



# White Bear Lake Area Schools

## Independent School District 624

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Senate Education Finance Committee Members:

Greetings from White Bear Lake Area Schools (WBLAS). I am writing to provide a local perspective as the 2025 legislative session gets underway. I have included our district's legislative priorities as well as additional comments related to topics that we were asked to prepare specifically for you.

After several years of budget reductions in WBLAS, our budget has stabilized as we enter the budgeting process for the 2025-2026 school year. This short-term stability has been reached for several reasons:

- **Increased funding.** Additional funding approved in the last couple of legislative sessions, particularly the formula allowance increase and the special education cross subsidy aid,
- **Stable enrollment.** Enrollment has stabilized after several years of decline during the COVID years,
- **Disciplined budgeting practices.** Multiple years of disciplined budgeting practices, including budget reductions as we worked towards a balanced budget, and
- **Managing expenditure increases where possible.** A respectful, disciplined approach to contract negotiations at a time when, statewide, employee expectations were unrealistic given the narrative that emerged from the 2023 legislative session. For example, some legislators inaccurately and irresponsibly declared that education had been "fully funded". These types of statements are problematic in the short term and long term will add to the complexity of explaining to school district stakeholders the budget challenges that persist.

We support many of the legislative priorities that Minnesota education organizations have developed for this session, including the Association of Metropolitan School Districts (AMSD), the Minnesota School Boards Association (MSBA), and the Minnesota Association of School Administrators (MASA). The most important priorities from our perspective are the following:

- **Increase the general education formula.** This benefits all school districts and provides local control with how to utilize the funds.
- **Cross subsidy reduction.** Reduce the cross-subsidies in special education and English learner programs.
- **Fully fund new benefits, reduce mandates, and restore managerial rights.** Either fully fund the new mandates, including additional employee benefits, that were recently enacted or repeal the laws. The concern that had been previously expressed to you about new mandates eroding new funding is becoming our reality. One example of a new mandate that may have seemed to you to be cost-neutral when enacted is the non-exclusionary discipline requirements. The implementation of non-exclusionary discipline, such as restorative practices, necessitated hiring additional support staff to effectively integrate these practices.

We urge Legislators and the Governor to refrain from enacting any additional unfunded mandates and to honor the historical role of school boards and their administrators to govern and manage their school districts. School board members are elected to represent parents, students, staff, and their communities. It is imperative that locally elected school boards have the decision-making authority to respond to local needs and challenges and align resources to meet the needs of their students.

In WBLAS, we will continue to work to control expenses while enrollment increases could help to mitigate some of the continued budget challenges; however, as we look beyond the 2025-2026 school year, we are likely to be back to a strained budget due to expenditure growth outpacing the increases of state-provided revenues, an all-too-familiar problem.

Thank you for your service and leadership. We value your partnership and your commitment to ensuring Minnesota's schools have the resources and support needed to effectively serve our students.

Sincerely,



Wayne A. Kazmierczak, Ph.D.  
Superintendent

## **Additional Comments for the Senate Education Finance Committee**

Thank you for your willingness to hear from your constituents from throughout the great state of Minnesota. I am happy to provide White Bear Lake Area Schools' perspective on the READ Act, cell phone policies, and a general update on school climate. Please reach out should you need additional information about these and any other topics.

**READ Act.** White Bear Lake Area Schools (WBLAS) is appreciative of the legislature's efforts to improve reading outcomes for Minnesota students. We believe ensuring high-levels of reading outcomes for all students is critical to student success and the overall well-being of our state. WBLAS was well-positioned for a successful READ Act implementation because of our proactive efforts to enhance student reading outcomes. Notably, we initiated LETRS training for elementary educators during the 2021-2022 school year, demonstrating our commitment to the Science of Reading prior to legislative mandates. This approach allowed us to strategically support teacher learning. While we are proud of our efforts, there will continue to be a need for adequate funding as we shift our focus to providing the training for educators identified for phase 2.

Furthermore, anticipating the 2025-2026 implementation of the new Minnesota English/Language Arts Standards, we conducted a thorough curriculum review and material selection process. Unfortunately, the READ Act's curriculum resources component significantly undermined our efforts. While Minnesota is a local education agency state, the MDE process, in partnership with CAREI, lacked transparency and caused significant frustration. This significantly impacted our trust in the process. We were appreciative of the reallocation of funds for curricula resources to the overall literacy improvement efforts. This restored our ability to make local decisions in the best interest of the students and community we serve.

We commend the legislature's dedication to improving student reading outcomes. We urge you to consider these points as you continue to refine the READ Act's implementation to ensure its effectiveness and successful outcomes for all Minnesota students.

**Cell phones and overall climate.** We implemented restrictions aligned with the new cell phone legislation at the beginning of the 2024-2025 school year. The law was particularly helpful as we worked to change previous practices at our high school. To date, we have seen a positive school culture shift such as reduced time out of class, more engaged students, and significantly fewer disciplinary infractions. We believe that some of these improvements are attributable to the implementation of the cell phone policy. We also opened a new grades 9-12 high school, combining our grades 9-10 building and our grades 11-12 building. The overall school climate improvements due to this change have reverberated throughout our entire school system.