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Robbinsdale's Distance Learning PLUS Model Provides Individualized Opportunities

Sometimes students need someone to sit next to them while they do their homework. Other learners may need one-on-one time with a teacher. While there are others who may be having trouble navigating technology from home. No matter what the reason, leaders at Robbinsdale Area Schools knew that students would need individualized assistance when they returned to school this fall, particularly if they didn't return in person.



Students engage in learning activities while socially distanced in the classroom. (Students pictured: Emma Ward Orillo, Greta Novak and Kerregan Beeck.)

One solution they developed was the Distance Learning PLUS model. Designed to assist students virtually, or in-person, the premise of the PLUS model is to provide students and their families individualized opportunities to connect with school staff.

The Robbinsdale district started the school year in distance learning. It wasn't able to shift to a hybrid model as planned due to the increase in COVID-19 cases. However, the district was able to highlight its PLUS model from the beginning and then made greater efforts to push it into full effect at each of its 17 schools.

The PLUS is what is offered at the school's support centers - which were designed to engage family and community partners to address the needs of students and their families. The supports include academic tutoring, social-emotional and mental health supports, and connects students and families to community resources.

The Student Support Centers are staffed by a mix of district employees that includes teachers, counselors, education assistants, culture and climate specialists and others. Students and families have access to mental health and chemical health services, counselors, social workers, school psychologists, nurses, and can receive assistance with technology.

"Providing transportation for access to in-person services for students who need it is a major "plus" in the support offered," said Dr. Kristine Wehrkamp, Executive Director of Community Education

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December 18, 2020*
Executive/Legislative Committee Meeting
7:30 a.m. - 9:00 a.m.

January 8, 2021
Legislative Session Preview
8:00 a.m. - 9:30 a.m.

January 29, 2021*
Executive/Legislative Committee Meeting
7:30 a.m. - 9:00 a.m.

February 5, 2021*
Board of Directors Meeting
7:30 a.m. - 9:00 a.m.

These meetings will likely be conducted remotely and instructions will be sent prior to each meeting.

AMSD's Mission

To advocate for state education policy that enables metropolitan school districts to improve student learning.



Association of
Metropolitan School Districts

From the Chair

With the 2021 legislative session fast approaching, I want to encourage AMSD board members and legislators representing our member school districts to attend AMSD's annual Legislative Session Preview program on Friday, January 8 from 8:00 – 9:30 a.m. This year's preview will be held virtually via Zoom. The program will include an overview of AMSD's legislative priorities as well as a legislative leadership panel discussion. The 2021 session is critical as the Legislature will adopt Minnesota's biennial budget which will determine the level of funding our schools will receive over the next two years. Please join us for this great event on January 8!

Curtis Johnson, school board member, Roseville Area Schools, is chair of AMSD.

Model Offers Academic, Social and Emotional Support

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and Activities Director Supervisor. “Overcoming this barrier creates equity in opportunity.”

While transportation has been a critical component of the Distance Learning PLUS model, the in-person option has been scaled back because of the recent spike in COVID-19 cases. Still, for those who need in-person support they can make appointments and everyone follows the safety protocols. Transportation is also provided, if needed.

“Every student is so different and we want to be able to focus on their needs and build on that,” said Judie Bomchill, a resource support specialist at Lakeview Elementary, who was also the district’s Education Assistant of the Year in 2016-2017. “Moving to virtual learning is challenging in that you want to be sure that the student has all the materials they need to be successful. What makes the PLUS so effective is that the whole team is working together to meet the needs of the students and their families,” Ms. Bomchill added.

“It’s the connection we make with our school community,” she said. “Our families know we are there for them and will do what needs to be done to help them through this crazy time. We have their back and our families have ours.”

Resources for families include access to information on assistance with food needs, technology help, mental health and chemical health services, and the class, *Parents In Community*.

Additionally, the Student Support Centers offer resources for families who are expecting or caring for a child from birth through third grade. They can connect with a licensed parent and family educator for assistance. A free one-to-one visit can be scheduled to share information on child development and community resources on topics such as setting up routines, positive ways to guide your child, family relationships and communication.



Lakeview Elementary 2nd Grade teachers Symone Brown and Susan Cunningham discuss upcoming lesson plans.

The numbers of students and families using the PLUS model was slower in the beginning of the school year, but has been growing steadily. There are some who utilized the supports on a regular basis, while others come as needed, according to building leaders.

“After attending just once, students have improved their grades because they needed that little extra help,” said Dr. Frank Herman, Principal at Robbinsdale Cooper High School.

“The other success was just being able to see some of our students in person...it was pretty amazing,” Dr. Herman added.

With a mostly virtual model in place right now, Dr. Herman said they would be even more intentional about reaching out and setting up small groups or individual support for students. “Another key is to ensure that we are offering not only academic, but also social and emotional support as needed,” he said. “The PLUS model for us is having a schedule with flexibility, for example for Wednesday, to provide that extra support for students and staff.”

“The focus is not only academics but all around support and time built into the schedule for that. We did not have that last spring so creating a PLUS model to include those was essential for our students and families.”

Besides ensuring that everyone is practicing safety measures when they do come into the buildings, the staff who work with the students are ensuring that they are making the best use of the time they spend together.

“Now that we’re in a mostly virtual model we will have to be even more strategic,” said Mary Jane Adams, Assistant Principal at Sandburg Middle School. “What makes the PLUS model successful is we start by loving our students. For me, the PLUS means just looking for the way to express our love in the most effective way for each student.”

This month’s member spotlight was submitted by Toya Stewart Downey, Executive Director of Strategic Communications, Equity and Inclusion, Robbinsdale Area Schools.

AMSD Platform Calls for Stabilizing Funding

The 2021 legislative session convenes on January 5 and the primary focus of the session will be the adoption of the biennial budget. It is a critical session for public education.

Over the past year, school districts have been working to meet the challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. Teachers, staff, administrators and school board members have stepped up to meet the needs of their communities including providing free childcare for essential workers and serving breakfast and lunch to students. One-time federal CARES Act funding has provided critical funding and helped mitigate the impact of these costs as well as helping school districts provide students with devices and internet connectivity to engage in distance or hybrid learning.

The challenges for education don't end there.

Prior to COVID, AMSD's Reimagine Minnesota initiative had highlighted the importance of addressing Minnesota's significant racial disparities and opportunity gaps. The events of 2020 — the death of George Floyd and the national civil unrest — have magnified the urgency of addressing these disparities and gaps.

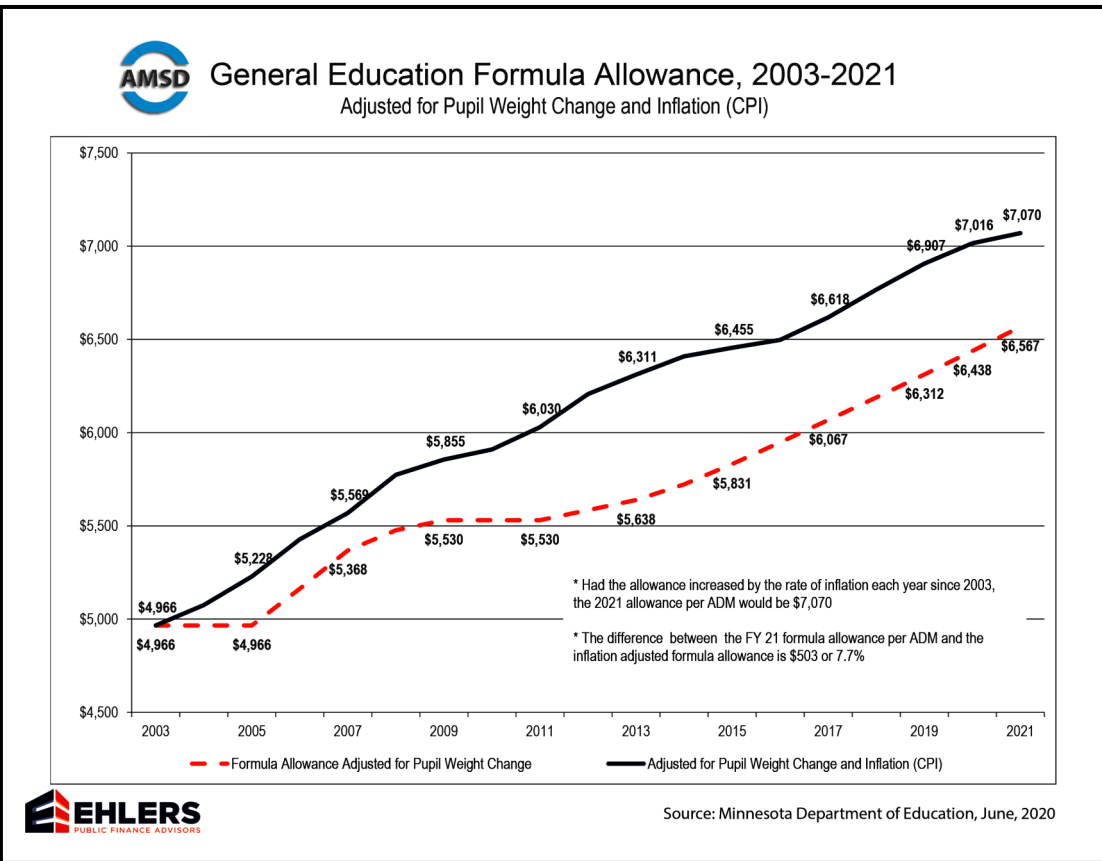
To address these and other important issues, the Association of Metropolitan School Districts Board of Directors adopted a legislative platform focused on five key areas:

Stabilizing Education Funding. Stable education funding remains a key priority for AMSD member school districts. In addition, the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic brought additional unforeseen costs and challenges that will need to be addressed by state policymakers.

In 2019, the Minnesota Department of Education convened a School Finance Working Group, which last month released a comprehensive set of recommendations that would stabilize the education funding system. The recommendations would reduce

reliance on state aid and revenue from voter-approved operating referendums by establishing an equalized local levy and recognizing cost differentials related to geographic location and district size. The AMSD Board of Directors recognizes that the current budget situation will require that these recommendations be phased in over time.

Key among those recommendations is to link the basic formula to inflation to provide a stable and consistent funding stream that allows school boards and administrators to engage in long-range planning. As the chart to the left shows, the basic formula has lost significant ground to inflation since 2003. In addition, AMSD is urging lawmakers to mitigate the impact of the enrollment decline that is a direct result of the COVID-19 impact. School districts adopted budgets last spring that were based on enrollment projections available at that time.



Source: Minnesota Department of Education, June, 2020

The basic funding formula would be \$503 per pupil higher for 2021 if it had kept up with inflation

Closing Opportunity Gaps is Critical

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The platform further urges lawmakers to allow locally-elected school boards to renew an existing operating referendum at the same level; and increase special education and English learner funding to reduce the shortfalls in these important programs as well.

Ensuring Safe Schools. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the mental health challenges facing our students. In addition, safe and modern school facilities remain a high priority and are essential for student learning.

The 2021 Platform looks to address these needs by increasing the Safe Schools Levy to allow school districts and intermediate school districts to hire additional support staff to address the growing mental health needs of our students which have been compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic. The platform also urges lawmakers to remove the per-pupil limit and expand the allowable uses of Long-Term Facilities Revenue to allow school districts and intermediate school districts to enhance safety through security modifications, remodeling and additions to existing buildings.

Close Opportunity Gaps. Closing opportunity gaps is essential to ensuring each and every student has the opportunity to reach their full potential. Research shows that among the most critical elements to ensuring students can realize their full potential is the reflection of the student population among the teaching ranks. According to the 2019 Teacher Supply and Demand Report, just 4.3 percent of the teacher workforce was composed of teachers of color, while more than 35 percent of the 2019-20 student population was composed of students other than white.

The 2021 legislative platform calls on state policymakers to create incentives and alternatives to attract, develop and retain teachers, particularly teachers of color and teachers in shortage areas, as well as maintain multiple pathways to licensure in the tiered licensing system. The platform also urges lawmakers to increase special education and English learner funding to eliminate the funding shortfalls in these programs as well as ensuring all students have access to reliable internet service and devices to engage in distance learning.

Reduce Mandates and Enhance Local Control. Mandates from the state and federal level come with costs, whether through the need for additional staffing or something as basic as additional paperwork and documentation. Mandates have been regularly imposed on school districts without the allocation of resources to carry them out. Each school district faces unique needs which depend on a variety of factors including demographics, geography and district size. AMSD believes locally-elected school boards are in the best position to work with their staff, students, parents and communities to address local needs and challenges.

The 2021 legislative platform continues to urge legislators to oppose new unfunded mandates and reduce existing unfunded mandates. AMSD also supports expanding the innovation zone law to allow school districts to implement a competency-based education model in lieu of seat time requirements, to collaborate with post-secondary institutions, nonprofit organizations and businesses to enhance course offerings and opportunities for students, and to replace the high school MCA exams with a nationally-recognized college entrance exam and more. AMSD is also advocating to repeal the requirement that school districts publish minutes and budget information in the newspaper and instead allow this information to be posted on the district website.

Enhance Taxpayer Equity. Property tax levies play a critical role in funding education programs and facilities. However, these levies have widely varying impacts on local property taxpayers depending on the property wealth of the school district. In an effort to enhance taxpayer equity, the AMSD Platform urges lawmakers to increase equalization of the operating referendum, local optional, and debt service levies to reduce taxpayer and education funding disparities.

The AMSD Board of Directors has approved updates to 13 Position Papers, which address the topics below. They all can be viewed at:

<https://www.amsd.org/position-papers/>

These papers include:

- Assessments
- Charter Schools
- Compensatory Revenue
- Early Childhood
- Employee Health Insurance
- English Learner
- Facilities Funding
- Guns on School Property
- Mandates and Local Control
- Referendum Renewal
- Special Education
- Tiered Licensure
- Vouchers

[Link: View the AMSD 2021 Legislative Session webpage](#)