



**OKALOOSA COUNTY
SCHOOL DISTRICT**

Contact: 850-833-3100

www.okaloosaschools.com

FROM THE DESK OF THE SUPERINTENDENT

State of Okaloosa County Schools

To say the last 11 months have been a challenge for the Okaloosa County School District would be an understatement. When March of 2020 arrived, we were preparing for a smooth end to the school year and planning for the upcoming year. Little did we know at the time that our world and way of normalcy was about to change in ways we never imagined. As educators, we find meaning in the time we spend with students, colleagues, and families and the relationships we foster in an effort to influence and shape the future of our most precious resource... our students. Never could we have known the resiliency we would all need in order to do the hard work necessary to keep our schools running during a pandemic.

As a school district, we have experienced education from a different lens which has taught us all many valuable lessons. I cannot recall how many times I have emphasized with others that, "this is really hard." The last semester has been tough on all of us, plain and simple. While our students have missed out on experiences that they would have remembered for a lifetime, our employees have worked countless hours to create solutions for problems never before encountered. But these perplexing times have also brought out the best in our "OCSD Family." Our teachers have learned to instruct and communicate with students and families in new ways while simultaneously learning how to keep students engaged and motivated during a pandemic. Our bus drivers and front office secretaries have worked to bring a sense of calm to the lives of students and families who may be struggling. Coaches, band directors, choral directors and drama teachers have guided their athletes and students under protocols that have made it extremely difficult to compete or perform; yet, they have succeeded.

The employees, students and families of the Okaloosa County School District are true heroes who have risen to the challenge to perform the "impossible" during our most difficult hour. In the midst of a pandemic, we have persevered and continued

the vital tasks of running a school district and educating students. I would like to report to our parents and the citizens of Okaloosa County where we are as a school district in some critical areas that impact our students and employees.

The first critical area in our school district is **COVID**. I am proud to report that our school district has implemented multiple COVID safety measures and continues to provide families the choice of attending school online or inside the school building. As we begin the second semester, we are pleased to report that 88% of our students overall are attending classes within our school buildings. That number has grown throughout the fall. On site safety measures include daily temperature checks, routine and regular hand washing, habitual disinfecting, desk barriers, reconfigured cafeterias and classrooms, new hallway patterns, nightly cleaning protocols, mandatory masks on school buses, block schedules, and the strong recommendation of masks in the school building where social distancing cannot be maintained, to name a few. In our middle and high schools, we have developed safety measures for our athletic and extra-curricular programs. Our coaches, band and choral directors, and drama teachers have completely revamped their programs in order to provide our students the opportunity to participate safely in the activities they love. Due to these protocols and efforts of our teachers, support professionals and administrators, the number of positive cases in our school district has been low. From September 6, 2020, through January 23, 2021 only 2.9% of students in Okaloosa Schools have tested positive, which means that 97.1% of our students are COVID free. In comparison, it may interest you to know that among all citizens in our county, approximately 8% have tested positive for COVID to date. We have by no means been perfect, but I am truly grateful for all the work being done by our employees to limit COVID cases within our schools.

The disruptions and uncertainty caused by COVID have led parents and teachers to ask about the status of Statewide Assessments scheduled for this spring. Will students be taking them? Will the results be used for student promotion or graduation, teacher evaluations and/or school grades? To date, all 67 school districts in Florida are still preparing for students to take the **Florida Standards Assessment (FSA) and End of Course Exams (EOCs)**. However, I have lobbied with Superintendents from across the state to hold students, teachers and schools harmless from these exams for this year and have recommended that they be used for strictly diagnostic purposes. This approach would not only acknowledge the education disruption experienced by students and teachers during the pandemic, but it would also allow the results to be used to formatively guide state and district leaders in bridging the achievement gap exacerbated by the pandemic.

Another important area impacting our school district occurred on November 3rd, when you, the citizens of Okaloosa County, voted to approve a **half-cent sales tax** to address our aging school buildings. As many of you know, Okaloosa has some of the oldest school buildings in the state with 61% of our schools being 50 years of age or older. From the bottom of my heart, I cannot thank our local Chambers of Commerce and all of Okaloosa County voters enough for your trust and support in helping us address the crucial updates and fixes needed within our schools... Now, the real work begins! To help with this work, our School Board recently appointed a Citizens Oversight Committee, comprised of community leaders who will be tasked with ensuring that we spend these sales tax dollars as promised. We are finalizing the timeline during which all of the projects on our list will be completed. I would like to thank the Chambers of Commerce for their support and input on this Committee.

In the first year of the Sales Tax Program, families can expect to see several important projects underway throughout the school district. Keep in mind that proceeds received by the district are spread out over the 10-year duration of the sales tax. Because of this, projects are spaced out over time as well.

Projects included in the 2021 and 2022 calendar years include:

- Finishing important safety projects at all schools such as Single Point of Entry and perimeter fencing
- Replacing roofs that are in the worst condition
- Adding cafeteriums at several elementary schools where the student population has surpassed the capacity of the current cafeteria.
- Starting the planning process for Multi-Purpose Buildings at our High Schools

The passage of the half cent sales tax will also afford our school district the ability to maximize our annual Capital Budget, which is separate from the half-cent funds. Within our Capital Budget, during 2021 and 2022, we will:

- Purchase 40 new air-conditioned school buses, which begins the process of replacing the oldest bus fleet in the state.
- Repair and replace air conditioning systems
- Repair and replace sewer lines
- Begin the planning process for new school construction

I have long said how proud I am of the Okaloosa School District and have touted the fact that we are a top performing district academically- in spite of our aging buildings and infrastructure! We have earned this impressive distinction due to the steadfast

work of our amazing teachers, support professionals and administrators; add in our incredible students and families who value education, athletics and the arts and it is easy to see why once again the Okaloosa County School District has earned the distinction of being named a **Highly Performing School District** by the Florida Department of Education! Over the last eleven years, only one school district in the state (Nassau) earned this distinction more times than Okaloosa. To earn High Performing status, a school district must earn an “A” for two consecutive years, have no district-operated schools earning an “F”, maintain all class size requirements, and have no instances of material weakness or noncompliance noted in their annual financial audit. I am proud of everyone who worked hard to achieve this recognition.

A top priority of mine over the last two years has been strengthening our **Exceptional Student Education (ESE)** Program. Though we are still working to provide our students and ESE teachers with the best educational services and resources possible, much has been accomplished. We have placed a strong emphasis on professional development for our teachers and assistants in order to equip them with the necessary skills and strategies to positively impact their students. Skills concentrating on positive behavior interventions, de-escalation techniques, multi-sensory training, social emotional learning, IEP Compliance Training, IEP Transition Training, Supporting ESE Teams, Autism Navigator for Classroom Success and much more, have helped to give students and teachers exactly what they need.

Last year, we reduced district level spending by over \$1,000,000 to fund high-student-contact positions in ESE including ESE Teachers, Staffing Specialists, School Psychologists, Social Workers, and Behavior Analysts. Going forward, our commitment will be to continue to push funding and resources closer to the students. We were also able to hire an ESE Parent Liaison as a much-needed resource for families. Finally, we implemented a Parent Advisory Group as a means to gain input and insight directly from parents. We are unbelievably blessed to have phenomenal teachers and educational support personnel who work tirelessly for our ESE students and families. As we move forward, my mission will be to provide them with the tools, resources, and training they need to continue to do their jobs most effectively.

Another critical area within our school district is **Career and Technical Education (CTE)**. By the year 2030, Governor DeSantis’ goal is for Florida to be #1 in the nation in the area of Career and Technical Education (CTE). In Okaloosa, our goal is to become a model for the state in CTE, beginning with our elementary programs. We want to be a school district that provides our students with pathways towards careers and college, and we believe that starts in elementary school. Skills

such as Coding can start at the elementary level and build into the CTE Programs offered in our middle and high schools. This year, in every single elementary school, we implemented the Kids Code program. Kids Code provides our students with a head start in coding by actively engaging them through hands-on-play. Using the littleBits® Coding Kit, students manipulate physical blocks for input, outputs, motors, and sensors. Our goal is to inspire this generation to pursue careers in STEM, and Kids Code does just that by providing a pipeline from elementary to the workforce. In Okaloosa, we have a robust CTE Program which allows students to earn high school credit, college credit, and industry certifications. CTE courses offer students the ability to gain specific, practical and professional skills that can mean the difference on a college application or the fast-track into a first job. We are proud to offer a wide array of CTE courses geared towards supporting our local industry. Programs such as Cyber Security, Carpentry, Welding, Culinary, Web Design, HVAC, Automotive and Engineering are giving our students invaluable experiences that will not only provide them with a solid education, but also opportunities for future employment.

Ultimately, I am optimistic about the upcoming months and years in our school district as we continue to improve while ushering in The Next Generation of Okaloosa County Schools. While we have had many challenges come our way in the last 11 months, it has certainly proved to all of us just how strong we are. A year ago, nobody knew what PPE was or what teaching online as a primary modality would mean. As I look across this district and see teachers rising to the challenge and engaging students in learning- both online and in person- I am reminded of how resilient we are. While the work we have been doing is hard and has challenged all of us, there is not a group of people with whom I would rather be challenged. Each of you as parents, students, teachers, staff, and administrators, continue to show up and prove why we are one of the top performing districts in this state... and for that, I am grateful!