Back to School: Staunton Superintendent talks funding formula and school safety

by Cory Davenport, Contributing Writer
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STAUNTON – Staunton School District Superintendent Dan Cox was a huge proponent of Illinois's improved school funding formula, which passed last year.

Because of that formula passing through the Illinois General Assembly and being approved by Illinois Governor Bruce Rauner (with a few added compromises), the Staunton School District was able to afford a better education for its students to the tune of $343.52 per student, or as much as $418,070.16 in overall additional funds. For the 2018-19 school year, the district expects even more funding, which looks like an additional $288.21 per student, or an overall additional sum of $352,485.64.

"Many of our staff, families and community members reached out to our lawmakers in Springfield to urge them to level the playing field by passing a more equitable funding formula," Cox said in an email. "Much thanks and appreciation goes out to those who got involved and stood up for our students and teachers. By doing so, they embodied our district's vision to lead, challenge and achieve!"

This additional money will go toward "improving student learning outcomes," Cox said. To do this, the district will restore an elementary teaching position and adding two core

intervention teachers to work with who Cox described as the district's most disadvantaged students.

"Our lawmakers in Springfield must keep the momentum going – our students are depending on them," he said. "We are thankful to both of our local legislators, Sen. Andy Manar and Rep. Avery Bourne, who are both champions for education and were instrumental in passing the formula."

Another positive side effect of the improved funding formula was the Staunton School District's ability to pass a balanced budget for the first time since the Financial Crisis of 2008. The district was able to finish its fiscal year with a positive of $489,079, meaning the operating funds grew by a sum of $531,461.

Student safety is another important factor for the Staunton School District this coming school year, and with all the school shootings pervading the news last year, it is also a major concern for parents and students. Because of those concerns, Cox said the district has implemented a new, 24/7 "Safe Schools Help Line."

"The Illinois Terrorism Task Force School Safety Working Group has released a list of recommendations schools can use to improve student safety," Cox said. "Among those recommendations is to have a student school safety tip line that is monitored and has the capability for anonymous reporting. This same recommendation is supported by the U. S. Department of Education and the Secret Service. Staunton Schools have now partnered with Safe Schools Help Line as a way for students and families to report bullying, violence or suicide in an anonymous manner with the help of trained professionals that is monitored and promoted with follow-up procedures."

This service is less than $1,000 annually, and includes a mobile application on both Apple and Android devices.

Besides being able to transcribe tips and send them to staff as well as issue emergency notifications, the service also has trained intervention specialists to help students deal with feelings of suicide and other mental health crises.

While no new building projects have been undertaken by the district for the new school year, Cox said the district has done many much-needed small updates and renovations.

One big change, however, is in regards to school lunches served by the district, which Cox said would be among "many highlights of the day for both students and staff." Through a new contract with Opaa! Food Management, Inc., the district will provide made-from-scratch food, fresh baked bread and locally-grown, farm-fresh fruits and vegetables.

The district also has an updated website at www.stauntonschools.org with a live feed of news stories, cafeteria menus and events, among other relevant information.