

VIEWPOINTS

Despite goveror's efforts, ed funding remains bleak

University of South Dakota President James Abbott's words came to mind as members of the Finance Committee of the Vermillion School Board quietly talked at the board's Monday meeting about what they have been working on lately.

"I think it's clear," Abbott said last September during his State of the University speech, "that South Dakota does not support education."

"Our state has a tremendous aversion to taxes," Abbott said. "We want excellence, but we don't want to pay for it."

Those words may seem a bit harsh, especially following Gov. Dennis Daugaard's State of the State address earlier this month, in which he called for a 3 percent increase in funding for K-12 education.

I'm sure members of the Vermillion School Board see a proposed 3 percent increase as better news than what the governor announced shortly after taking office—a 10 percent across the board cut to the state's general fund.

The state Legislature managed, during its 2011 session, to find some one-time money to lessen the blow a bit to schools so that education funding was cut about 8.6 percent instead of 10 percent.

BETWEEN THE LINES



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South Dakota schools received a total of \$52 million in cuts to state education funding.

So, even with a proposed 3 percent increase, the Vermillion School Board isn't exactly celebrating

right now.

"The financial picture for the Vermillion School District—I'll be blunt—is bleak," said Dave Stammer, Vermillion School Board member who serves on the board's Finance Committee. "It doesn't really get a whole lot better with 3 percent, and the reason why is student population."

The Vermillion School District's enrollment has been declining in recent years. Fewer students mean fewer dollars from Pierre.

According to the South Dakota Department of Education, the fall 2010 enrollment of the Vermillion School District was 1,258. By the fall of 2011, fall enrollment dipped to 1,235.

The fall 2012 enrollment of our school district tumbled to 1,202. This school year, fall student numbers ticked upward a bit, to 1,213.

The state's per-student formula, set in place in 1997, established that no matter where a student attended class, his or her school received the same amount of money per child. In property-tax-rich school districts, the bulk of that money comes from local property taxes; in poor districts, most of the money comes from the state.

The formula has been adjusted slightly to send more money to small and sparsely populated schools and those with students learning English as a second language.

The per-student allocation of funds to each school district was \$4,805 for the 2009-10 school year. Gov. Rounds froze that amount during his last year in office, so, again, in 2010-11, schools received \$4,805 per student.

In the 2011-12 school year, school funding took an 8.6 percent hit, and the per-student allocation was cut to \$4,390. The state gave school funding a tepid 2.3 percent increase for the 2012-13 school year, raising the allocation to \$4,491. School funding received a 3 percent raise for the 2013-14 school year, setting the allocation at \$4,626

per student.

Let's do some quick math: The Vermillion School District, based on enrollment and per-student allocation figures, received \$6,044,690 for the 2010-11 school year. For 2011-12 (the time of the 8.6 percent education funding cut), it received \$5,421,650 in state aid. For the 2012-13 school year, Pierre sent the Vermillion district \$5,398,182, and for 2013-14, the district is scheduled to receive \$5,611,338.

If all goes as the governor proposes, the per-student allocation for 2014-15, thanks to a 3 percent increase, will be \$4,765 per student. If enrollment stays exactly the same from now until next fall (which likely won't happen), the Vermillion School District would receive \$5,779,945.

Even with the governor's added 3 percent, our school district next year, under this scenario, would receive significantly less state aid—more than a quarter million dollars less—than in 2010-11.

Can you think of any expenses related to running a district that educates approximately 1,200 young people in two elementary schools, a middle school, and a high school that have decreased significantly over the past four years?

Fortunately, patrons of the

Vermillion School District have recognized the funding challenges our local schools and students face with the erratic funding that comes from Pierre. The district in is the midst of a second opt-out of a property tax freeze that that has softened the financial blows from Pierre just a bit.

The opt-out demonstrates that there are pockets, here and there, in our state, where President Abbott's observations aren't completely accurate. Yes, we South Dakotans are tax averse. We want excellence, but we don't want to pay for it.

And while one would like to think that perhaps state leaders are realizing that it is time to invest more in education, the 3 percent increase proposed by the governor is not the product of a vast philosophical change in school and student investment in Pierre.

The governor found some one-time money, and decided, this year, to spend it on schools.

What may happen as the 2015 Legislature convenes a year from now is a mystery. School funding might stay the same. It very well could be cut. Who knows?

One thing is for certain. If you are a member of the Finance Committee of the Vermillion School Board, it's difficult to get excited about the proposed 3 percent increase for 2014-15.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Destination community

Steve Howe has described the end result of their VCDC Vermillion Now 2! proposal as "Vermillion becoming an interesting place ... a destination community".

Rotary's announcement that Coyoteopolis will again produce "Shakespeare in the Park" this June, foretells the fruition of VCDC's intent. The 2012 production capitalized on Vermillion's two assets which are continuously recycling: Its incomparable beauty and its heritage. Staged in the historic Prentis Park band shell that production proved to be both cost-effective and culturally perpetuating. The event restored dignity of stature to the band shell—one of many prominent Vermillion landmarks which have long been held in disregard.

Through the years, entities have grappled with balancing the budget and other challenges. Often they voted "Yeah" for the option of "Out with the Old and In with the New".

I predict that the already significant number of visitors will increase dramatically within the next 10 years. The ripple effect of "Shakespeare in the Park" will cascade and individuals and groups will determine to restore decaying landmarks. With so many interesting things to see and do and feel in Vermillion, by 2024, Vermillion will become the "Destination City of the Mid-West!"

Some visitors will come to experience the sod house in the Bluffview Outdoor Historical Museum. Many will travel miles to be motivated by the renowned Bluffview Easter Sunrise Service when the cemetery is completely surrounded by instrumental groups which have auditioned and paid a fee to participate.

And, "Yes, David." There will be many who will come to Vermillion on a warm summer evening just to watch the turkey vultures with their enormous wingspan use the updraft from Vermillion's old restored beige water tower to lift

them "Up, Up, and Away." Sincerely, Edis J. Anderson Vermillion

We are Washington

This letter is in response to the "Between the Lines" editorial by David Lias in the Jan. 24, 2014, issue of the Plain Talk regarding taxation awareness presentations by bank representatives. Although Dave concedes that this discussion was "enlightening," it was apparent he missed the point when he writes to the bankers, "Local governments can listen, but they really can't help you, even if they agree with you."

Contrary to his comment, the bank representatives are the ones providing help to governmental and educational authorities by educating them as to a source of their revenue as well as potential sources for additional funding. This discussion serves the interests of schools, counties, and cities that are in serious need of revenue to provide adequate services for their constituents. This is not for the self-interests of banks as others would have the public think.

The only way that our representatives in Washington can make significant positive changes in our futures is if we tell them. Each of us is "Washington." It starts at the grassroots level and is eventually debated in Congress ... but it has to start with us if true progress is going to be made.

My fear is that our local school board members, county commissioners, and city council members, like Dave, will view this as a "Washington issue" and will self-justify their lack of action. You and I are "Washington" and good solutions will not be found without our actions.

Sincerely, Tom Schaack Community Bank First Bank & Trust-Vermillion



Instead of waddling through Duckville...

News flash! I finally see a light at the end of the tunnel and it's not a train! Instead, it's an explanation for the Sermon on the Mount (AKA The Beatitudes) that I can get my head around. I came across it in the Bible translation, "The Message," by Methodist pastor Eugene Peterson. For those who have never heard of the Sermon on the Mount or may need a refresher, consider it Jesus' first official State of the Union address. After being baptized by his cousin John in the River Jordan, Jesus offered this sermon as his first set of instructions on mercy and compassion, drawing deeply on love and humility.

From that moment on, Jesus was infused by the Holy Spirit and ready to turn things upside down by creating a new normal, regarding love, forgiveness, peace and being children of God.

During this, his first gig, Jesus drew away from the growing crowds to a nearby hillside to have a word with his direct reports—the disciples whom he handpicked and would commission to relay the Good News to the ends of the Earth.

The Message translation deconstructs the eight proverb-like Beatitude—"Blessed are the poor in spirit, the meek, the merciful," and so on—into bite-sized pieces easily digestible by you and me. This translation explains you are blessed when...

"You're at the end of your rope. With less of you, there's more of God and His rule. You've lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you. You're content with who you are—no more, no less. That's when you find yourself a proud owner of everything that can't be bought."

MY STORY YOUR STORY



PAULA DAMON
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"You've worked up a good appetite for God—the best meal ever.

"You care and are care-full. That's when you find yourself being cared for.

"You get your inside world—your mind and heart—put right. Then you can see God in the outside world.

"You show people how to cooperate instead of how to compete and fight. That's when you discover who you really are and your place in God's family.

"You're commitment to God provokes persecution...driving you deeper into relationship with God.

"When people put you down, throw you out or speak lies about you to discredit Jesus. This means the truth is too close for comfort and they are uncomfortable. You can be glad when that happens—give cheer—and know you are in good company as all of heaven applauds."

Through this new understanding, I can finally see a reflection of myself in The Beatitudes that is positive—almost uplifting.

In this—Jesus first message to His followers—He delivers an unprecedented news flash by drawing a new line of demarcation between the haves and have-not. He redefines what it means to be blessed.

And it has nothing to do with being a power broker or a star on the red carpet; a lottery winner or a Super Bowl champion. According to

Jesus, we don't have to have big bucks or a big house to be blessed.

Instead, it's not what we have or what happens to us in life that matters. It's how we deal with what we don't have and how we react to what happens to us that really and truly matters.

Sixteenth Century theologian and founder of Lutheranism, Martin Luther explained The Beatitudes by stating: "This life is not righteousness but growth in righteousness, not health but healing, not being but becoming, not rest but exercise. We are not yet what we shall be, but we are growing toward it, the process is not yet finished, but it is going on, this is not the end, but it is the road..."

This little story from "Duckville" by 19th century Danish philosopher and theologian Soren Kierkegaard illustrates further the freedom this Bible passage imbues...

"Every Sunday the ducks waddled out of their houses and down Main Street to church. They waddled into the sanctuary and sat in their proper pews.

"The duck choir waddled in and sang. The duck minister came forward and opened the duck Bible and said, 'Ducks, God has given you wings! With wings you can fly! No walls can confine you! No fence can hold you! You can fly like birds.'

"All the ducks shouted, 'AMEN!' and then waddled home."

Yes, it is true. I have seen the light at the end of the tunnel and it's not a train.

It's a new light, a new sound, provoking me to see my life and the lives of others through the lens of deep love and humility, giving me wings to fly.

So, instead of waddling on through life, I can soar.