



Superintendent's Message

The Politicization of School Governance

Dear *Community Members*,

The past year has seen a sharp increase in what we might call “hyper-political” activity at all levels of government. While a great deal of attention has been paid to local levels of government in the past, and for good reason, the focus is especially intense at this time.

While we should welcome this new attention, there are several important things that need to be pointed out.

First of all, I think it is necessary to note that school boards, as governing bodies, are very different from legislative bodies. Although both school board members and legislators are elected, the role of school boards is to ensure that the operations of school districts are as effective as possible, not to pursue political ideologies or agendas.

Despite the clear differences between governing and legislative boards, school districts across the state have been caught in very difficult situations. On the one hand, in the current hyper-political environment, many community members view the taxation level as the only indicator of our schools' success. On the other hand, the educational needs of our students and community require the ongoing investment of tax dollars. This unique change in the political landscape has manifested itself at the state level in the debate on Act 10 and Act 32.

At the center of this debate is the reality of the state's arcane school funding formula, one that hurts many Wisconsin districts but hits the Mequon-Thiensville School District especially hard.

In this intense political environment under which some of the most important issues facing the Mequon-Thiensville School District have been addressed, public attention often seems to look at the school board as a legislative body, leading to misunderstandings. The following are a few examples of the issues that have resulted:

- The 2010-2011 school year tax levy was protested against, despite the fact that the proposed increase was less than one third of one percent.
- The District's attempt to implement a four-year-old kindergarten program was protested against, in part due to the program's potential to lead to an increase in the community tax levy.

- The District's exploration and eventual passage of a trimester schedule at the high school was criticized, partially because it was portrayed as an attempt to accommodate teaching staff.
- The District's recognition from the Department of Public Instruction for its exemplary breakfast and lunch program was downplayed due to the perception of some community members that schools should not provide a breakfast program to children.

In all of the cases cited above, there were valid and important points shared by parties on both sides of the issue, but open, collaborative dialogue did not occur.

Instead, the issues became divisive and perspectives became negative, and little discussion was had regarding what was best for the students. Unfortunately, many of the conversations concerning school policy in the past year have lacked the type of civility expected in a community like Mequon-Thiensville. Too often, simplistic solutions—such as reductions in employee compensation and academic services to students—have been offered to address the complex issue of school funding in our school district. The community has approached these issues as "all or nothing" propositions, displaying an inability to offer reasonable modifications to the well-vetted proposals offered by the District. In order for Mequon-Thiensville to move forward, we will all have to commit to a more civil and collaborative approach to developing solutions to the funding dilemma our school district faces.

School operations are, to some degree, always political as a result of the taxation element involved. It's best that we face the facts: school districts rely on taxation to provide a quality educational experience for students. If we want to maintain or improve our school district, taxation will in some way become part of the conversation. If we avoid the discussion of taxation, we are in essence ignoring the discussion of how to improve our schools.

Taxation is a difficult issue for our District because we are dependent on taxes from the local community to operate our award-winning schools. Approximately 84 percent of the revenue for the 2011-2012 school year came from local property taxes. In a community where residential growth has ceased, the school district must annually reduce services due to the decline in enrollment. The issue of community growth is an important one, as the District's tax levy authority depends on the number of resident students enrolled in our schools. The District is in need of more students to generate enough revenue to sustain current programming.

In my next email, I will share what we could become if there was a greater investment in the school district and our future. It is not reasonable to assume that the current pattern of limited student enrollment growth, budget reductions, low taxation and the reduction of employee compensation is the path to a greater Mequon-Thiensville. We need to determine what our schools and our students really need.

Sincerely,

Demond A. Means, Ed.D.