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As we near the close of the 2021-22 school year, I have been reflecting not only on this year but also on my seven-year career at Prior Lake-Savage Area Schools (PLSAS) that has been filled with meaningful relationships, wonderful accomplishments and complex challenges. Throughout it all, I have been proud to serve the students and families of this community.

In my final column as Superintendent, I want you to know how thankful I am for the students, staff, School Board members, families, service organizations, local government leaders and community members who place such high importance on public education and who have supported me in my service to our students.

From referenda and construction, to attendance boundary changes and a global pandemic, a lot has happened over the last seven years. When I first came to PLSAS, I spent time listening to stakeholders to learn what was going well, along with the challenges that lay ahead. I remember parents listed staff as one of the strongest assets in our district, which remains true today.

Parents and staff also favored the variety of opportunities available to students in our district such as: La ola del lago, SAGE, E-STEM, Post Secondary Enrollment Options and Environmental Education curriculum. Since then, we have added Laker Online and Minnesota Center for Advanced Professional Studies (MNCAPS). The MNCAPS has been a highly successful program that prepares students for careers by teaching academic content through the lens of a specific professional field. Juniors and seniors are offered multiple pathways to pursue potential career interests including business, healthcare, education and our latest pathway: the trades construction industry.

In 2017, our district was facing a serious space crunch. Most of our schools were either at or over capacity and we needed additional staff for our growing student enrollment. Thanks to our community, voters approved bond funds and an operating levy. Over the next two years we engaged in an aggressive construction schedule that resulted in the new Bridges Area Learning Center, Hamilton Ridge Elementary, along with additions and renovations to nearly every building in the district.

In 2018 more than 125 school and community members came together to review and update the district's most important document, our Strategic Plan. Students, parents, staff and community members worked to describe the experiences they would like to have in our schools in the coming years. These descriptions were ultimately used to make adjustments to our district goals and were centered around increasing measurable student learning and reducing achievement gaps, fiscal accountability through operational excellence, expanding innovation to improve the learner experience, integrating an E-STEM focus across the district, providing a safe, secure and supportive environment that nurtures the social and emotional well-being of all learners and engaging students, parents, families and community to strengthen a culture of respect and inclusion. This is our continued commitment to our community.

Ensuring our schools are as safe as possible was - and still is - important to us all. I am proud to say PLSAS has been very proactive and is a leader in school safety. In 2019, we implemented a Standard Reunification Procedure to help parents and students safely reunite in the event of an emergency. We also implemented a new lockdown practice called Lockdown with Options, updated our district Crisis Management Plan to ensure it meets best practice and we have district and building crisis response teams that regularly review and practice safety protocols. We also installed a visitor management system to control access to our schools and provide enhanced protection for our students, staff and visitors. In addition to ensuring the physical safety of our students, we have prioritized social and emotional learning as we work to ensure inclusive and positive learning environments in our schools.

As an educational leader, I have always been committed to equity: ensuring all students receive the resources and support they need so they recognize their brilliance and graduate prepared for success after high school. In December of 2020, the School Board approved an Equity and Inclusion Resolution, created in collaboration with stakeholders. This was a clear and public statement that the Board not only supports this work, they expect it.

We know there are many supports needed to assist students as we recover from the pandemic and we will continue to grow in response to incidents of racial harm. It will take all of us working together to bring the positive changes needed to continue to ensure we have safe learning environments for all of our students. Collectively, PLSAS staff have worked hard towards supporting the needs of students, closing achievement gaps, implementing culturally responsive teaching strategies, engaging with families and receiving professional development. We have focused on serving the social and emotional needs of students and have empowered student voices, all to ensure our students have what they need to be successful; each student feels a sense of belonging and all students and staff are respected and valued.

It has been my honor to work with dedicated teams and School Boards who have helped me lead through shared leadership and stakeholder engagement. Our team of almost 1,300 PLSAS employees has inspired me to be my best each day and collectively we have accomplished amazing things for our students. I am proud of them and the work we have done together.

I have loved my 33 years in public education because it is where I have been able to live my purpose, inspire change, empower others and find great joy. While I am moving on to a career in the private sector, I am so grateful to have been on this journey with PLSAS and I treasure the relationships I have made throughout the past seven years here. I will take all I have learned from the experiences and the people at PLSAS as I continue to serve school districts in my new role.

On May 9th, the School Board made a very important decision in hiring Dr. Michael Thomas as the next Superintendent of PLSAS. I know that great things will happen in PLSAS under his leadership and that our district will continue to educate all learners to reach their full potential as contributing and productive members of our ever-changing global community. Please join me in welcoming Dr. Thomas to PLSAS and thank you for your continued support of public education.