

Local View: Facilities, growth on LPS' horizon

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As we turn our attention to 2019, this is an excellent moment to consider new opportunities and challenges on the horizon for Lincoln Public Schools.

We love working in public education, a profession that impacts children and families across our community, and makes all other professions possible. At the same time, our school district and Lincoln Board of Education are always looking ahead, setting the stage for a future that gives our students the greatest potential to prepare for success in college, career and civic life.

Indeed, this is an exciting time for our schools, students and families of LPS and our entire community.

- * We are aligned at LPS for quality learning with outstanding teachers, fine curriculum, instruction, assessment and evaluation, cutting-edge technology and great school facilities.

- * The recent release of accountability data demonstrates we are on track with our students, producing solid academic outcomes.

- * Our school district continues to grow in all directions, working hand-in-hand with a healthy and vigorous community. We have a rich and textured student population with families coming to us from across the country and the world.

We appreciate working in a robust school district with significant and steady growth: With more than 42,000 students this year, our school district has increased nearly 3,000 students during the past five years – and more than 8,000 students since 2008-09, an increase of nearly 24 percent.

That growth comes with challenges. Currently, our high schools are at 110 percent of capacity and pushing the limits of school infrastructure. Five of our six LPS high schools now have enrollments topping 2,000. Three have more than 2,200.

LPS has a tried-and-true community process for analyzing long-range facility needs to ensure we wisely accommodate student growth. Next week, we convene the Superintendent's Facilities Advisory Committee, a group of about 100 community stakeholders who have committed to intense study of school facility needs. We know the many difficult considerations they must ponder and thank these compassionate citizens in advance.

- * High schools: How do we address high schools in an equitable and progressive manner? How many high schools should we build – and where? How large should they be? Last year, we called together a community high school task force, and their recommendations give us valuable parameters from which to begin, but critical questions loom.

* Personalizing education: While we consider the question of facilities, we must also turn our attention to the ongoing individualization of education. We have wonderful classroom teaching in place and tools of technology, but how else can we prepare our students for a successful life? Now is the time to be creative and critical in our consideration of curriculum delivery, thinking outside the box and personalizing the learning experience with options in career pathways and focus programs.

* Partnerships: LPS must continue to seek strategic community partnerships that provide engaging, real-life experiences for students, underlining the understanding that Lincoln has tremendous career opportunities.

The Facilities Advisory Committee will dig into these difficult questions, meet into the summer and offer recommendations for a thoughtful, community-based plan that lays the foundation for a potential bond issue in 2020.

We respect this tested and proven process of community engagement and will make any and all decisions following their advice and input. Indeed, these will be difficult decisions, ensuring solid facilities for our students into the future – but also understanding there are considerably more needs than our limited resources will ever allow.

At the same time, while we ponder the future of LPS facilities, we also understand additional challenges ahead.

We have been prudent in our budgeting and have developed an effective and efficient budget forecasting system. LPS is always looking for smart ways to tighten our belts. But we will also must be – and will be – prepared for any possible economic uncertainty.

Our academic scores are solid, but we can and must do better, constantly looking for ways to sharpen focus in the changing world of teaching and learning.

We recognize that, with growing student numbers, we also face growing student needs. More children arrive at our door hungry, homeless or as victims of trauma.

To have a successful public school district and community, we are committed to addressing the needs of all students. In 2019, LPS remains bound to the pledge: All means all.