three years.

The general fund tax rate has remained the same (44.9) since the 2002-03 school year. In other words, unless something changes soon we'll be forced to cut deeper into the academic and extracurricular areas in the district budget.

In this school year the number of students in classrooms was increased across the district, which saved \$1.4 million. We can't continue to reduce support to the instructional program and maintain the same quality of education for our students as we have experienced in the past.

What are the revenue cuts from the state and federal allocations?

For 2009-2010, federal grant reductions total \$227,195 and state grant reductions (including preschool, student tutoring, Safe schools, textbooks, and teacher training) total \$833,528. In 2010, state SEEK program funding is reduced by \$829,922. State and federal cuts total \$1,890,645.

Total cuts to Oldham County Schools' general fund due to local district cuts and the state and federal cuts listed above total \$4,153,093.

We have an exciting vision for Oldham County students that will equip them to be competitive in an international economy. Our children are the most valuable resource that we share.

For this vision to become a reality, our stakeholders must continue to make student achievement a priority in Oldham County.

The views expressed in this column are those of the writer. Superintendent Paul Upchurch can be reached at 241-3500.

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