

RSU 18 Rome Director's March update School Security, academic excellence, and the 2018/19 budget

3/28/18

Everyone,

As always I hope you will reach out to me by phone, in person or email to share your thoughts and perspectives. (397-5332 or acook@rsu18.org)

The News:

School Security:

- The Superintendent and his building Principals responded quickly to the recent tragic violent school events in the nation. Access to the high school has been significantly tightened, CIT (crisis intervention training) has been provided to members of the staff that work with "at risk" students, and the Superintendent has made it a priority to ensure that each student has a positive relationship with some member of the RSU faculty or staff. These are all BIG positives.
- Additionally the Superintendent and the Board have discussed many additional concepts. These include hardening the classrooms, providing class room "door stoppers", installing exterior strobe warning lights, modifying the High School entrance area, providing additional faculty crisis training, running simulations, NASRO training for the administrators, expanding JMG* to the Middle School and adding additional School Resource Officers (SROs).
- There is a possibility that some of these ideas (and they are all good) if we implement them, may increase our school budget. The Superintendent will present his proposals and the costs at the April 4th school board meeting. I am 100% for them even if there is a substantial (\$500,000) increase in the budget. **It is worth it, I support them.** Our first and foremost goal is to deliver the students, faculty and staff back to their homes in the same good condition that they came to us in the morning – every day! Safety is #1.

The Budget (this is all first draft data – more to come – things are not final):

- The Superintendent gave a very good presentation on the budget, the impact of the bond issue and academic performance at the March 21st Governance meeting. It is attached here as a Pdf file.
- The tax bill to Rome, the 2018/19 school tax to Rome – not including the \$13.9M bond payment – **actually goes down!** That's right. Because of economies at the schools and increased support anticipated from the state, our tax bill – on an apples to apples basis compared to last year will go down – by >4%!
- On the other hand the \$13.9M bond for capital improvements was approved in November by a majority of the voters in each of our five towns. This was for required (State Fire Marshall) upgrades in fire safety, school physical condition repairs, energy efficiency upgrades and upgrades to the high school athletic fields. That bond results in about a \$126,964/yr. bond payment by Rome (11% of the total bond payment)
- So in aggregate, primarily because of the bond, **our tax bill is expected to rise about 2%.**

- On the other hand Rome got a State rebate last year of about \$29,000. It was carried forward and could be credited to this tax. So that could mean **our bill will only go up 1%**.
- **All things considered given the bond this is pretty darn good!**
- Finally the Superintendent makes a point that \$5M of the bond money is for basic school physical plant maintenance. That's true. He pointed out the eight year short fall in funding for this work has been almost exactly that \$5M. So **we have to pay the piper at some point**, the schools need basic work just to keep going – like your house and your car. So this all makes sense.

Academic Excellence:

- It is important to note in the presentation, the Superintendent listed (to his credit) relative academic performance of our district versus other neighboring districts. On the same table he listed the “tuition” per student by district. He emphasized this is one “snap shot” of MEA scores school district wide.
- You will note - and this is important – RSU 38 (Maranacook) ranks highest in “tuition” and higher than RSU 18 in Mathematics and English Language Arts (ELA) proficiency by 6%. Also RSU 38's tuition (\$11,036) is much higher than the RSU 18 average tuition (\$8,809.84).
- On the other hand the RSU 38 (Maranacook) tuition is substantially lower than the actual tuition we in Rome pay per student (~\$15,000).
- All in all **none of the scores in any of the school districts is anything to be proud of**. If we believe the scores to be meaningful (that is also an item of debate) only about 1/3 of the students in our mid Maine area are “proficient” in mathematics and only ½ are “proficient” in ELA. While I am not sure these scores are accurate to better than 5% they are consistent with other data I have seen on academic performance in our and neighboring districts.
- We want to be sure our students get the best start in life we can afford. I would expect that **our district could achieve 70 or 80% ratings** on both of these scores. It is possible – if we have a plan and if we focus on it. We don't have a plan (that I know of) to get there.
- Further – and there is a lot of debate on this – it would appear there is a correlation between the school budget and actual results. I think we are dramatically underfunding our students' education. The payoff of a Cracker Jack education for the students (and us) is huge. The cost is minor. I keep encouraging the administration to ask for more financial support (from us), as much as 50 % more, and then drive us, via a written improvement plan, to be #1 academically in the State. **We can do it!**
- If all the towns paid per student what Rome pays we would have one heck of a district with students just at the top of Maine academics!
- At the February 13 Board meeting it was noted that our dropout rate may be rising higher than our historically very good performance. I was unclear as to all the reasons but part seems to be associated with how students are counted (or not counted) who take 5 years to complete high school and also how a very small cadre of struggling students are helped through to completion.
- The Mid Maine Technical Center held a skills championship. Fifteen RSU 18 students won medals including golds in cabinet making, collision repair, digital cinema production, video production, and medical terminology. These “gold medal winners will go on to the State championship. Incidentally the Wall Street Journal has noted that many who pursue skills

excellence (welding, electronics, machining etc.) are much in demand and are financially outperform many of their contemporaries who get a college education. This is an interesting twist on what we all consider common knowledge about the value of a college education.

The capital projects:

- It appears the athletic field upgrade and the energy conservation efforts are progressing well and per plan.
- I am concerned that the other \$5M of building work has not received the same level of attention. I am pursuing that with the Superintendent. I am confident it will get on track soon.

Will I support even this modest and defensible budget increase? My perspective continues to be –

- **If we get a good, solid 5 year academic excellence improvement plan – then I strongly support the budget increase.**
- However in the absence of a plan, I do not see how I could support any increase.

I hope you will come and speak at the various budget hearings. We need your perspective. We in Rome really do care about our young men and women and their education. The people in Rome want to be sure our young men and women get the very best education we can afford. **Now is the time to speak up.**

Yours in helping our students by helping RSU 18 set the standard for academic excellence for public schools in Maine.

Rome – a great place to live, and a great place to grow up!

Dr. Andrew Cook
397-5332

p.s. If you want to talk or have thoughts, please call me (397-5332) or email me!
acook@rsu18.org

P.P.S. Thank you for reelecting me with such a strong vote of confidence. I take faith in your support every time I wonder if I am doing what you want and if I am doing the right thing. Thank you for your support. It has been very heartening. AGC

* JMG stands for “Jobs for Maine Graduates.” It is a State program to help students set a career path and then achieve it. It helps provide direction for those who may not have a clear path and strong motivation for achieving their future.