

Superintendent's Blog

This post has been designed to answer questions that the community may have regarding school related issues. If you have a question about school operations; policy, budget, future plans or anything similar that you would like to see answered in a public forum, you may mail, email or call me with your question. If you would prefer to remain anonymous, please make that request.

Although there is no such thing as a bad question, certain questions may not be addressed, specifically questions that deal with individual students or individual personnel. It would be unethical to discuss these topics in a public forum. These are also considered to be confidential topics according to state law.

Gossip and hearsay are damaging to our school. It is my hope that this "blog" will address some of the rumors that are typical in every community and that it will set the facts straight. We don't claim to be perfect but we do make every effort to be open and honest regarding our school business. My hope is that this "blog" can prevent us from getting sidetracked so we can stay focused on our mission of educating our students.

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October 27, 2016 – The Texas Education Agency recently revised the rating system for public schools that has gone into effect this school year. Our school administration released this statement regarding the rating system.

In the latest release of school "ratings" that were released in August 2016 by the Texas Education Agency (TEA), Farwell ISD "Met Standard" (the highest possible rating currently) and received some distinctions, which is recognition for doing well in some areas. We have reported these ratings to our teachers and publicly reported these to our community at our Monday, October 17 school board meeting. These ratings, along with ratings from the previous two years, have also been posted on our website. We are proud of the successes that we have had and the improvements we have made but we have not made a big deal of these ratings because we feel that these do not accurately represent **all** of the educational philosophies or priorities of Farwell ISD and that "standardized" state accountability does not meet our parents and community expectations.

Testing has a purpose and a place and we will continue to support it, but not at the expense of the true education that will have a greater impact upon students' hopes and futures. We have chosen to take a more holistic approach believing that cognitive skills matter, but social and emotional skills, such as perseverance, self-control and resilience are just as important. All of these skills need to be fostered for our students to prosper so we strive to provide children a balanced set of skills for achieving positive life outcomes.

The purpose of our letter today is that we wanted to write you and let you know about a change that is coming to the Texas public education system in the very near future. It was introduced by the legislature at a past session. You may have heard of it. It is called the "A-F Rating System" that all Texas public schools will be "judged" upon in the near future with the "intent" that everyone can easily understand what is a "good" or "bad" school.

We believe this coming system is completely off track and will be a detriment to many schools and communities across Texas. There are many in the education community across the state who believe that **this system is being created to discredit public schools in a political effort to push private school "vouchers" and privatized charter schools at the next legislative session.** We have outlined some of the basics of the new rating system:

1. First, this "A-F system" is strongly dependent upon state mandated standardized test scores. ANY system that is so strongly based on testing results does not represent the differences in communities in regards to demographics, socioeconomic conditions, local needs and expectations or philosophies of individual districts. For example, this same system will be used to rate schools in Texarkana, Beaumont, Brownsville, El Paso and Farwell. These communities are hundreds of miles apart in different regions of the state and each have different needs. It is our belief that it is statistically impossible to design a mathematical system that can rate schools fairly across such a vast state.
2. Second, this system has and is being used in other states with no proof that this system helps districts, schools, students or parents. In fact, some states have now gone away from this system as they have seen the detrimental effects upon students, schools, communities and no positive results.
3. Third, this new rating system will not accurately represent what goes on at a local school or district where philosophies, actions and considerations can be taken into account to benefit local students and community needs.

Some may say that we are against accountability; we are not. We support some type of state accountability rating system, a portion of which is based on standardized testing. However, we believe that the statistical system to be put in place will be very misleading.

We believe accountability must be in place for ALL public schools and the funds that are shared with us from the taxpayer. Our district is held accountable locally by students, parents and our community every day in regards to academic results, taxes and meeting the needs of the local community as well as by state standards of academic and financial accountability.

It is a fact that LOCAL taxes now fund 51% of public education in the state of Texas as the legislature has allowed the state's share of this cost to drop to 41% (the other 8% is federal money). Recently, our local taxpayers stepped to the plate and passed a Tax Ratification Election in support of our school. So, it could be argued that local accountability and opinions SHOULD carry greater weight since they have become the primary funding source for public education.

We strive to have every student "college ready," but we realize that everyone is unique and this cookie cutter rating system does not meet everyone's needs, desires and goals at this point in their lives. Thus, we strive to additionally offer opportunities for our students to improve their employment prospects by fostering social and emotional skills, also known as non-cognitive skills, soft skills or character skills, such as communication skills, perseverance, responsibility and motivation to name just a few.

We will share these state ratings with you when they are given to us by the state but we want to remind you that these ratings are only a small part of what happens at your local public school. Someone in Austin, **who has never set foot in Farwell, Texas**, is incapable of rating the overall picture of our school.

Our school is your school. We welcome feedback from students, parents and community members on any suggestions for improving Farwell ISD.

We sincerely hope that you will join with us in making your state legislators aware of your support for and the benefits of public education. If you have any questions or wish to find out more about these issues, please do not hesitate to inquire with Kelly Lusk at 806-481-3371.

Respectfully,

Kelly Lusk, Superintendent

Coby Norman, HS Principal

Kristy White, JH Principal

Michael Johnson, Elementary Principal

August 26, 2016 – The State Line Tribune contacted me recently. There were multiple questions that were asked regarding the new Farwell ISD drug testing policy. I am sure parents may have some of the same questions. I have copied the article to be posted on this blog.

The State Line Tribune has asked Farwell School Supt. Kelly Lusk several questions about the new random drug testing policy. The policy begins this year and covers any high school student who participates in extracurricular activities or drives a vehicle on campus.

What is the cost of the program?

Lusk: This year we have budgeted \$5,000. We might not spend that much, but that will cover the cost of bringing in experts to oversee the collecting of the samples, the testing and results. We've contracted with a company out of Waco, and we wanted the first year of this program to be done professionally. Our goal is to train our staff to take over the collections process next year which should lower the overall cost. The company would still select the students to be tested and test the samples.

Will law enforcement be involved in this process, or in the punishment of the students?

Lusk: No. The school does not view this as a discipline issue, and it will not go on the student's permanent record. We view this as an opportunity to help students. We hope to educate them before things get out of hand and it becomes punitive outside of school.

What happens in the event of a false positive?

Lusk: The odds of a false positive are very small. The samples will be tested by a trained laboratory, staffed by experts in testing. If a test is flagged as positive it is re-tested to make sure of the results. If parents feel that it is still incorrect, they may have the original sample tested again at their own expense. The first time that a student tests positive, the only consequence is counseling, so for them to lose a privilege they would have to test positive on two separate occasions.

How will we know that the tests will be randomly assigned, and not targeted at specific kids?

Lusk: We have supplied a list of every student who is participating in extra-curriculars, or drives a vehicle on campus, to the testing company. They have a computer program that randomly chooses students, and they will tell us each time who will be tested. The school will not choose students on our own.

Was there a lawsuit in Farwell over the drug policy in the '90s?

Lusk: I'm not aware of one. I have looked through all of the records in the superintendent's office and have not come across any records of one. In Texas, there have been multiple court cases that have shown that schools have the right to test students who are involved in extracurricular activities.

Is there anything better that the school can do with the money?

Lusk: The school will always have needs, but is there anything more important than preventing a student from going down the path of being a drug user? The amount of money that is spent on drugs annually in this country, and the harm it does to student's long term health is through the roof. Students and families can be devastated physically, financially, emotionally and spiritually. All of this could perhaps be prevented by a \$75 test that could help keep kids from becoming users. I think this is a great investment in our students and our community.

Will the staff get tested?

Lusk: Laws guiding testing of employees are different than laws guiding testing of students. I'm not saying that I'm against it or for it, but that would be a decision for the school board.

If a student has to join the counseling program, how is it paid?

Lusk: The counseling will be paid for by the parent. If the student does not complete the counseling program in the prescribed period of time, then they would lose the privilege of participating in the extra-curricular programs or of driving on campus.

Is the purpose of this program to educate or punish the students?

Lusk: I think this program is set up to educate them to the dangers of drug usage. In the case of a positive test, the student will be required to go to the counseling with their parents. We feel that it will be positive for the parents and the students to work together to curb drug usage before it becomes habitual. I think this will be better for the students in the long run.

What if a high school senior goes to Colorado or another place that has legalized marijuana, and legally buys drugs and is caught in a random drug test?

Lusk: My understanding of Colorado's law is that they must be 21 years old to purchase marijuana. However, it's really irrelevant because we are not pursuing any legal action against the students. Our board policy has been designed to educate and help students and ultimately decrease their drug use, whether legal or illegal. If the student tests positive for marijuana or any other drug, we are not pursuing legal action.

What if we have other questions about the policies?

Lusk: First of all, I'd love for the parents to come by my office at any time and discuss these or any issues they have with Farwell Schools. I would be happy to explain any of our policies and why we have them in place. I also will often put answers to frequently asked questions on the superintendent's blog on our webpage at farwellschools.org.

April 27, 2015 - A parent contacted me recently and asked if I could explain the attendance policy of the school and its relation to semester test exemptions, retentions, excused and unexcused absences and school funding. The parent had questioned other parents and felt there was some confusion among all of them about the school's attendance policy.

I must state that this can be very confusing for all. Attendance relates to different topics in different ways. I will start by referring parents to our student handbook. Page 13 deals with semester test exemptions for secondary students while page 36 deals with the attendance policy for all students.

Let's start with the compulsory attendance law that relates to all students. First, we need to define what is an excused and an unexcused absence. I think this causes the most confusion. According to state attendance regulations there are only a limited number of reasons in which a student may receive an **excused** (counted present) absence. The two most typical excuses are for a declared religious holiday (which must be verified by a signed statement from a pastor, rabbi, etc.) or for a medical appointment when the student has been at school for part of the day

(which must be verified by a signed note from the doctor or dentist). Other reasons are listed in School Board Policy. All other absences are considered **unexcused** (counted absent), which means the school does not receive funding for the student on that day and it also counts against the student's attendance record.

The school asks for notes for all absences. If a parent writes a note that a student is absent due to a minor sickness or a funeral or quite a number of other legitimate reasons, the local school considers those to be "excused" because the parent has notified the school that they have given the student permission to be absent from school. But in reality, the absence is **unexcused** according to state attendance guidelines. The school does not receive funding for the student on that day and it will count against the student's attendance record.

Students that miss a class due to a school sponsored activity are considered to be present. The school receives funding and it does not count against the student's attendance record.

According to the state compulsory attendance law, a student must be present 90% of the school days to be **promoted** to the next grade (8th grade and below) or to receive credit for a course (high school). This is when it becomes important that the parent has communicated with the school throughout the school year. The campus principal or, in more extreme cases (below 75% attendance) an attendance committee, can **place** a student in the next grade or award credit for a course. The principal or the committee will review each student on a case by case basis. Students whose parents have communicated with the campus principal throughout the school year regarding the reasons for their poor attendance and who have a history of having excellent attendance and good grades will most likely be **placed** in the next grade (8th grade and below) or be allowed to "make up" their absences in some way. High school students may not receive credit for a course unless they have "made up" their absences. There are other options. For example, the student may be retained or denied credit if there has been a pattern of poor attendance over the years, the student may be placed in the next grade on a probationary status or the student may be required to attend summer school. It is completely at the discretion of the campus principal or attendance committee.

Finally, semester test exemptions are allowed by the state but are based on local regulations. Some schools do not recognize any absences as excused as they relate to earning semester test exemptions. Currently, Farwell ISD does allow all excused absences recognized by the state to be excused in relation to semester test exemptions.

Attendance laws and local school board policies may also be reviewed in the FEA, FEB, FEC and FED sections of the board policy manual posted on the website.

March 11, 2015 - At our Kindergarten Roundup we heard multiple comments that folks had heard we were not accepting transfer students. This is false. The school district has not changed the transfer policy. We are still accepting transfers according to our district transfer policy. Contact the campus office or administration building if you have questions.

February 27, 2015 – Board member Jaybe Barrett made a presentation regarding the school finance issues that are faced by Farwell ISD at the February 24 Rotary Club meeting. At the meeting, I was asked by several Rotarians to go into greater detail to explain the 300 mile penalty that Jaybe had touched on in his presentation. I have adapted an email that I sent to our faculty and staff that includes information presented by Nazareth ISD superintendent Glen Waldo and the Equity Center that will explain the 300 mile penalty that is being discussed in the state legislature during this session.

The state funding formula is a very complex animal. But to break it down to its simplest terms, the Basic allotment per student is multiplied by a number of factors to come up with a final dollar amount per student that the school will receive from the state. The small school formula provides for districts that have less than 1600 students to multiply the basic allotment by .40 if larger than 300 square miles but only .25 if less than 300 square miles. This means that schools less than 300 square miles receive .15 less funding off of the basic allotment per student than those with more than 300 square miles. The basic allotment varies from year to year but if you were to take the basic allotment and multiply by .15 and then multiply by our Average Daily Attendance, you would come up with the amount of funding that Farwell ISD does not receive as a result of the 300 mile penalty.

As you can see on the attachment (below), it is quite costly to our school district. There is no increased cost for a school district that is larger than 300 square miles other than transportation and the transportation issue is addressed in the transportation formula.

The problem with some of the multipliers in the formulas is one reason there is an inequitable amount of funding per student in school districts across the state. During my time in Austin, the 300 mile penalty was a very hot topic. We are hopeful that this legislature will correct the problem but there is no guarantee.

Nazareth, TX, February 24, 2015—More than 460 small districts have fallen victim to an arbitrary component of our school finance system—a component which serves no other purpose than to penalize schools with less than 300 square miles and deprive their children of the resources and programs they need.

Two bills have been filed in the current Legislative Session to remove or repeal this funding penalty for all schools—SB 324 by Senator Nichols and HB 645 by Representative Ashby. By simply replacing the punitive formula (.00025) with the one the State already uses with districts 300 or more square miles (.0004), Nazareth ISD could receive an additional \$326,753 in state funding each year.

I'm asking you to call, write, or email Senator Seliger and Representative King and tell them:

"I support making the multiplier .0004 for all small schools in Texas regardless of square miles."

"I support SB 324 (Nichols) & HB 645 (Ashby) that would remove or repeal this financial penalty."

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More Background Information From The Equity Center Related to This Topic

"Why would the state purposely create a special formula just to penalize a group of districts?" This question originated some 31 years ago and has continued with significant impact on our school in Nazareth, in addition to another 463 districts statewide. The Equity Center reported in a recent article this is the only time of which it is aware the State has deliberately created two different formulas—one to fund small districts at a state-recognized cost, and another created to intentionally fund other small districts at a level below the state-recognized cost.

The purpose of the small schools formula is to offset the diseconomy of scale costs associated with small schools size. Based on a modeling process that attempted to quantify how much more the cost per student increases as size decreases, the State created a small schools formula with a multiplier of .0004. This has not changed since the early 1980s. However, legislative leadership at that time wanted small communities to consolidate their schools and decided any district with less than 300 square miles (an arbitrarily-chosen number) should be funded 37.5% below the state-recognized cost. To emphasize the illegitimacy of the formula, at least a third of the reduction was in retaliation for one state representative reneging on a promise to vote for a tax increase at the time!

While the openly stated intent was to "encourage" these districts to consolidate, very few have chosen to do so because the school is often the center of the community and an essential part of maintaining the vitality of rural Texas. This punitive formula has meant children in these arbitrarily-chosen rural districts have gone for more than 30 years with fewer resources to offer quality science or career programs. It means local taxpayers have had to pay significantly higher property tax rates to prevent the loss of key teachers to better funded districts. No one can fairly argue there was ever a legitimate reason to refuse funding at the cost the State recognized as appropriate for geographically-larger small districts. After all, communities do not choose to be small. They do, however, choose to have a local school!

In a day when the State is putting such an emphasis on charter schools, which are quite small and exist within already existing districts, it would seem the State would not want to retain a formula that punishes students in small schools that represent entire communities.

Along with Nazareth, there are five nearby schools that would benefit from funding at the .0004 multiplier for districts with less than 300 square miles.

Nazareth ISD – Annual loss in state funding* - \$326,753.00
Bovina ISD – Annual loss in state funding* - \$523,822.00
Farwell ISD – Annual loss in state funding* - \$563,894.00
Hart ISD – Annual loss in state funding* - \$382,544.00
Kress ISD – Annual loss in state funding* - \$329,511.00
Lazbuddie ISD – Annual loss in state funding* - \$274,988.00

December 12, 2014 - We have received multiple questions about the requirements and/or restrictions in the school cafeteria throughout the year. This week we had our annual basketball tournament and this also led to questions regarding whether or not students were allowed to eat in the concession stand during the school day. I will attempt to answer these questions in as brief a manner as possible. Please understand that I am summarizing a manual that is hundreds of pages long. For more information on school lunch regulations, you may go to squaremeals.org.

As most of you know, the school receives a substantial amount of money from the federal government, approximately \$180,000 last year, to assist in funding the school breakfast and lunch program. The USDA places guidelines on the types of foods that are allowed to be served, how the foods are to be prepared and the amount to be served on each plate as well as numerous other guidelines and restrictions, including any type of food or snack that is distributed or sold by school personnel at any time during the school day. Unfortunately, this also includes items that are sold as fundraisers by different school organizations. Our cafeteria director and our administrators are responsible for following these rules. Our school food service department is audited on a regular basis and also may be "spot checked" at any time. If we as a school are found to be not following the guidelines, penalties

will be imposed. Schools may lose the funding provided for that day's breakfasts and lunches, or more severe fines that could be in the thousands or tens of thousands of dollars.

To revert back to the original question, why are students not allowed to purchase items out of the concession stand during the tournament? Rule 26.11 in the school lunch manual states that: the concession stand is considered to be "in competition" with the school lunch program. Elementary students may not be served a competitive food or have indirect access to a competitive food during the school day, junior high students may not have access to these competitive foods from 30 minutes before their lunch period to 30 minutes after their lunch period, and high school students may not have access to these competitive foods during their lunch period in the cafeteria. So therefore, some of the high school students were allowed to purchase items out of the concession stand and the junior high students could purchase items after 1:30 but the elementary school was not allowed to purchase items until after school had been released.

Please understand that we do not always agree with each of these regulations but that we are attempting to do our job as best we can to prevent the school from receiving a fine or a loss of revenue, which we use to provide the best possible breakfast and lunch that we can for our students. We attempt to use common sense as best we can to deal with this issue but the risk of losing funds is real. There have been multiple schools in our area that have been fined and/or lost some funding as a result of not following the guidelines imposed by the federal government.

The guidelines for the School Lunch Program are constantly changing. We make every effort to keep our parents informed of these regulations. We have just received new information recently. As we become more familiar with these we will distribute it through the campuses. If you have any questions about the school lunch guidelines, please contact your campus principal.