



Mixed bag of issues discussed at education forum

*By JoAnn Knutson
09/12/2006*

BRIGHTON — Standardized graduation rates and grappling with growth were among the topics discussed during a Sept. 5 forum featuring Colorado State Board of Education representatives.

Sponsoring the forum, held at School District 27J's Harshbarger Educational Services Center, were Jared Polis, vice-chairman of the Colorado State Board of Education and Karen Middleton, Colorado State Board of Education 7th Congressional District representative.

Consolidation of accountability system

The state has three accountability systems. The No Child Left Behind federal law, the school accountability requirements and the state accreditation system. While it's cumbersome for school districts to deal with all three, consolidation is not an option because the No Child Left Behind Act is a federal law and can't be changed. Polis said he feels there is value in the other two programs at the state level.

Standardized graduation rates

Until recently, the state did not have a standardized formula to determine graduation rates for high schools. The graduation rate is the percentage of students who graduate high school, based on the number of students coming into the school as freshmen. Each school district had used their own formula to factor in variables such as dropouts, transfers and students who leave school to work but complete their GED. Using a standardized method will help determine a more accurate number for the individualized districts and statewide.

Finding other options

While School District 27J struggles to keep up with the growth, Polis said there are actually more school districts in the state with declining student populations. Both struggle with federally mandated programs that include very little or no federal funding to help support them.

Middleton said there are some options available such as redirecting lottery funds for a period of five years. She said the schools receive some lottery fund spillover that is used for capital construction but it's not enough to make a real impact.

Doing property assessments annually instead of every other year is another option.

"It really comes down to what we are willing to live with," Middleton said.

District 27J's per-pupil funding is \$6,135, below the state average of \$7,942.

CSAPs

The Colorado Student Assessment Program is a specialized form of testing. Middleton said the problem is that it is not backed up with any specialized support programs or the funding to pay for the programs.

"If we're going to test students this much, we need the support to find solutions," she said.

Polis said another problem with CSAPs is that the arts and music and other programs not tested in CSAPs are being cut in some school districts to focus more time and money on the areas that are tested. He said the state board has tried to head it off by pointing out ways the arts are related to the subjects tested.

Amendment 39 and Referendum J

Both items will be on the Nov. 7 ballot and both would require school districts to spend at least 65 percent of its operating budget on teachers, classroom aides and tutors, libraries and librarians, books and other instructional materials, classroom computers, field trips, athletics, arts and music. Referendum J would also include principals, support staff and services for guidance counseling, health services, transportation, and food services.

Source: http://www.metrowestfyi.com/story_display.php?sid=4533