



## **Funding needs discussed at state education forum**

*By JoAnn Knutson  
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Finding money for capital construction projects and support programs to improve classroom achievement headed the list of topics discussed during a Sept. 19 education forum in Commerce City with representatives from the Colorado Department of Education.

Sponsoring the forum, held at the Adams City High School cafeteria, were Jared Polis, vice-chairman of the Colorado State Board of Education and Karen Middleton, Colorado State Board of Education 7th Congressional District representative.

### **Capital construction**

School districts across the state are grappling with \$7 billion to \$10 billion in capital construction needs to keep pace with student growth and aging buildings.

"This school year we have 14,000 more students in our school districts (statewide) than we did a year ago," Middleton said. "It's not enough to rely on the mill levy and bond issues to meet construction needs. The state has to do more."

### **CSAPs**

The Colorado Student Assessment Program was enacted by Governor Bill Owens to improve classroom performance. The tests are designed to track achievement and show areas where improved teaching and curriculum are needed. Schools not showing improvement can be penalized. The state pays for the testing but not for programs to improve achievement.

"I think the state needs to do more," Middleton said. "You can't mandate achievement and not provide the money to pay for the programs those students need."

She said Owens has made it clear he will veto any changes to CSAP, but she anticipates gradual changes to the law after his term ends this year.

"I think we will see significant changes in CSAP and No Child Left Behind with the leaderships changes coming up," she said. "I would never want to jeopardize our funding, but there will be some flexibility with a new governor and president."

Middleton said improving academic achievement doesn't begin and end in the classroom. It takes the support of the entire school from the administrative staff to the custodians and bus drivers. It's important to recognize everyone who is a part of the solution. District 14 has received special recognition two straight years for making significant improvement.

Middleton also talked about some of the creative things District 14 has done to improve CSAP scores, such as bringing in two qualified teachers from Mexico who understand the Hispanic culture and can relate better to the Hispanic students.

### **Math and science scores**

John Lange, superintendent of schools for School District 14, talked about the need for money to provide extra help in math and science and to recruit good math and science teachers.

Polis said it is a need the state is aware of but funding to help improve math and science scores was lost in the financial crunch a few years ago. At the national level there is a House bill proposed to offer additional incentives for improvements in math, science and engineering.

## **Communication between schools**

With all school districts struggling with budget issues, Middleton said it is important that the traditional public schools and charter schools work together.

"Sometimes it's just a lack of communication and the need to understand each other better," Middleton said.

School Board President Jeannette Lewis talked about the cooperation between District 27J and the charter schools to get a new elementary charter school built. Pending approval of the charter application, the school district is donating land for the school site in the Reunion area.

"When you work together it can increase the votes for a bond issue," Lewis said.

## **Referendum J and Amendment 39**

Referendum J and Amendment 39 will be presented to voters in November. Both require school districts to spend at least 65 percent of the 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 goes further to include principals, support staff and services for guidance counseling, health services, transportation and food services, student testing and college placement services.

Polis and Middleton say they do not support either proposal. It would create more bookwork and neither proposal takes into account the differences in school districts, namely in support services and transportation. Amendment 39 does not include transportation in the 65-percent requirement, Polis noted.

"One size does not fit all here," Polis said. "If you really feel you need to vote for one, Referendum J is the better of the two."

## **Electronic learning centers**

New learning centers offering online computer classes are cropping up. The centers that offer online classes in place of the traditional classroom education programs are creating concerns because they qualify for the per pupil state funding formula but are not accountable to the school board governing the district in which they are operating. The problem is further complicated by the fact that they could have students from other school districts as well since all curriculum is taught online.

"They are attracting students and taking funds but they're not accountable to the district so the district has no control," Lange said.

Polis said the state board is aware of a growing problem with the online programs and will be taking a close look at how to address the accountability issues.

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