

Community Unit School District 200

Administration and School Service Center

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Dear Families:

I had the opportunity to give the State of the District address to the Wheaton Chamber of Commerce last month and opened my comments with the following quote from former NBC News anchor Tom Brokaw:

There is a place in America to take a stand: it is public education. It is the underpinning of our cultural and political system. It is the great common ground. Public education after all is the engine that moves us as a society toward a common destiny . . . It is in public education that the American dream begins to take shape."

Reflecting on Mr. Brokaw's comments, I decided it was important to discuss what defines quality school systems so that we can all take a stand on the great common ground known as public education.

I am pleased to report that the state of Community Unit School District 200 is moving to higher levels of greatness. We use these words because we believe in the work of Jim Collins and his book *Good to Great*. Collins suggests that Good is the Enemy of Great. So we are not willing to settle for being good – we demand greatness. Collins also states that great organizations strive to get the right people on the bus. In District 200 we are blessed to have a fantastic faculty and staff that are dedicated to our primary mission of teaching and learning. As demanded by NCLB – we work to leave NO Child Behind. Finally, we have a wonderful community that supports and demands quality schools. From the very supportive parents to the fantastic students that walk through our doors every day, from our strong partnerships with our business community to the cooperation we share with the park district and local governmental agencies – our school district has all the ingredients to achieve greatness.

Each year the Board of Education sets high priority goals to help us move to the next level. I told you about this year's three goals in my September newsletter, and these are the goals that we continue to address on our journey toward greatness. Following is an update on our progress toward meeting the goals:

Goal #1: Build a new middle school in the southwest part of the school district.

We unfortunately haven't been able to move this goal along as quickly as we'd like, although some activity has occurred in the last few weeks that gives us hope that we may be able to identify a site for the new school in the coming weeks. I am not able to discuss details at this point, but I am optimistic that we are moving in the right direction. Meanwhile, the City of Wheaton has injected some excitement into the project by indicating its interest in the redevelopment of the Hubble property over time. A conceptual plan for the site was presented to

the City Council in February by local planner Ken Busse. His plan includes retail, business and residential developments, as well as a water feature and open space. Once we are able to identify a site, I believe we will be in a position to address in some detail all of the issues related to building a new school and relocating the students and staff to a new facility.

Goal #2: Develop a vision and mission statement for District 200 based on community feedback.

More than 1000 community members participated in 24 focus group sessions during February to provide their views on the programs and services they value in their public schools. In discussion and on written questionnaires, they identified what they believe the school district needs to become great and those things that may be holding us back as we seek enduring greatness. You may access the complete summary on the District's web site at www.cusd200.org, but I will tell you here that the top three things participants said should not be compromised are:

1. A safe and secure environment.
2. Quality programs and high standards.
3. High quality teachers.

The data from the focus groups was used to develop a survey to get additional information about what the community wants in its schools. The phone survey is being administered as I write this letter and many of you may have had the opportunity to give your views. The results of this survey will be statistically valid and subsequently used by the Board of Education to guide future decisions and develop a new vision and mission statement. A report on the survey analysis will be given at the May 11 Board of Education meeting at Whittier Elementary School. Special thanks to any of you who participated in a focus group or the survey.

Goal #3: Develop a long-term financial plan – based on the new mission and vision statement.

We will work on this goal after the Board completes the new vision and mission statement. At that time a citizen's finance committee will be formed to do just what the goal states—develop a long-term plan for financial stability and predictability. The committee will use information gathered from the focus groups and the community survey to make recommendations for dealing with the District's financial future.

Related to this goal, I will tell you that the District is handling its finances well despite ongoing budget deficits and the unpredictability of the state's support for public schools. Most recently, the District was able to refinance more than \$15 million in existing debt to save taxpayers about \$750,000 in interest costs due to the Aa3 bond rating assigned to us by Moody's Investors Service. In announcing the Aa3 rating, Moody's commented in a press release that District 200 has an affordable debt level and financial reserves that provide an element of flexibility in responding to fiscal pressures the District has encountered in the last several years. This is just one example of how we seek to become more efficient as we operate in a deficit budget position.

Although we do not have a formal budget reduction process this year, we have in the past three years cut close to \$7 million in programs and services, a figure that does not reflect the cumulative effect of the reductions. As we head into budget development for the 2005-06 school year, it appears that we will not get any relief from the state. Based on the governor's budget

proposals, District 200 will, in fact, lose about \$2 million in general state aid next year. We already receive about \$2 million less than we did in 2001, so this additional loss would further impact our already strained financial situation.

Safety and Security in our Schools

As you know, the District has worked actively over the last six years to improve safety and security in our schools. Led by the Safety and Security Task Force, we are continually working to improve our responses to a variety of emergency situations by holding practice drills, training our staff, and providing resources that enable us to respond quickly and efficiently when emergency situations arise. All of these efforts are met with grateful support from our staff and parents, but there is one question that frequently arises that I wish to address here. That question is, “Why don’t we evacuate the school when there is a bomb threat?”

Our responses to emergency situations were developed in cooperation with our local emergency officials and reflect their vast research and experience as well as our own. Here is how we handle a bomb threat in any of our schools:

1. The school is placed in a lock-down situation to clear the hallways and bathrooms, areas that research indicates are prime locations for planting incendiary devices.
2. The police are contacted and assist the school in evaluating the threat and searching the building for any suspicious items.
3. Teachers and other staff also examine their classrooms or office spaces for any out of place or suspicious items.
4. If nothing out of the ordinary is found, there will be no evacuation.

“Evacuating immediately is an alternative that on face value appears to be the preferred approach. However, under certain circumstances evacuating the building may increase rather than decrease the risk of injury. Research shows that bombs are three times more likely to be placed outside buildings rather than inside,” Wheaton Police Chief Mark Field said.

Please know that each situation is handled individually, based on collaboration between the police and the school, who consider the circumstances around which the threat was made. Because of the excellent cooperation that exists between the District and our various community police and fire departments, we are in a position to deal with these situations efficiently and safely.

High School Construction

I am extremely pleased to be able to tell you that our high school construction projects are moving ahead on time and on budget. Students moved into the new classroom wing at Wheaton Warrenville South when they returned from Spring Break on April 4. It is an outstanding learning space that the entire community will be proud to have in its high schools. The classroom addition at Wheaton North, which will be partially completed this summer, is very similar to the one at Wheaton Warrenville South and will expose students to state of the art classroom facilities. Construction at the two schools is on a slightly different schedule due to the location of the temporary mobile classroom suites.

At Wheaton Warrenville South, open space was available to build the entire classroom addition at one time. The field house addition could not be started until students vacated the mobiles and

moved into the new classrooms because the field house will extend into the area where the mobiles were placed. The mobiles have been removed and construction on the field house is now just underway.

At Wheaton North, the location of the mobiles created the need to construct the classroom addition in two phases. The first phase is nearly complete and will be ready for occupancy when students return in August. When school ends on June 7, the mobiles will be removed to make way for the construction on the second part of the classroom addition. Meanwhile, the field house is nearly complete and will be opened to students this summer. Construction was able to move ahead on the field house at Wheaton North because it was built over part of the existing parking lot.

We will make opportunities available for parents and community members to visit the new facilities as construction moves along. On behalf of the students and staff at both schools, I thank you for your support of this project and the many opportunities it will bring to current and future students.

Sincerely,

Gary T. Catalani, Ed.D.
Superintendent

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Inside this issue:

1. Moving from Good to Great
2. Response to Bomb Threats
3. High School Construction Update