

At the first of two “Schools: A Community Conversation” sessions on Oct. 12 at Horace Mann Elementary School, Lakewood City Schools Superintendent Joe Madak offered a broad picture of the steady academic progress the district has made in student achievement and then outlined a sobering picture of the district’s financial status and how the state’s budget issues may negatively impact us over the next few years. He also heard from the community members present how we can all work together to continue to offer our students high quality educational opportunities.

Madak explained to the audience the nuances of the State Report Card system that caused the district’s rating to drop from Excellent despite the district’s students overall performing better on the state tests than the previous school year. This rating dropped also despite all of the district’s buildings being rated Effective or above, including five that were rated Excellent or above. However, due to the fact that three “subgroups” of students as categorized by the state – those of Limited English Proficiency, Students with Disabilities and Asia/Pacific Islanders – did not meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) benchmarks as required by the federal government in reading and math, the state law dictates that our district could be rated no higher than Continuous Improvement.

Madak shared the district’s sense of urgency in finding better ways to help these student subgroups achieve the progress needed. “We’re trying to find out how to pool the talent and resources of our staff to address these needs,” he said. One tactic that the district will employ is Teacher Based Teams, which have the goal of increasing communication and collaboration between the English as Second Language teachers, the Intervention Specialists and the classroom teachers in trying to identify instructional strategies to help these students.

In his budget presentation, Madak showed a line graph of the district’s cash balance over the next four years that hammered home how critical passage of the May levy was. However, despite the boost from the levy, he cautioned that the district’s expenses continue to outstrip its revenues and that more cuts will be necessary to keep the district in stable financial shape. While district officials are doing their best to reign in the budget, matters are complicated by the uncertainty of state funding. Madak explained the myriad of ways the state may look to plug its \$8 billion budget shortfall that could mean significantly less dollars for school districts. Those potential reductions, combined with declining local property tax collections due to foreclosures, delinquencies and reduced property values could add up to millions of dollars in lost revenue for the district.

Despite the financial uncertainty, Madak assured the audience that keeping as many teachers in the classrooms as possible is the district’s top priority when it comes to planning for next year. He also stated that if cuts are made “we will try to minimize any cuts to programs for students.”

After Madak’s presentation, audience members broke into small groups to discuss what had been presented and offer suggestions on how the district and the community might deal with the challenges ahead. They also prepared individual questions for the superintendent to answer, which he spent about an hour doing once the table discussions were finished. Some of the suggestions that were offered included using more volunteers in school buildings, partnering with local colleges, working more collaboratively with other districts, seeking alternate forms of funding (grants, corporate donations, etc.)

and maintaining an ongoing dialogue with the community to educate them of the issues and hear more frequent feedback from citizens.

The meeting closed with Assistant Superintendent Jeff Patterson reminding the audience that despite the challenges ahead for the district, Lakewood City Schools has much going for it: a caring and engaged community, state-of-the-art facilities, technology tools that are the envy of many other districts, talented and dedicated teachers and staff, thriving extracurricular programs and, of course, amazing students. Working together, we can continue to be a district of which we are all very proud.

The last “Community Conversation” session will be Oct. 20 at 7 p.m. at Emerson Elementary.