

## Let's invest in our children

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Beacon News Common Sense Columnist

As you know, residents of the West Aurora School District will be asked to vote on a referendum April 17. If it passes, it will be the first time this district has passed an operating-rate tax increase since 1988.

Since then, we have gained an additional 5,000 students, and the percentage of funding paid by the state of Illinois has dropped about 14 percent. We have built new schools to accommodate the new students, but we cannot operate them without running deficits.

The 1991 tax cap limits money for schools, regardless of actual growth. In 1989, we spent \$1,934 in property taxes per student. Adjusting for inflation, we now spend the 1989 equivalent of \$1,525 per student. Our spending per student is below all other school districts in the area except for East Aurora (and I wish them luck with their own badly needed referendum).

If the referendum does not pass, it means we cut \$5.7 million to balance the budget, losing not only more administrators and the ability to maintain buildings at the level we would like, but we also lose teachers. In fact, some of that damage may already be done. The state sets the date by which teachers must be notified if their positions could be cut. Since that date fell before the referendum, teachers have already been given notice. Some may begin to secure jobs in other districts immediately, especially because many districts pay more.

I have heard some residents say they plan to vote against this because they don't believe our schools spend money as efficiently as possible. While I have not researched previous administrations, I can tell you confidently that Dr. James Rydland has done everything humanly possible to cut costs in ways that do not directly affect the children and to be absolutely transparent about where money is being spent.

He has reduced administrative positions at District 129 by \$1 million! Through Rydland's efforts, our district has obtained several million dollars in grants, we will save \$50,000 in lighting costs, and taxpayers will save \$3.2 million through the refinancing of bonds.

Some people may not support the referendum because of some miscommunication in 2002, when \$11.5 million became available if we immediately passed a building bond. A citizens committee promised the money would be spent on certain things and in the end, the money was not spent in precisely that way. I understand the feeling of frustration.

But this time, information about where the money will be spent comes from the School Board itself and is very specific and very public ([www.d129schools.com](http://www.d129schools.com)). Rydland is

working to build an administration that works very closely with the community, even to the point of setting up a Community Advisory Council. This is made up of parents from each of the District 129 schools and will give advice and oversight concerning district decisions.

The most vocal opposition might come from those who no longer have children in school. In just a few years, I will not have children in school, either. But it's important to remember that public education is not one of those things we only pay when our family happens to directly need it.

Long ago, when we were students, people from all walks of life paid taxes to invest in our future. It is always in our best interest to offer quality public education in the community where we live. Quality education says something about our values. It says we want to live in a place where young people are properly educated and able to contribute positively to society.

The way I think of it, there are 12,300 students on the April 17 ballot, and I intend to vote for them.

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