

December 2021

Volume 19

Number 3

## Columbia Heights Public Schools Takes Sustainability to the Next Level

### December 17, 2021 Executive/Legislative Committee Meeting

7:30 a.m. - 9 a.m.

Anderson Center  
Bethel University  
Arden Hills

### January 7, 2022 Legislative Session Preview

7:30 a.m. - 10 a.m.

Quora Education Center  
NE Metro 916  
Little Canada

### January 28, 2022 Executive/Legislative Committee Meeting

7:30 a.m. - 9 a.m.

Anderson Center  
Bethel University  
Arden Hills

### February 4, 2022 Board of Directors Meeting

7 a.m. - 9 a.m.

Quora Education Center  
NE Metro 916  
Little Canada

Columbia Heights Public Schools (CHPS) is home to an innovative solution for sorted organic waste: The Biodigester. Housed at CHPS's very own North Park School for Innovation (NPSfi), the Biodigester is being integrated into the PreK-Fifth Grade curriculum at the school. North Park School for Innovation is focused on Science, Technology, Engineering and Math education that inspires creativity grounded in a commitment to sustainability. The educational experience of the students is supported by a newly renovated building with outside learning and play spaces that include edible landscaping and rain gardens. A unique feature of NPSfi is the Biodigester that takes all the food waste and much of the paper waste from the school and turns it into soil that can be used in the school gardens and turned into fuel to heat the building.



The NPSfi Biodigester is one of four in the country in use, so in regards to sustainable schools, they are on the cutting edge of integrating this technology into the field of education. Jeff Cacek, NPSfi Principal, said "It started 10 to 12 years ago, when we started putting a lot of energy into recycling. Every year we have decided to add one more thing." NPSfi has been leading the way for CHPS in sustainability programs and was named a U.S. Department of Education Green Ribbon School in 2018, so adding this new equipment is the perfect addition to a sustainable school. "The Biodigester takes all of our carbon-based

*Continued on page 2*

The recently released state budget forecast projects a budget surplus of \$7.7 billion for the current biennium and almost \$6 billion for the 2024-25 biennium! This incredibly positive news provides state policymakers with a golden opportunity to stabilize Minnesota's education funding system and help our students and communities recover from the pandemic as outlined in AMSD's legislative priorities which are highlighted in this newsletter. We look forward to sharing our legislative priorities with legislators at AMSD's annual Session Preview program on January 7. Further details about the preview are available [here](#). Happy holidays and I look forward to seeing you on January 7!

*From the AMSD Chair, Kelsey Dawson Walton, Osseo Area Schools Board Member*

# Students Taking Action on Food Insecurity and Climate Change

*Continued from page 1*

waste,” says Cacek, “and instead of putting it onto a compost pile to produce methane and taking eight months to create compost, the Biodigester does it overnight.” This system is a fully-automated, waterless digester process that is capable of reducing the mass and volume of organic waste by a minimum of 70 percent.

---

How does the biodigester and biomass boiler work?



1. Empty our food waste and compostable material into the biodigester.
  2. Let the system process for about a day.
  3. The food waste and compostable material is converted into a high biofuel in 24 hours.
  4. The fuel is used to run an integrated biomass boiler.
  5. The resulting heat is delivered to the existing heating system.
- 

CHPS’s Agriculture Specialist, Wes Nugteren, works in all of the district’s schools and focuses lessons on the Blooming Heights School Garden and nutrition programming. Nugteren uses the Biodigester’s compost to help the gardens at both NPSfl and Blooming Heights flourish. “Students can feel a source of pride in what they’re learning about and taking action toward these issues like food insecurity and climate change.” By integrating the Biodigester into not only his lesson plans, but multiple NPSfl teachers’ lesson plans, students not only reap the benefits of having such a system, but are also learning about how important composting and sustainability is for the planet.

The Biodigester and Biomass Boiler were a gift to the ISD #13 courtesy of Waste to Energy Canada (WTEC) and is valued at over \$269,000. This gift allows CHPS to decrease waste and continue to pave the way for sustainability in schools. WTEC is a technology driven company, focused on providing off-grid holistic infrastructure solutions, that deploy logical, proven, economical, modular/scalable, technology platforms. They are focused on community independence, security, home, family and the next generation. Director of Technology, Security & Building Operations Bryan Hennekens has discussed how the district can start to turn its organic waste into energy without shipping it off to be properly disposed of. The Biodigester at NPSfl is the first initiative for CHPS to implement this innovative sustainability initiative.

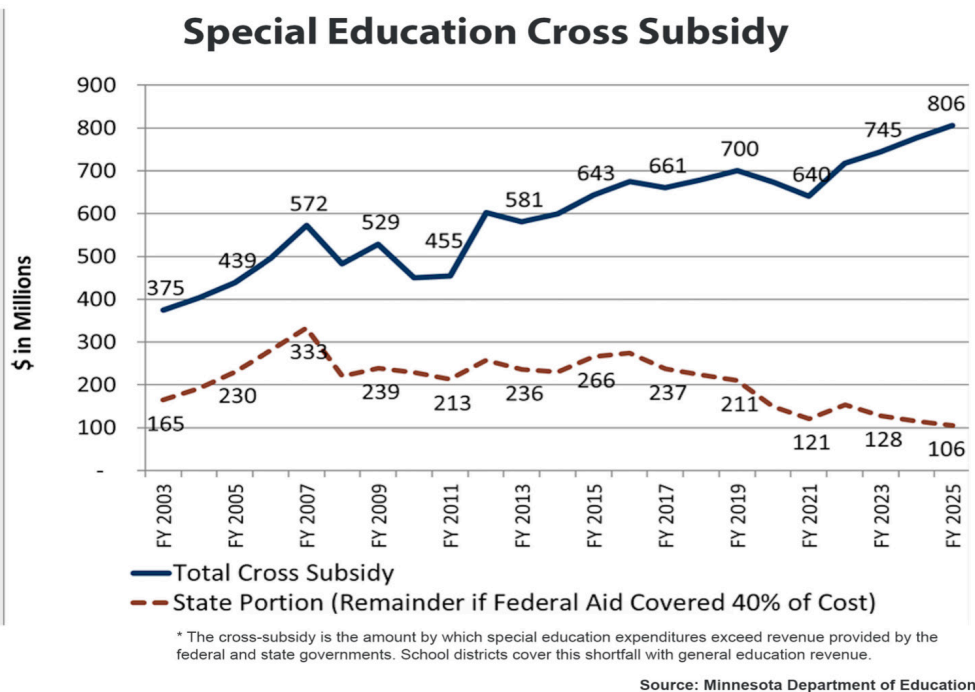
North Park School for Innovation’s key messages are: our learners unlock their potential through a strong academic foundation, they use science and the design thinking process to develop new solutions, they create an environmentally-sustainable community, they discover their passion through creativity and our learners see challenges as an opportunity for growth. These commitments are what drive the curriculum at NPSfl and adding the Biodigester to their school sustainability plan is just one more way of helping our young students become well-rounded individuals in the future. CHPS is proud of the steps that NPSfl is taking at a building level and is excited to start implementing more sustainable practices throughout the district.

*This month’s member feature was submitted by Emma Bute, Communications Coordinator, Columbia Heights Public Schools.*

# AMSD Board Adopts 2022 Legislative Platform

The 2022 legislative session convenes on January 31. While the biennial budget was adopted last session, the recently announced budget surplus provides state policymakers a once in a generation opportunity to stabilize Minnesota's education funding system and address the challenges exacerbated by the pandemic such as student mental health and severe staff shortages.

Teachers, staff, and administrators are filling new roles and duties that require additional support. Growing needs (mental health support; public health protocols; student nutrition; childcare) dominate not just district board meetings, but media headlines.



One-time federal funding has provided critical resources during the pandemic to address some of these challenges — including technology, transportation costs, personal protective equipment, school nutrition programs, COVID testing and more — but this funding does not continue into the future, creating what has been described as a “fiscal cliff” for school districts. The projected budget surplus offers state policymakers the opportunity to eliminate the pending fiscal cliff and ensure that school districts can continue to respond to the challenges of the pandemic.

Not to mention that many of Minnesota's longstanding financial challenges for education continue.

The 2019 Legislature made significant strides to address the growing special education cross-subsidy by reforming the special education funding formula and establishing cross-subsidy reduction aid. However, the 2021 Omnibus Education Finance Bill fell far short of the funding needed to prevent the cross-subsidy from growing again. As the chart above shows, the cross-subsidy is projected to grow to \$806 million by FY 2025. Similarly, the shortfall in the English learner program was more than \$117 million in FY 2020. The 2021 bill included the largest increase to the basic formula in 15 years — a 2.45 percent increase for the current school year and a 2 percent increase for the 2022-23 school year. But as the chart on page 4 shows, the basic formula would be \$598 per pupil higher today if it had simply kept pace with inflation since 2003. Furthermore, current inflationary pressures are significantly exceeding the formula increase approved in the 2021 session.

AMSD member school districts are committed to helping students recover from the COVID-19 pandemic and closing opportunity gaps based on race and socioeconomic status. With that backdrop, the Association of Metropolitan School Districts Board of Directors adopted a legislative platform focused on four key areas:

*Continued on page 4*

# Surplus Offers Chance to Stabilize Education Funding

Continued from page 3

## Stabilizing Education Funding

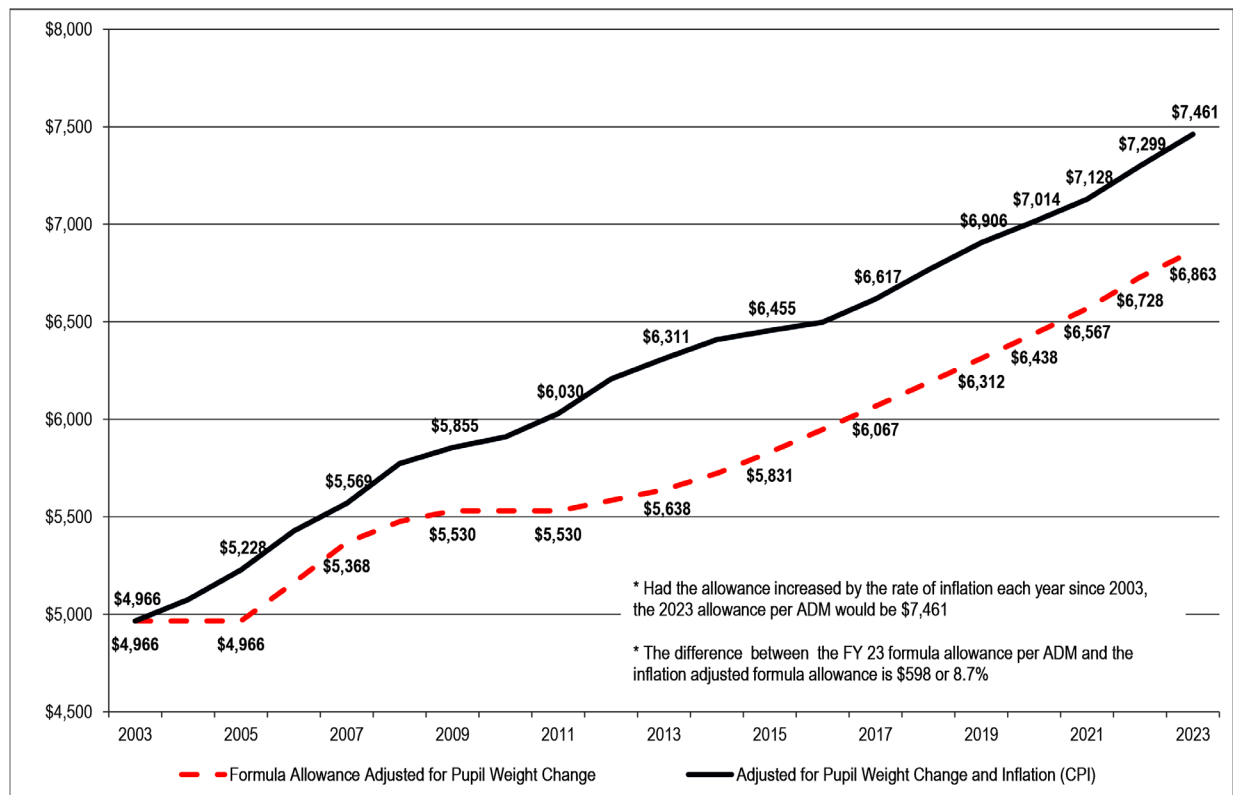
Stable education funding remains a key priority for AMSD member school districts. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic continues to bring additional unforeseen costs and challenges that need to be addressed by state policymakers.



## Association of Metropolitan School Districts

### General Education Formula Allowance, 2003-2023

Adjusted for Pupil Weight Change and Inflation (CPI)



Source: MDE Inflation Estimates, July 2021



Association of Metropolitan School Districts



As happens all too frequently, the regular 2021 legislative session ended without the omnibus education finance bill being adopted. The unpredictable nature of the current funding system leaves school leaders scrambling to finalize budgets and makes long-term planning nearly impossible.

AMSD urges state policymakers to stabilize the funding system by linking the basic formula to inflation to provide a predictable and consistent funding stream that allows school boards and administrators to engage in strategic, long-range planning. In addition, it is critical that lawmakers address the ongoing shortfalls in the special education and English learner programs.

Funding stability would further be enhanced by allowing locally elected school boards to renew an existing operating referendum at the same level, and by increasing equalization of the operating

Continued on page 5



# Student Mental Health at a Crisis Level

*Continued from page 4*

referendum, local optional, and debt service levies to reduce taxpayer and education funding disparities.

## **Ensuring Safe, Modern School Facilities**

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 2022 Platform urges lawmakers 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 making additions to existing buildings.

## **Increase and Diversify Teacher Workforce**

Addressing the labor shortage is a critical issue. Virtually every school district has faced shortages of teachers, substitute teachers, paraprofessionals, bus drivers and other staff. Demographics make it likely that this challenge will continue even after the pandemic. As we work to grow the educator workforce, it is critical that state policymakers continue efforts to diversify that workforce to better reflect the growing diversity of our students.

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 staff. According to the 2021 Teacher Supply and Demand Report, just 5.6 percent of Minnesota's more than 100,000 licensed teachers self-identified as teachers of color, while more than one third — 36.3 percent — of the 2020-21 student population was composed of students of color.

The 2021 Legislature made significant investments to recruit and retain teachers of color in Minnesota. The 2022 AMSD legislative platform calls on state policymakers to build on this momentum by expanding incentives and alternatives to attract, develop and retain teachers, particularly teachers of color and teachers in shortage areas. An important strategy to reach this goal is to maintain multiple pathways to licensure in the tiered licensure system.

## **Reduce Mandates and Enhance Local Control**

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 2022 AMSD platform continues to urge legislators to oppose new unfunded mandates and reduce existing unfunded mandates. The platform also calls on lawmakers to provide greater flexibility for 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, to establish the school calendar that best meets the needs of their students and community, and to replace the high school MCA exams with a nationally-recognized college entrance exam. AMSD is also asking the Legislature to address the rapidly escalating costs associated with data information requests so scarce resources can be directed to student programming.

- LINK: [View the 2022 AMSD Legislative Platform](#)