

Jim Sutfin: Public education is worth the investment

Midlands Voices Jan 12, 2017 Updated 20 hrs ago

The writer is superintendent of Millard Public Schools.

Stretch a rubber band beyond its limits, and it will snap. The rubber band will no longer function as intended.

As a lifelong Nebraskan committed to a solid community and strong economy, I am concerned the rubber band of public education funding is close to snapping.

The issues facing the Nebraska Legislature are significant this year. With a projected shortfall as well as the current deficit, hard decisions have to be made. As they always do, needs will outweigh resources.

I know this about my state: Hard work, sensible thinking and strong values guide us through the most difficult of times.

The fact that we have a unicameral Legislature cuts through the partisanship and allows lawmakers to focus on the critical issues. State funding is certainly one of those issues.

It is my hope that Nebraska leaders will be cautious about how far they stretch the financial rubber band of public education.

Here in Millard Public Schools, the rubber band has been stretched each year for more than half a decade, with no relief in sight.

Based on audited reports submitted to the Nebraska Department of Education, Millard expenses have grown a total of 5.7 percent since 2010, which is an average of 1.1 percent per year.

During the same time period, our revenue has grown by 4.4 percent for an average of 0.9 percent per year. This has not allowed us to keep up with current expenses.

To balance the budget, you either cut expenses or increase revenue. We have reduced expenses by eliminating approximately 40 teaching and three administrative positions as well as other cuts. We have done this even as we have added more than 1,200 new students over the same time period.

We achieve excellence. All three Millard high schools rank in the top 1,000 schools in the country. Last year, we had more than 475 AP scholars, and we offer public school choice through accredited programs.

We see excellence like this throughout our Nebraska public schools. Unlike some states, Nebraska public schools are the beacon of their community and an example to our nation.

This is worth protecting. Caution is needed as the rubber band is further stretched.

What is the answer? We all need to recognize that budgeting should be difficult. These are taxpayers' dollars we are spending. School districts must make careful decisions about how they spend revenue, and they should be held accountable for results.

Currently, schools have a significant reliance on property tax. If that is ever going to change, we must re-examine the three-legged stool of property, sales and income tax. We need a study of the state education funding formula so we are dealing with present-day facts.

If the Legislature makes significant cuts to education funding, we need to empower local boards to raise revenues so the rubber band does not snap.

Nebraska public education is worth the investment.