

**Susan Miller Speech on Closing 16 Schools
As Delivered
Jeffco Board Meeting
10 November 2022**

I know all of us on this Board may not always agree on everything, but I think all of us did not run to find ourselves dealing with the challenge before us.

I also want to think all of you who met with me, as well as attended community meetings.

When faced with a crisis, people need to hear two things: Truth and Hope.

Let's start with some painful truths about the mess we're in.

Jeffco is in the middle of a rapidly worsening financial crisis, with continued enrollment declines reducing revenue, and COVID federal aid that ends in 2024.

And even as our enrollment was declining, according to JCEA's presentation to the Board last spring, we continued to increase our enrollment levels.

Further, despite falling revenue, our costs are significantly higher. While every organization wants to compensate their employees fairly, the reality is that depending on the circumstances, not all can increase pay without triggering a financial crisis.

When this board approved a \$67 million increase in employee compensation this year (that will continue to increase in future budget cycle), we brought our salaries into line with our surrounding communities, but at a cost that tonight we have to face.

This year the district is projected to run a \$34 million deficit in our General Fund, and an overall deficit spend across all funds of more than \$40 million. The general fund deficit spend alone is projected to total \$130 million dollars over the next three years, if we do nothing.

When a district begins to draw on reserves, State law required school districts to prepare a plan to eliminate their budget deficit. Hope is not a plan.

We must develop a comprehensive plan to not only move away from a deficit spend, but build back to a stronger fiscal position. Closing schools is just one part of that plan. But that alone won't come close to closing a \$40 million dollar plus gap.

Staff reduction to serve a smaller student population will almost certainly be needed.

So how did we get here?

For the past decade, Jeffco management and boards have kept small schools open by cutting their arts, music, and PhysEd classes, and forcing teachers to teach multiple grades in the same classroom with stretched resources.

We also moved vulnerable populations into smaller schools to help improve enrollment numbers, without a thoughtful pathway for where these children would be served after they left their elementary school.

When Jeffco did acknowledge the enrollment challenge, we acted without forethought.

One example is the closing of Pleasant View Elementary School in 2017. When the Board closed that Title 1 school, the district sent the children to Shelton and Welchester – both non-Title 1 schools. The Title 1 supports did not follow the children and that negatively impacted those children and the communities that welcomed them into the fold.

The same year, we tried to address the declining utilization of our middle schools, by moving sixth graders to middle schools for the 2018/19 school year. We hoped that we would shore up our elementary schools with pre-school students. But that didn't happen.

Further, during that time, Jeffco continued to add staff and increase compensation, while we experienced declining academic results and falling student enrollment in district-run neighborhood schools.

As many of you are now aware, our neighborhood schools lost over 11,000 students over the last decade.

Our predecessors refused to deal with this growing crisis, and kept kicking the can down the road.

As I said in August, we have now run out of road.

It has thus fallen upon this management team and this Board to finally act with a long-overdue sense of urgency to resolve the many challenges facing the district, so that we may better serve our children.

Unfortunately, the need for us to act urgently has made a lot of people angry, and reduced their trust in Jeffco and its leaders.

Tonight's vote won't solve the crisis we face. But it is a necessary and unavoidable part of the solution.

We still must help many children transition to new schools, some of which will be using different curriculum.

We must manage the transition of critical special education and other programs to new schools.

To close our budget deficit, we have to make hard decisions about staff cuts and what to do with 16 closed schools.

And starting in January we must begin to look beyond this year and look to a 3-5 year plan that incorporates secondary schools, pathways in articulation areas, and management of our fixed assets.

Above all we have to find the money we need to pay for initiatives to recover our children's COVID learning losses and substantially improve their academic results.

Because that is why this district exists: To educate our children.

In an affluent, educated suburb like Jeffco, having 70% of 6th graders fail to meet state proficiency standards in math is totally unacceptable, and is setting them up to fail in the 21st century economy. We owe them a better future than that.

So where's the hope?

Turning around a \$1.4 billion organization like Jeffco is an immense challenge, and our vote tonight is just one of many steps we will have to take in a long, hard process.

But now that many more people in our county, our state, and indeed our nation understand the breadth and depth of the multiple crises Jeffco is facing, they're going to be paying much closer attention to what's going on our district, and asking a lot more tough questions about how we're spending over a billion dollars a year that taxpayers have trusted us to use wisely.

The public is going to demand improvements in our process for deciding on school closures. They want it done with them, not to them.

The public is going to demand to be fully involved in deciding what to do with the closed schools in their neighborhoods -- schools that the district has spent millions of bond money upgrading.

The public is going to demand more urgency from Jeffco in substantially improving our children's academic results, and reversing the decline in district enrollment and revenue. We need to stabilize our deteriorating situation.

The public is going to demand we do better for our most vulnerable students, our children of color that are impacted by these proposed closures. The reality is that we as a Board can no longer turn our backs on these students, and provide them with less-than-ideal learning experiences.

We as a Board must have the courage to say, "No More." All children deserve better.

Above all, my reason to be hopeful tonight is that the citizens of Jefferson County are never going to forget that thriving schools aren't an end in themselves.

They are a means to achieve our fundamental purpose: Graduating academically proficient young adults who will thrive in the 21st century economy.

For more than a decade we did not stay laser focused on our most important role, ensuring that all Jeffco children have access to high quality and rich academic programming. That is our job.

I hope that we as Jeffco never again lose that focus.

Thank you.