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### **District staff working on 2006-07 budget**

By Dr. Debra Bowers, Superintendent

St. Louis Park Public Schools administrators, principals and program directors are busy putting together their budgets for the 2006-07 school year. Each year we face many challenges as we work to deliver a balanced budget to the school board. The board must adopt a budget by the end of June.

One specific challenge we have identified is the growing level of expenditures for Special Education services. Projected expenditures for Special Education next year are almost \$9.5 million out of a total operating budget of \$42.7 million. Profile reports of other districts show our district spending at comparatively high levels.

Our goal to spend wisely and efficiently will be assisted by ensuring that our Special Education expenditures are proportional to our neighboring districts. In Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) alone we spend \$1,571,664 serving 50 average daily membership students (ADM) which is much higher than expenditures in other districts. (In ECSE, under law, one ADM is the equivalent of 825 hours of attendance.) The Bloomington public school district spends \$945,367 serving 67 ADM and in Richfield, \$358,327 serves 31 ADM.

As a result of this disparity we are examining ways to reduce our ECSE expenditures but maintain desired educational outcomes. We've heard concerns from some community members. We understand those concerns. Our special education department does an outstanding job and that will not change. I assure you, we will continue to meet the needs of our ECSE students. But as good stewards of taxpayers' money, we must examine ways to deliver services more efficiently.

We have been through this process with other departments, and while change is not always easy, our district is fiscally stronger as a result. For example, we examined our district support services and our maintenance departments to find areas where we could operate more efficiently and save costs. Our per pupil expenditures in these areas were far above Hennepin County averages. Now, as a result of reorganizing these departments, we are providing quality services with a leaner budget. The average per pupil expenditure for support services in schools in Hennepin County is \$350.51. St. Louis Park Public Schools spends \$232.41. For maintenance, county average is \$999.38; in St. Louis Park, \$992.97.

At the same time, we're moving forward with our mission to increase student achievement. We're looking at ways that schools can make the biggest impact on learning by setting aside funds for which principals can apply through a grant-like process to implement a program. This year we allocated approximately \$150,000 in "grants." We plan to increase that to \$250,000 next year. Rather than increasing budgets

across the board by one percent, for example, we can more effectively impact student progress by providing funds for outcome-based projects determined by each school.

We also believe the International Baccalaureate Primary Years Program will increase student achievement. So we need to plan how to implement and sustain the program in terms of the budget.

We're working on energy efficiency strategies as well. Our staff and students are part of a team effort to engage in energy-smart behavior that we hope will result in a ten percent reduction in annual energy use, representing a \$100,000 cost avoidance.

There are many variables to consider as we look at redesign. Be assured that stakeholders at all levels will have the opportunity to be involved in the process. We're committed to maintaining delivery of quality ECSE services as we restructure some areas. For updates on our progress, visit us at [www.slpschools.org](http://www.slpschools.org).