



Highlander Insider

“It is good people who make good places.” – Anna Sewell, English novelist

An Update from Treasurer Steve Bain

Addressing a growing financial need and keeping OHLSD strong.

The Oak Hills Local School District has not received an increase in funding from the local community in 10 years. Through a mixture of hard work and extreme fiscal prudence, the district has managed to deliver high-quality education — two Blue Ribbon Schools in the last five years; a Four-Star rating by the Ohio Department of Education this year; and six U.S. News Best Middle or Elementary Schools in 2022 — while having the lowest per-pupil spending in Hamilton County.

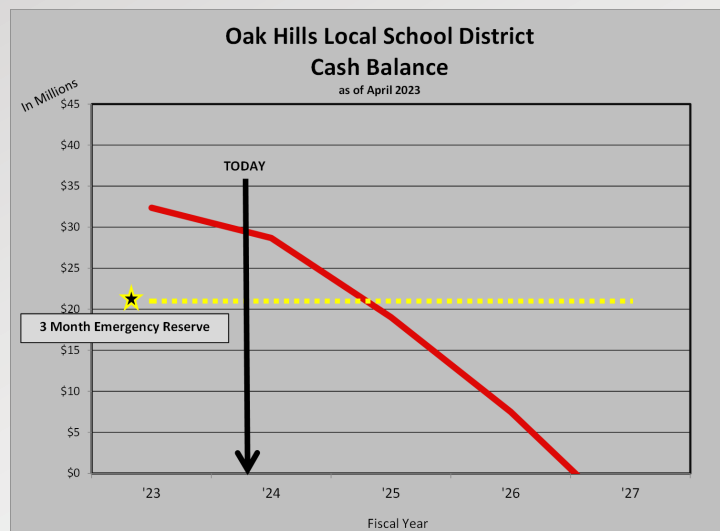
But as inflation swells costs and state actions flat-line district revenues, that financial picture will soon be unsustainable. OHLSD cannot stretch resources further without affecting the quality of education and services it delivers to students. Over the coming months, the Oak Hills Board of Education and administration will decide on a course of action to address the financial picture, which is similar to that of many other local school districts. In the meantime, here is a brief Q&A to help you understand the district’s current financial status:

Where is OHLSD financially?

For the last three years, district expenses have exceeded district revenues — a situation called deficit spending — and this trend will continue. This is an anticipated and inevitable result of costs continuing to rise while Ohio’s school funding formula prevents school districts from collecting more taxes from rising home values.

(As home values increase, the state “rolls back” property tax rates, keeping school revenues flat.)

The result is that the district’s savings reserve is shrinking. It’s been district practice to keep three months’ of operating expenses in reserve, much as families may try to have a three-month emergency fund. Unless other action is taken, within the next



18 months the district will be operating with less than a three-month reserve. At that point — again, if unaddressed — the district will face a financial crisis, very likely being forced to make sizable cuts and ask for a sizable tax increase. The result would likely be a reduction in staff and services, leading to larger class sizes and reduced course offerings.

Besides the state funding formula, are there other factors that brought the district to this point?

The other most significant factor is that Oak Hills Local Schools has not received additional funding from the community for the last 10 years. The average Ohio school district requests additional funding every

3 to 5 years. Only four of the 23 Hamilton County school districts have not received additional funding from their community since 2014.

What actions has the district taken to address the situation, and what are the next steps?

First, the district has implemented more than 50 actions to contain costs (click [here](#) to view the list), resulting in more than \$20 million in taxpayer savings.

Second, in 2022, the district made both staff and administrative reductions as well as reducing building budgets.

Third, the district made very prudent use of federal pandemic funds with the intent of helping local taxpayers by staying off the ballot. Those funds expire in 2024, which will lead to a sharp drop-off in the district cash balance.

The Board of Education will decide next steps. At its request, the administration met with an advisory group of diverse local businesspeople and community members who reviewed district finances and offered thoughts on future actions. The administration is now sharing a financial update with a wide range of district and community groups in order to build awareness and get feedback.

How can community members learn more?

We welcome community interest in our financial information, which is available [here](#).

‘Lab Sites’ Let Teachers Open Their Doors, Learn from Each Other



Ms. Herrmann presents instruction during lab-site session.

In her third-grade classroom at Springmyer Elementary School, teacher Sophia Herrmann teaches a math lesson that emphasizes observation, finding multiple ways to solve a problem, and “talking with a neighbor” to share what was noticed and what problem-solving strategies were used.

It’s a productive lesson, not only for Ms. Herrmann’s students, but also for the 16 OHLSD teachers who sit along the perimeter of her classroom, observing the lesson and taking notes.

Known as ‘lab sites,’ these carefully orchestrated lessons are intimate, up-close opportunities for teachers to learn from each other, reflect on their own practice, and improve instruction in their classrooms.

“We have teacher leadership teams, and this is one way they lead — by opening up their

classrooms and letting others see them teach,” says Corey Kessler, Director of Curriculum and Instruction. “This is the culture we’re trying to create at Oak Hills, which is open and transparent — how do we learn from each other?”

Teachers volunteer to host and also to observe lab-site presentations, which begin outside the classroom, with a 20-minute discussion of the background of the class, dynamics at play in the classroom, and the goals of the lesson being presented. The visiting teachers then enter the classroom and silently observe the lab teacher present a 45- to 60-minute lesson. The group reconvenes afterward for a 30-minute discussion of what they observed, with explanations from the lab teacher on her techniques.

“I can tell how comfortable your kids are with mathematical concepts,” one observing teacher says. “I love how you focused on small things and built their confidence.”

Ms. Herrmann nods and smiles. “I’ve seen growth from the beginning of the



OHLSD staff members observing Ms. Herrmann’s lesson.

year — a willingness to show the models they’ve used, and not saying, ‘This is hard,’ or giving up.” She tells the group that she builds “little mysteries” into the lesson by encouraging the students to look for math clues, and to anticipate what question they’ll be asked to answer or solve. “Everybody can always find something to notice or wonder about.”

It’s a fitting summary of the lab-site experience for teachers as well — an opportunity to learn from a colleague and use the experience to improve instruction in their own classrooms.



Debriefing after the lab-site lesson.

A Conversation with Director of Safety & Security Bill Murphy



New camera systems allow School Resource Officer Jason Canup, OHHS Assistant Principal Eric Fry, and Director of Safety and Security Bill Murphy to monitor activity throughout Oak Hills buildings.

In September 2021, Oak Hills Local Schools hired Bill Murphy as its Director of Safety and Security. A retired Delhi Township police officer, Mr. Murphy is responsible for overseeing the district's safety planning, conducting training for staff and students, as well as conducting vulnerability assessments that initiate building security enhancements such as purchasing security-related technology. He also coordinates training with local police and fire personnel that familiarizes them with our facilities. He recently sat down to share updates on the district's ongoing work to keep students and staff safe, and campuses welcoming and secure.

You have applied for, and been awarded, a number of safety grants. How much funding did the district receive over the last two years, and what was it used for?

We've been awarded more than \$800,000 in state and federal grants. We conducted Homeland Security vulnerability assessments on each of our buildings to determine specific needs. One notable improvement

are new finger-print readers for each building that allow access to our staff, and police officers from each township. Officers walk our schools while on routine patrol and use them for tactical training after school hours. We've also implemented new camera systems at eight of our nine buildings and are working to add them to the remaining school.

Of the upgrades made to security this school year, which do you consider to be the biggest improvements?

Controlling access to our buildings is the most significant thing that makes everyone safer on a daily basis. Secondly, we're vetting everyone as they come into our buildings by requiring them to present identification. These changes will be more visible in buildings across the district in the fall. Be prepared to have your identification ready when you visit an Oak Hills building.

What signs have you seen that safety training or safety improvements are 'taking hold' — that our safety planning has really gotten into the groundwater?

I think culture is really big. Oak Hills is such a warm and embracing culture, and locking facilities down is a little bit of a challenge, but I think it's worked. One example is that we now have controlled access at Oak Hills High School. My first year we had two entrances. We recognized that to be a security issue. Now, at 8

a.m., we shut it down to just one entrance. All visitors must present identification and are escorted if they need to move throughout the building. It's quieter now. You don't see visitors wandering.

What initiatives will the district pursue next?

We're going to work toward securing entrances across the district. There's some cool technology that's coming, and we'll continue to seek grant funding for that.

Safety planning is always a partnership between the district, students, and families. What advice would you give families on how they can help keep our schools safe?

Promote the culture you want to live in. If you see concerning behaviors, report them. As parents, have a conversation with your kids that it's OK to report it, and that that's what your expectation is.

Remind your kids that actions on social media have consequences. We've seen a number of social media threats — online behavior has created a lot of problems. If you see a threat on social media, don't be the person who takes a screenshot and repeats it. Be the person who reports the issue so it can be addressed as quickly as possible. If you want to be safe, get the information to the people who can investigate it. The culture needs to be one where people report concerning behavior. When they do, we have a threat assessment team to follow up on those reports. We continue to monitor them and revisit them.

For Some Students, MindPeace Rooms Are ‘Game-Changers’



Springmyer psychologist Jaimie Beerck looks over popular mindfulness materials.

Educators have long known that students need to enter the classroom ‘ready to learn.’ Only relatively recently have they realized that — first — children need to learn how to deal with stress and negative emotions, in order to leave things like anger and anxiety outside the classroom door.

Now there’s an effective — and very popular — approach called the MindPeace room.

Overseen by MindPeace — a non-profit organization supporting schools in accessing mental health services — the program teaches children and teens how to regulate their bodies, minds, and actions while dealing with big emotions. Three Oak Hills schools — Oak Hills High School, and Oakdale and Springmyer elementary schools — now have MindPeace rooms, where students can come for 20-minute intervals to learn to identify what they’re feeling and then use strategies to calm themselves down. The immediate goal is to get back to their classroom in a positive frame of mind for learning. The longer goal is to internalize the skills so they know how to cope with difficult emotions for a lifetime.

“This is teaching, and that’s what schools are about — teaching basic skills that people need in life,” says Springmyer Principal Mark Winters. “Not all kids need a MindPeace room, but for those who do, it’s a game-changer.”

Here’s how it works: Students either request a visit or have scheduled visits. They sign in on a computer,

with prompts to identify what emotion they’re feeling and how strongly they’re feeling it. At Springmyer Elementary, psychologist Jaimie Beerck sets a timer for 20 minutes, and the student begins a rotation through three “stations” — body movement, mindfulness and self-reflection. Activities in these stations can range from using resistance bands to work out stress, to using cards with mindfulness activities, to using a “breathing sphere” to practice deep breathing, which helps them focus on the present moment instead of their stressors.

“It’s being present in the moment, recognizing what you’re feeling, and then knowing how to target that emotion to calm ourselves down,” Mrs. Beerck says. “The students I’ve worked with come right in and know just what to do.”

Staff members say they’re seeing a range of benefits from the MindPeace rooms, from improved relationships among students who now better manage their own emotions, to a calmer and more secure school culture with more focus on learning.

This year at Springmyer, students made 137 visits to the MindPeace room.

“You now have kids who are coming to a teacher and — before they cause a disruption — saying, ‘I recognize that I need to do something, so can I go to MindPeace?’” says Mr. Winters. “They’re going, getting themselves settled, and then they get back to class.”



Support from Partners Funds New Turf Field at OHHS

Oak Hills Local Schools has greatly appreciated its long-standing relationships with Christ Hospital, Dr. David Argo, and Green Township. As strong supporters of our district, they have again stepped up to advance opportunities for Oak Hills students and for the Oak Hills community by funding the new turf project at Oak Hills High School. Their generosity means that no school district tax funds were expended on this project.

A huge thank you to Dr. David Argo, Christ Hospital, and Green Township for providing a safe and attractive field for our student-athletes and for our community!



Aerial view of new turf field at Oak Hills High School.

Early Notice: Staggered Start for the 2023-24 School Year

Start of 2023-24 School Year	
First day of school:	Students whose last name begins with:
August 17	A – L
August 18	M – Z
August 21	All students attend together

OHLSD will again begin the school year with a staggered start to give staff time to connect with smaller groups of students, and to review procedures and essential information.

Here is the schedule:

- Students whose last name begins with A – L will have their first day of school on Thursday, August 17, and then remain at home on Friday, August 18.
- Students whose last name begins with M – Z will remain at home on Thursday, August 17, and have their first day of school on Friday, August 18.
- All students will attend together on Monday, August 21.

A Sampling of Recent Honors & Special Events



OHHS senior Madeline Seibert named a National Merit Finalist.



2023 One Hope, One Heart fundraiser raised \$20,000 for local families experiencing hardship.



138 OHHS seniors earned Highest Honors.



Congratulations to the 2023 OHLSD 'T' in PTA Award Winners
OHLSD 'T in PTA' Award winners: Bryan Berwanger, Bridget Dignan-Cummins, Lina Jansen, Mary Rose Lierman, Caitlyn Schlimm, Carrie Sexton, Jennifer Smith, Darlene Townsley and Vanessa Wellendorf.



OHHS senior Kosta Brunson named to All-State Jazz Band.



OHHS all-state band Matthew Watson.



OHHS junior Matthew Watson named to All-State Band Photo: OHHS student-athletes qualifying or placing in state-level competition: Wyatt Ferguson, Bri Graves, Lexi Grant, Petal Sloan, Presley Pennekamp, Noah Asman, Donny Grote, Eva Hensley, Alyssa Hammond, Morgan Lint. GMC Coaches of the Year Kevin Spraul and Justin Roden.



C.O. Harrison Elementary psychologist Amy McNabb named Hamilton County's Celebrate Excellence honoree for OHLSD.



OHHS senior Brookelynn Webster received the Student of the Month Award and Scholarship from the Western Hills Exchange Club.



Springmyer Elementary fifth grader Addisen Dobbins named the 2023 Outstanding School Safety Patroller in the Tristate by AAA.



C.O. Harrison Elementary intervention specialist Kathy Herrmann named Local 12 Educator of the Week.



Oakdale Elementary hosted the widely popular Fairy Tale Ball.

#OHBetterTogether

Strategic Plan: Articulating Oak Hills' Future Success

One of the significant ways OHLSD moved forward this year was the adoption of a new Strategic Plan, which will guide the district's efforts for the next three years. Begun in 2019, paused by the pandemic, and completed in 2022, the Strategic Plan was researched and created by more than 40 community members, parents, students, staff members, and local business leaders.

Its four pillars — student learning, school culture, OHLSD as a destination district, and financial stability — are educationally sound and fundamental to the student experience. Each pillar evolved into a clearly stated goal, and then into measures of success, which will be used to evaluate the district's progress on the goals.



For Your Calendar: Ohio Tax-Free Weekend 2023

No Sales Tax

Friday — **Sunday**
AUG 5 — **AUG 6**



**\$75 or less
per item**



**\$20 or less
per item**



**\$20 or less
per item**

From Friday, August 4, through Sunday, August 6, the state of Ohio will charge no sales tax on these items:

- An item of clothing priced at \$75 or less
- School supplies priced at \$20 per item or less
- School instructional material priced at \$20 per item or less