

To the Editor,

The voters of Independent School District 2142 will soon hold the fate of the school district in their hands. In December, they will be allowed to cast a vote for the bonding referendum that will provide the school district with the resources necessary for an orderly reorganization of the rural St. Louis County School District.

A “Yes” vote will allow the district to close several underused and costly buildings and regroup in fewer new and remodeled facilities. This plan will cut operational costs and consolidate the student bodies into more efficient groupings. In the new configuration, the district will be able to restore lost educational offerings, and use the latest technology to provide cutting edge education to the 2,000 or so students living in the districts far flung boundaries.

A “No” vote will effectively push the lever that will flush the district down the drain. In fact, water swirling around the toilet and eventually disappearing is a good visualization of the demise of public education in rural St. Louis County. With the failure of the referendum, some schools will still close, offerings will continue to decrease, more students will flee, debts will pile up and eventually the district will dissolve and be adsorbed into the surrounding districts.

The St. Louis County School District has fought against the odds to remain in business as “the schools that nobody else wanted”, delivering quality public education for nearly four decades. I feel it would be a shame to see this district go out of business now because we are unwilling to directly support it with our taxes, even though our neighbors are already doing so in their districts.

Voting “No” to lower your property tax burden is a cold and dangerous calculation.

It is cold because you will have told the children in your neighborhood that you will not support having them educated in new and updated facilities relatively nearby, but would rather send them to another district where their parents will have little say in their education.

It is dangerous because all of the surrounding districts but one levy significantly more in school taxes than does 2142. Additional property being added to a neighboring district might dilute the amount levied by that district on each individual taxpayer temporarily, but the additional students that will be required to be educated by that district will raise the total amount needed to be levied for. The burden on individual taxpayers will rise in response. It is also my guess that the voters in those other districts will be eager to access revenue from the highly valued lake properties, and pass even higher levies in the future than they have so far. A “No” vote to keep school taxes low will probably backfire.

The school district is not to blame for asking taxpayers for more money to do its job. This is the fault of state politicians who have weakened the public school funding system to the point where all school districts must ask the local taxpayers for additional money just

to provide the basics. This has been done in spite of the constitutional requirement for the State government to provide equitable public education across the state.

In a public forum sponsored by the Cook P.T.S.O. at the Cook School nearly two years ago, State Senator Tom Bakk and Representative Dave Dill clearly stated that the district could expect no additional financial help from the State, especially if they continued to operate within the status quo. It was partially in response to this direction, and to three defeated operating levy referendums, that the district administration and school board looked at serious options for reorganization. The plan before the voters now is the result of these exhaustive deliberations.

The district is responsible to educate the students within its borders and nothing else. It is not required to provide community centers. It is not responsible to save individual towns. If anything, the schools reflect the results of economic development efforts in their areas. They are not in themselves engines of economic development. Economic development is a tough job in northern Minnesota, even in the best of times. Many good people have worked long and hard at this task, but the district has to face the reality of the present and deal with it. Having one strong school close to several towns should be more attractive than having small struggling schools located directly in several towns.

The recent approval by the State Department of Education of this plan might be a surprise to some people, but to me is an indication that the district has come up with a valid overall plan to address the situation. I support this plan because it is one that will allow the staff and students to aggressively meet the educational challenges of the future, rather than have them try to cling to the past. It is a plan that will allow a strong school to survive in the northwestern St. Louis County area for decades ahead. It is a plan that keeps the district alive and in a position to accommodate economic growth in northeastern St. Louis County if, and when, it occurs. It is not a perfect plan for all people, but it is a plan that the district can execute.

If the district is allowed to die, it will not come back, and people in other towns will decide on the education of our kids far into the future.

When the Virginia, Eveleth-Gilbert and Mountain Iron-Buhl school districts are looking at getting together to build a new common high school to save money, it should be no surprise that the St. Louis County School District has to do something as well.

I challenge everyone to vote "Yes" on this question in December, and then in turn challenge the Board and Administration to live up to their promises to provide better education for the kids. This plan is their plan, and they are the ones that will have to make it work. Our job will be to provide them with the support necessary to keep public education as local as possible. Please give the district the chance to survive so it can provide improved education to the children of rural St. Louis County.

Respectfully,
Bill Conger