



President's Message: Budgets and Priorities

The Interlake School Division recently released its draft budget. A final budget decision will be taken next week with the intervening time allowing the board to consider input from Interlake citizens and employees of the division. A budget is about priorities. Given the reality of restricted revenue and the many worthwhile programs requiring funding, the creation of a budget forces a school division to clarify what is important – and then to articulate that vision to its employees and stakeholders.

On a division-wide basis, staffing in schools (Regular Instruction + Student Support) is up by 1.13FTE while coordinator/lead teacher positions are down by two full FTE's. Specifically, the division is proposing to eliminate the positions of Program Support: Technology (1 FTE), Career Development Coordinator (0.5 FTE), and French Lead Teacher (0.5 FTE). After removing technology mentors from ISD schools in the previous two budgets, this budget proposes the elimination of the final educational technology support position. Likewise, if this budget were to pass, the division would cease to provide division level support for French language instruction and career development.

It would seem that the board has made a priority decision to concentrate resources in the classroom. It cannot be understated how important it is, and has been, that the board, for decades, has made it a priority to keep class sizes small. We are still one of the ten best in the province when it comes to PTR. Classroom education is our core business; the board has, again, made sure that our core business receives funding. This is a good thing.

The draft budget indicates another priority decision. If we assume that the proposed elimination of the lead teacher and coordinator positions has been made for financial reasons, the board has decided that keeping tax increases lower is of higher priority than keeping these positions. To be clear, this is their job; trustees are elected to make difficult priority decisions between taxation and program delivery.

The message, then, in this budget seems to be that teachers, like the division, are to concentrate their professional energies in the classroom. Technology can be integrated as time and energy allow, but it should not be a top priority. French language teachers will, as always, do right by their students in the classroom, but expanding programming becomes less of a priority. And, it is always the goal of teachers to prepare students for life beyond high school, but that now must be contained to existing programs. This proposed budget protects frontline educational workers, it removes some secondary support for that work. These are the priority decisions I see when I read the proposed budget. The budget documents are on the division website as is an online form for budget feedback; I encourage all employees of the division to read these documents and present their thoughts on the priorities they see outlined in this budget to the trustees.

Positive Budget Highlights

In the president's message, I outlined some of the major cuts included in the proposed budget. It is worthwhile to note that there is a lot of good news in the budget as well. We retain the two Instructional Lead Teachers, the number of clinicians is retained, and the position of Behaviour Lead Teacher is funded. Likewise, the number of school administrators remains constant as does the number of classroom teachers. The division predicts essentially flat enrolment numbers, so consistent staffing in these areas is a positive. An acknowledgment of the increased challenges we face in the classroom is reflected in a slight increase in resource and guidance FTE. The division continues to pay down the debt incurred with the introduction of fibre, an infrastructure upgrade of which we are all the beneficiaries and French immersion will make its debut in high school. One budget line that has made a big rebound is the operating surplus which is used to pay for unbudgeted expenses. The division projects this to be just over \$900,000. This is a good thing. In years past the surplus has dropped to as low as \$421,000. If, for example, an unexpected influx of students requires the hiring of an additional teacher, that salary comes out of surplus. If the division needs to hire an additional EA to mitigate a behaviour issue, that salary is drawn from the surplus. Some accountants suggest that the surplus is still too low, but at least this rainy-day fund is a lot healthier than it was just last year, allowing the board increased flexibility to deal with emergent concerns.

Some Numbers

In the president's message, I made the assumption that the 2.0 FTE cut in lead teacher/coordinator positions was made for financial reasons. I am not privy to budget discussions, so this must remain an assumption. It is useful, however, to know how much is being saved. In the Interlake School Division, one mill raises \$1.29 million (per MTS). The 2.0 FTE would cost the division roughly \$200,000 in salaries and benefits. \$200,000 represents 0.155 mill. The draft budget proposes an increase of 0.6 mill which the ISD budget states will raise taxes on a \$300,000 home by \$81.00. By my math, an additional 0.155 mill would raise the taxes on that same home by another \$21.00 or \$1.74 per month.

20K3 in Limbo

In fall 2011, the provincial government made a commitment to smaller class sizes in Kindergarten to Grade 3 classrooms. The guidelines set forth were that 90% of K-3 classrooms within a school division were to have 20 or fewer students; 10% of K-3 classrooms could exceed the 20-pupil cap; however, no K-3 classroom was to exceed 23 students. In addition, 3/4 split classes were not to exceed 23. The 2017/2018 school year was to be the full implementation year of 20K3; however, the new provincial government has been silent on the issue leaving school divisions with no clear directive. The draft ISD budget shows 45, K-3 classrooms; 14 of these classrooms (31%) are above the 20-student cap. There is one 3/4 split in the proposed budget; it has 26 students.

A large, stylized graphic of the text '20K3' in a red, outlined font, positioned on the right side of the page.