



Cincinnati Federation of Teachers

Association of Cincinnati Public School Office Personnel
Local 1520, AFT, OFT, AFL-CIO

CFT President Julie Sellers' comments regarding the budget
June 28, 2010

Uncertain economic times test relationships. This is true at kitchen tables in homes all across our community and it is true in our school district as well. How we manage these difficulties defines who we are. Just as families have been determining their priorities and identifying the sacrifices they must make, the district is presenting its findings tonight.

Over the past two decades, CFT has collaborated every year with the district to establish priorities for spending. The Budget Commission, although established in our contract, includes many stakeholders. It is a collaborative structure that performs specific tasks. It is the district's kitchen table, where we are supposed to take an open and honest look at our financial prospects for the coming years.

In the last few years, but this year in particular, it has fallen victim to the Board and administration's refusal to collaborate – to transparently share facts and opinions while respecting the expertise, insights, and judgment of your partners. Instead, it has become entangled in the Board's convoluted politics with voters and with contract negotiations. The Board's interest is in creating a sense of looming crises and of being tough with CFT and all the labor organizations. This has distorted and paralyzed the commission's work. The recommendations the Superintendent presents tonight represent little consensus and are based on incomplete, distorted, and contradictory information. We stuck with the work until the end, hoping that as deadlines approached, tactics might change. We were too optimistic.

The Board will claim differently. But don't believe it. An example of these distortions appeared in yesterday's op-ed piece in the newspaper. To convince the public of their commitment to interest based bargaining and collaboration, the Board cites it hired a nationally known attorney to aid in the talks. What is conveniently left out is that, when they discovered he really believed in collaboration, they disavowed our work product and showed him the door!

Our district needs a levy. Sooner - rather than later. Convincing voters to pay more is based on communicating both need for additional money and for value to be received for that investment. The Board has mangled both.

When a family looks at their budget, they first settle on the dollars coming in - the revenues. Then they think about what they need to accomplish with those dollars, their overall goals, the tasks needed, and they set them in some order of importance.

With this budget, questions are everywhere. Any potential loss of revenue has been magnified and the impact of any new monies minimized. As recently as last week, CPS officials have repeatedly spoken of a 15% cut in funding. That's just not true. The impact of these state cuts is limited to 1 or 2 % for school districts. But these misrepresentations get added, one on another. The district's political considerations overwhelm the truth. We are dismayed by Duke Energy's recent actions, but we don't know how to anticipate its impact. What steps does CPS take to delay any cuts until a legal decision is reached? Does CPS irreversibly impact the education of children? The Board believes alarming the public makes the more compelling case for a levy.

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For determining bond ratings, the district submitted a different, much more optimistic assessment of our financial condition than the five year forecast that has been publicized in the media. In that submission, the district reported that it would get through this year and next without deficits. Fiscal 2012 would show a deficit and new revenues would be necessary. Moody gave us an Aa2 rating based on that submission. Yet simultaneously, they announced the need to cut 20 million dollars - to keep general fund expenditures flat. This is in anticipation of needing to make cuts in the future. The administration and Board know this is impossible without inflicting serious damage to the instructional programs.

This is not to minimize how difficult these issues are. But CFT believes that muddling with the quality of services we provide to the public is wrong. Recent events prove that if an auto or oil company wants greater profits, taking shortcuts by eliminating quality control or cutting corners is not a realistic long-term solution. Ask Toyota or BP Oil. The public remembers the failures they must endure. The Board doesn't need to create any more groups incensed at our district.

Who am I talking about?

- parents and students unable to manage the extra burden created by changes in eligibility for transportation
- parents worried about the safety of their children walking to school without crossing guards
- parents and students in overcrowded classrooms with no help by paraprofessionals
- parents and students with few activities to keep them occupied after school
- school communities, teachers, parents, and students without teacher leader positions in schools – denying how these roles have become crucial to making schools function

Besides having basic questions about the size and sweep of the proposed cuts, the list is rife with cynical assumptions about how to find savings.

There are cuts that simply cannot be implemented so any detail is omitted.

- Cutting 100 paraprofessionals when there were far too few last year
- Freezing hiring shows that CPS doesn't have enough insight to actually target where cuts should be made while masking the fact they don't intend to go after any of the growing central office staff

Is CFT ever willing to accept sacrifices in hard economic times? Anyone watching us for the last 20 years knows the answer is resoundingly yes. We are proud of that history. As it should be, our members' jobs and our educational reforms make up the bulk of expenses in the district. Yet CFT leadership has never shied away from asking our members to share responsibility for the financial health of CPS. In our last contract, we agreed to skip raises and pay more in health care. And we will continue to act as mature partners with the Board. Yet never once in the past months, as the Board has hinted at cuts involving the contract, have they asked us to go to our members with a plan to make cuts.

The Board claims to have become more open and transparent with the public. The words are comforting, but anyone following the Facilities Master Plan fiasco knows that matching words and deeds has been impossible for them. The CFT has been working at analyzing the budget for months – as part of our responsibilities with the Budget Commission and for our members in negotiations. But time after time we have been thwarted in our efforts to get reliable answers. We are unable to verify the claims that the Board makes using their data or examining independently available documents. We heard these doubts echoed in the budget commission and at the public budget hearings.

The magnitude of the cuts requested by the Board do not make sense. They do not match other filings by the Board. They inflame the public. They diminish the quality of education our students receive. They make the public more cynical about the Board's ability to manage our district.

CFT asks the Board to do what it should have been doing these last six months around that kitchen table. Be transparent. Give details. Be direct. Show respect. Be collaborative. That's how transformation happens.