

## D51's Hill discusses major district topics

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Mesa County voters have begun to fill in their ballots, which include two measures concerning Mesa County Valley School District 51 facilities: measures 4A and 4B.



With the status of the measures' success still undecided, The Daily Sentinel conducted a Q& A with D51 Super-intendent Brian Hill to discuss the measures and other major topics in the district.

**What is the best case you can make for why Mesa County voters should pass the mill levy and bond measures (4A and 4B)? You've emphasized that there will be no tax increase from either measure, but otherwise, what is the value of the impact these measures would have if passed?**

**Hill:** We completed a 25-year facility master plan last year for the first time in D51. What we found through that process is that D51 schools have a lot of deferred maintenance and safety and security needs. The total amount, in today's dollars, is over \$600 million. Unfortunately, we don't receive funding from the state for building needs. So, the only way a school district can address deferred maintenance, building safety needs, and any major capital improvements is through bonds.

Bonds are essentially a 20-to 25-year loan that our community lets us take out, we do the work on our schools, we pay it off, and the debt falls off. We are paying off our 2004 bond debt this year, so it provides us a one-time opportunity to ask our community to let us borrow \$190 million to address a large chunk of the over \$600 million worth of building needs, without raising the tax rate. We are essentially asking our community to let us borrow at the same rate, and take out a new bond payment to replace the one being paid off. If we don't pass it this year, the next opportunity to do a no tax rate increase bond initiative would be 2041.

Mill Levy Overrides are a way for local school districts to ask their local community for funding above and beyond what the state provides. Unfortunately, Colorado ranks 39th in the nation when it comes to K-12 funding, and D51 ranks 174th out of 178 school districts when it comes to per pupil funding. So, we are one of the lowest funded districts per student in a state that is one of the lowest when it comes to K-12 funding. Since we are funded per student, when you experience declining enrollment like we are that means less funding than we had in the past.

One misconception is that because our local property taxes are going up that D51 is receiving more money. That isn't accurate. The amount of money we receive in D51 is determined at the state level, and that amount of money doesn't increase when our local property taxes increase. What changes when local property taxes increase is the percentage of local share goes up and the state's share goes down. But the total amount doesn't change. So, Mill Levy Overrides are a way for the local

community to contribute school funding above what the state provides. These are local dollars that stay local.

Not only is D51 one of the lowest funded school districts in the state, but we also lag far behind our comparable districts when it comes to Mill Levy Overrides. On average, we receive about \$1,300 less per student than our comparable districts, and about \$1,100 of that difference comes from Mill Levy Overrides. If we were funded at the average of our comparable districts, we would receive about \$26 million more in funding each year. The gap is large, and it is increasing.

In 2017, our community passed a Mill Levy Override that has been funding five additional school days for kids, money for curriculum updates, money for capital improvements and money for some tech positions in schools. Those dollars will sunset soon if we don't do something, so we are asking our community to let us keep what we already have, and that won't increase the tax rate. We've seen great results as a district since 2017, and we need this support to keep that momentum going.

**What are your thoughts on the district's current budget status in terms of challenges and obstacles? How much is the district's use of budget improving?**

**Hill:** We have an amazing finance department led by our chief financial officer, Melanie Trujillo. They received the Government Finance Officers Association's Certificate of Achievement for Excellence in Financial Reporting for the 30th year in a row. We are doing more with less, and that has led to great results. We have prioritized teacher and staff salaries as we have historically lagged behind other districts. Our starting teacher salary is now \$50,015 ... up from \$37,500 in 2020, which is a 33% increase. We moved to a Steps and Lanes salary schedule that rewards teachers for continuing education, and the average teacher salary has increased by 39.8% since 2020-21.

We have accomplished this through smart use of available funds, finding cost savings where we can and cutting \$1.3 million from Central Office staffing. And in the time that we've made all of these gains, we haven't asked for an additional tax increase from our community. That being said, we still lag far behind our comparable districts when it comes to funding, so initiatives like our no tax increase Mill Levy Override that is on the ballot this year go a long way to helping our budget.

**The school district is still exploring its options at the elementary school level because of declining enrollment. Realistically, what are the chances that any more schools are closed in the near future?**

**Hill:** Since 2019, D51 has seen a decline in student enrollment by 2,049 students. That is a 9.3% decrease. This is mostly due to some of the lowest birthrates we have seen in our county in decades, meaning we have less students entering our schools than we had in the past. Affordable housing, alternative school options and other factors have contributed to that decline as well. We currently have 4,715 empty seats at the elementary school level (65% utilization), 1,369 empty seats at the middle school level (74% utilization), and 30 available seats at the high school level (98% utilization). With a total of 6,114 empty seats in our district, we are only utilizing about 71% of the available capacity in our schools. Ideally you would utilize 85% or above.

Staffing allocations are assigned to schools based on student counts, so when you decline in students, you decline in staffing, which means you can't offer the level of programs and support

that you would like. So, when enrollment declines, we either cut staff and programs, or we have to subsidize those positions without funding to pay for it.

We are overstaffed at the elementary school level by 26.7 full-time equivalency currently. The average teacher salary with benefits is \$97,967. At the elementary level, using the average teacher cost, we are subsidizing staffing at a cost of \$2.6 million, and we are having to use reserves to pay for that, which isn't sustainable. Next year, if projections are correct and we don't close schools, the amount of overstaffing at the elementary level would grow to 43 fulltime equivalency, and we would have to subsidize staffing at the elementary level at an estimated cost of \$4.2 million.

We don't have the money to do that, so school closures at the elementary school level is still a reality. My goal is to finish this process this year, and we as a community can move forward without having to focus on school closures. We are currently utilizing the closure criteria that was developed by the Elementary Declining Enrollment Committee to run scenarios prior to me making a recommendation to the Board of Education. That recommendation will happen this fall.

**Are you happy with the current salary level and structure for teachers in the district? In the longer term, how much are you hoping to grow those figures?**

**Hill:** We have prioritized teacher and staff salaries as we have historically lagged behind other districts. Our starting teacher salary is now \$50,015 ... up from \$37,500 in 2020, which is a 33% increase. We moved to a Steps & Lanes salary schedule that rewards teachers for continuing education, and the average teacher salary has increased by 39.8% since 2020-21.

With that being said, we still lag behind other districts across the state when it comes to salaries. A starting teacher can make close to \$65,000 on the Front Range. Competitive salaries not only help us recruit great teachers, but it helps us retain the great teachers that we do have. I am proud of the work we have done to boost salaries for our staff over the last few years, all without asking for an additional tax increase, but we still have a lot of work to do, and it takes funding to be able to do that.

**What do you believe are the top two or three issues facing District 51 right now?**

**Hill:** We are always trying to improve in the area of student and staff mental health and well-being. It has been a focus as a district for years, and we have made a lot of progress. But we still have work to do. I am very concerned with the state of our facilities across the district. We celebrate the opening of a new Grand Junction High School, a new Orchard Mesa Middle School and a new Monument Ridge Elementary School, but we have over \$600 million worth of deferred maintenance and safety and security concerns across the district.

Our students and staff deserve to be in safe learning environments that are conducive to academic success. It takes our community passing bonds to address these needs. We are always pressing and supporting our schools when it comes to academic success. We are celebrating our highest graduation rate ever, we are seeing academic success across the district, and we just had a school, Mesa View Elementary School, earn the National Blue Ribbon School Award. But we have more work to do, and our school and central office staff are up for the challenge.

**Do you believe the district will need to address the affordable housing issue for teachers in the near future? If so, what are some of the ideas the district is considering to increase housing accessibility for staff ?**

**Hill:** Affordable housing is impacting all sectors in our community. We conducted a survey of our staff, along with the help of Community Builders and the Housing Resources of Western Colorado, to get an idea of the need when it comes to affordable housing. There is definitely a need, and we are exploring options that will hopefully lead to more affordable housing for our staff. While we are not in the housing business, we do want to be at the table to help find solutions.