Funding shortfalls challenge school districts
Superintendent Gdowski shares what's driving this shortfall

As we enter the home stretch of the school year and celebrate the many accomplishments of our students, I want to look ahead at the 2016-2017 school year and provide a budget update.

The Adams 12 Five Star Schools Board of Education will review my proposed budget for Fiscal Year 2016-2017 in late May and adopt the budget at its June 15 meeting.

District reserves used up to mitigate pain of past cuts
Over the past six years, we’ve intentionally spent down one-time funds in our district’s discretionary reserves to mitigate some of the pain caused by cuts in state funding. Those funds are now used up entirely, so we’ll feel the pain of limited state funding next year as we no longer have reserves available to soften it.

This paradox — a healthy economy but a lack of funds to support critical services like education — is driven in large part by several state constitutional and statutory provisions, with spending limits imposed by the TABOR Amendment chief among them.

You’ve likely heard that public education funding in Colorado continues to face many challenges and this impacts us right here in the Five Star District. Finance experts project this challenge will continue beyond next year absent any enhancement to revenues through state or local ballot measures.

The Colorado School Finance Project tracks the cuts being made in Colorado’s 178 school districts. You can find that information at www.cosfp.org/BudgetCuts.html.

My proposed budget to the board of education will reflect reductions totaling more than $10 million for next school year, equivalent to about three percent of our General Fund budget.

Increased costs outpace limited revenue increases
Since 2009-2010, the Colorado Legislature has not funded K-12 education at a level that keeps up with student enrollment growth and inflation. For the Five Star District it means we’re receiving nearly $1,000 per student less than the funding necessary to keep up with inflation over the past seven years.

The state-measurement for inflation calls for a 1.2 percent increase in revenues next year, and it is detached from the reality we face in our community. As an example, the average apartment rental rate in the Denver metro area increased 10 percent in the last year. For our district specifically, the 1.2 percent increase is inadequate to cover the increasing cost of health insurance and higher wages needed to recruit and retain the very best employees.

This paradox — a healthy economy but a lack of funds to support critical services like education — is driven in large part by several state constitutional and statutory provisions, with spending limits imposed by the TABOR Amendment chief among them.

Balanced budget plan calls for reduced district services, limits on class size relief
Some schools will see smaller allocations for class size relief because our district enrollment is not growing enough to fund those supports. Otherwise, school budgets continue current year funding for next year and rely on reductions in district operations and services that support schools.

How to change the trajectory in school funding and how we support Colorado’s future
It’s likely the November ballot will include a measure that would do away with TABOR refunds for several years so that those funds could be used to assist in shoring up K-12, higher education and transportation needs in our state.

Thank you for your continued support in making the Five Star District a great place to live and educate our children. I’m confident this ongoing partnership will help us tackle any challenges that come our way, including how we fund schools in Colorado.

Have an enjoyable summer break and we’ll see you again in August!
Preparation for the future
Alumni share the value of a Five Star education
- Lauryn Orcutt Bushey, Horizon High School senior

After 12 years, seniors across the Five Star District are preparing to join the world and use the tools they were taught to begin their lives.

Education gives students the keys to unlock endless doors and opportunities. These opportunities can lead many directions after high school — straight into the workforce, military or college.

Two former Horizon High School students from the Class of 2013 took a look back on how Adams 12 Five Star Schools has influenced their path.

After graduating from Horizon, Tyler Orcutt joined the military and is currently stationed in White Sands Missile Range, New Mexico. “I am a Patriot Missile Operator,” said Orcutt. “I have been trained to effectively emplace a launching station, which is strictly designed for Air Defense.”

When asked about the importance of his education, Orcutt said with excitement, “High school was an experience I will never forget. The skills I learned in class helped me to improve in my job. I couldn’t have done it without encouragement from my teachers and the lessons I was taught.”

Orcutt’s classmate Tanner Horning is attending Front Range Community College and working part-time. “Working and being a full-time student isn’t easy, but the hard work definitely pays off,” he said.

Horning continues to push forward, thanks to the knowledge gained in high school, which influenced his career journey. “The gym classes I took in high school have helped me out with personal training for my future job.”

While both of these Horizon alumni have traveled very different paths, they share a common denominator: a Five Star Education. Whatever path students choose, education is the foundation to help accomplish those dreams and is a worthy community investment — an investment in students and in the future.

Good schools need us all
- Stephen Bennett, Mountain View Elementary and Westlake Middle School parent

It is easy to criticize almost everything the government does, whether it is trying to solve the healthcare cost issue or calling a snow day during a spring snowstorm. Public schools fall into that easy-to-criticize category, but few would argue that we should get rid of public education and have parents educate their children how “...they are able. Our constitution provides for…” free public schools throughout the state. “...Of course, nothing the government provides is actually free.

For the 2015-2016 school year, we paid more than $6.2 billion for public education in the State of Colorado. We probably shouldn’t spend like New York, where they spent $19,818 per student in 2013, but Colorado spent only $8,647 per student, ranking 40th in the nation and 20 percent below the national average. Colorado school funding has not kept pace with inflation and population growth, and just this year is back to the levels from Fiscal Year 2009-2010.

Although spending does not translate directly into academic success, it is generally true that better funding makes better schools. In Adams 12 Five Star Schools, which has the third lowest administrative spending in the state, additional funding could be used to reduce class sizes, maintain buildings and grounds whose maintenance has been deferred too long, or fund specialized programs that directly promote student achievement.

We all need to understand what that dreaded “negative factor” is and what it does to school budgets. We need to learn about how TABOR hinders our recovery from the Great Recession. And we all need to get involved in our civic process so our representatives start doing what we elect them to do. Please, contact a local teacher or visit the district’s website to learn more about school funding. And when it really matters in the fall vote.

Investing in our community, investing in our schools
- Judi Dollaghan-Madsen, Hulstrom K-8 principal

Growing up in Adams 12 Five Star Schools, I attended Malley Drive Elementary, Northeast Junior High and Northglenn High School. My parents raised seven children, all of whom were Five Star students.

When I began my career as an educator, I decided to work in the district which had served me and my siblings so well. My career has spanned more than 26 years, beginning as a teacher at Thornton Elementary and Thornton Middle School. As an administrator, I have served as the principal at Westview Elementary, Silver Creek Elementary and now Hulstrom K-8. Over the past 45 years, it has been an honor for me to be a part of such a great school community.

My support of the district has been unwavering over the years, in good times and bad. My appeal to you is to join me in supporting Adams 12 Five Star Schools. Now, more than ever, we are in need of community support as we navigate funding challenges.

The funding issues we face as a district have drastically affected how we educate students. Money does not solve all of our problems, but lack of funding has distracted us from serving students. My primary concern is maintenance issues that we cannot address each year. At Silver Creek, we had a brand new building and had very few facility issues. But Hulstrom is a 50-year old building and I find myself spending more time worrying about our facility than I did at Silver Creek. From drafty rooms to drainage issues, time spent focused on non-education concerns takes away from our core business of educating students.

Our students deserve to learn in a safe, comfortable and dry classroom. Maintenance is only one of our challenges. When funding is not available for technology upgrades, we are not providing the best opportunities for our children. When the operating budget is decreased, we lose out on good teachers, updated classroom materials and curriculum options.

We cannot continue to scrape the bottom of the barrel each year. I have had parents tell me they are moving their children to a different district where the community supports initiatives to fund schools. This is hard for me to bear, because as a lifelong resident I know this community and I know we support and value education. Yet, as an employee of this district, I see needs that are not being met.

My hope is that this district becomes the vibrant and successful school community we all want it to be. Strong schools lead to a strong community, but a strong, supportive community can lead to strong schools. Join me in investing in our schools; our children deserve nothing less.
Colorado continues to struggle to adequately fund education. This school year alone, the district is faced with more than $10 million in operational cuts based on limited funding from the State. Public education funding is complex and involves a variety of sources. Here’s some information to help make sense of it all:

**How does Adams 12 Five Star Schools receive funding?**

The district’s general operating budget goes toward attracting and keeping the best teachers, providing a safe and secure learning environment.

Due to lower tax revenue, the Five Star District has had to ask for more operational overrides in the past to make up the difference than other districts, such as Boulder Valley or St. Vrain Valley. And yet, Boulder Valley still has more than twice as much override revenue than the Five Star District.

### State Revenue

- **State Revenue accounts for nearly two-thirds of the Five Star general fund.** Originally, state revenue was intended to fill in where local funds came up short. In the 1980s, state revenue was only one-third of the district’s budget. At our current state funding level, the lack of increases take a major toll on our school funding.
- **Local and state revenue work off of the School Finance Act.**
- **Adams 12 Five Star Schools’ local property tax funds are much lower due to lower overall home values and fewer businesses.

### Local Property Taxes

The district receives tax revenue from the properties within its boundaries, which adds to the state School Finance Act budget. Compared to other school districts, Adams 12 Five Star Schools’ local property tax funds are much lower due to lower overall home values and fewer businesses.

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### Locally-Approved Bonds and Overrides

- **Bonds**
  - Allowing districts to ask voters to approve additional funding, as the state does not provide funds to maintain aging schools, build new schools to address overcrowding and expand space for in-demand educational programming, such as Career and Technical Education.

### State School Finance Act Funding

- **Adams 12 Five Star Schools General Fund**
  - 62.4% State Equalization Revenue
  - 15.7% Local Property Taxes
  - 3.2% Specific Ownership Tax
  - 11.6% Local Mill Levy Overrides
  - 5.3% Other Revenue

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### BOND VS. OVERRIDE

**Bonds**
- Can be used for capital expenditures, including major repairs, renovations and additions to schools and new schools. Bonds are not included in the district general fund and cannot be used for operating costs, such as salaries and benefits. LAST BOND PASSED: 2004

**Overrides**
- Overrides are additions to the general fund used for operational programs and classroom technology. LAST OVERRIDE PASSED: 2006

### What can we do?

- **Join a district or community parent group.**
- **Talk with your principal about having a community or PTO/PA conversation on funding concerns with your school.**
- **Contact the Adams 12 Five Star Schools Board of Education**
- **Support the district’s bond measure.**
- **Sign the petition to request a tax override.**

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Reflections: Inaugural Five Star Leadership Academy

A year in review of the first graduating class
- Emily Adams, FSLA parent liaison

I had the opportunity to serve as the parent liaison for the inaugural Five Star Leadership Academy (FSLA). I became involved with FSLA because I wanted to dig deeper and learn more about our district. Early on, I recognized my focus was only on what impacted my children and their schools, missing the larger needs of the district. This was an immediate eye opener for me and helped me develop a deeper appreciation for the district’s diversity and complexity of needs.

The goal of FSLA was for everyone to leave feeling engaged, equipped and empowered to advocate for what is important to them, while seeing the bigger picture of our district. The theme was “know how and know who,” laying a foundation of strong community relationships and creating a productive dialogue between parents and district leaders. We discussed a range of topics, including funding, governance, testing, programs and district and state struggles. I encourage anyone looking for a better understanding of our district and public education to apply for a future FSLA class. This program is an excellent opportunity to learn how our community goes beyond school walls and how, together, we can drive long-lasting change and improvement.

Seeing a new side of the district

My experience on the Five Star Leadership Academy bus tour
- Jannelle Hahn, Cotton Creek Elementary parent

In February, I had the pleasure of taking a bus tour with the Five Star Leadership Academy. The tour took us to three schools: Cotton Creek Elementary, Thornton High School (THS) and Bollman Technical Education Center (BTEC). At each school we had the opportunity to see various programs and the benefits offered to students contrasted with critical facility and programming needs.

At Cotton Creek, we experienced dedicated staff. Established improvement in test scores and support of the largest population of special needs in the district is coupled with an environment where differences are valued and positive behaviors rewarded. Affected by the northern “population explosion” and lacking maintenance funds, an entire grade of students cram in tiny trailers, while the school suffers rusting windows and peeling paint.

At THS, students shared enriching experiences, from International Baccalaureate programs, to the diverse student populations and class offerings. We were also treated to a student string quartet performance! We walked through educated public education to apply for a future FSLA class. This program is an excellent opportunity to learn how our community goes beyond school walls and how, together, we can drive long-lasting change and improvement.

Long Range Planning Advisory Committee presents recommendations

Committee advises board of education on district facility needs

For the past year, the Long Range Planning Advisory Committee (LRPAC) has worked to understand and prioritize key areas of facility needs in the district, and to develop recommendations on how to address the needs in the next year.

The committee — comprised of parents, community members and school staff — presented its findings and unanimous recommendations to the Adams 12 Five Star Schools Board of Education on April 13 for three overarching areas of need: overcrowding, aging facilities and educational programming.

To relieve overcrowded schools, a new P-8 school in the Anthem area and additions at Cotton Creek and Arapahoe Ridge elementary schools to remove old mobiles were recommended. For aging facilities, the committee recommended addressing $90 million in maintenance needed to keep classroom learning environments safe, comfortable and dry, and capital safety and security technology to keep schools and students safe.

Finally, new innovation and instructional upgrades for all schools and a focus on providing more opportunities for Career and Technical Education were determined necessary to meet educational programming needs.

Overall, improvements to the entire district were a key value for the committee. “Ultimately, we valued equitable improvements that broadly reach across our district to affect every school and every child,” said Tiffany Anderson, committee member and Five Star parent.

The committee urged the board of education to place a bond request on the November ballot to address the identified needs. The board of education plans to review the committee’s recommendation and community feedback from polling, online surveys and a Telephone Town Hall, and will meet in August to determine if a bond will be on the November ballot.

Read the complete Long Range Planning Advisory Committee recommendation at www.adams12.org/LRPAC.