

Rural education challenges addressed by Colorado panel

Written by Brenda Johnson Brandt

Community leaders from around the state were given the opportunity to more fully understand the challenges facing rural Colorado public schools at “The Rural Education Challenge” forum at the School District 27J Training Center in Brighton last Thursday, May 31.

Supt. Bret Miles, three school board members and five other Holyoke community members made a strong representation for this community at the informative program.

Miles was one of seven panelists in the program hosted by the Colorado Association of School Boards (CASB) and Colorado Board of Cooperative Education Services (BOCES) Association.

Additional sponsors of the panel discussion and forum were Colorado Association of School Executives (CASE) and the Colorado Rural Schools Caucus.

A video of the session was scheduled to be available this week and will be posted as a link on the Holyoke School District website, <http://holyoke.schoolfusion.us>.

Panel participants included veteran rural educators from throughout the state, with former CASE executive director John Hefty serving as moderator.

Effects of school finance cuts on teacher/teaching, curriculum, the student and setting were addressed by the panel in the initial question.

Miles cited the reduction of staff in Holyoke, which is most evident in larger class sizes or fewer offerings of classes.

He noted staff sees the same things to accomplish, but the responsibility is divided among fewer people.

The Campo School District superintendent addressed the tough spot their district of 75 students is in. Miles said she talked about staff members doing lots of things that are really out of their

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areas of expertise.

The so-called “negative factor” impact was a panelist topic last week. This relates to the gap between what the Amendment 23 formula requires and what is actually received by school districts.

Amendment 23 was a constitutional change passed in 2000 to reverse a decade of budget cuts experienced by Colorado school districts throughout the 1990s. Amendment 23 requires K-12 funding to increase by inflation plus one percent from 2001-2011 and by inflation after that.

Unfortunately, because of the economic downturn and Colorado’s resulting budget crisis, Amendment 23 was not fully implemented through 2011. “The Rural Education Challenge” forum indicated the negative factor for 2012-13 will be \$1.1 billion.

While headlines indicate flat funding for schools, Supt. Miles said Holyoke Re-1J is looking at a reduction.

He explained per-pupil funding starts with a base, then involves a seven-page-long formula for adjustments. For 2012-13, Holyoke ends up with about \$11,000 less, using the same pupil count. Additionally, Title I federal funds are back about \$11,000 for this district.

Effects of three relatively new laws involving major reforms for Colorado schools were explained by panelists.

They include SB 163, a 2009 law that strengthened accountability requirements for schools; SB 191, the new educator evaluation law passed in 2010; and SB 212, Colorado’s Achievement Plan for Kids (CAP4K), signed into law in 2008.

CAP4K was designed to create a truly aligned preschool to postsecondary educational system. It was to establish new standards and new assessments that enable all students to graduate

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from high school with the skills and knowledge to succeed in today's 21st century, ultra-competitive global economy.

Miles acknowledged these are three potentially good laws. However, all three are at a standstill because of resource issues.

Ideally, all of CAP4K should have been done, then the accountability and teacher evaluation pieces added, said Miles. In the political process, all passed on top of each other.

Miles said he's not sure how they'll train every teacher/principal in a one-year period on a new evaluation process that's to be implemented for principals next year and for teachers the year after that.

He added this truly is not the Dept. of Education's fault, as funding is not available. For instance, he cited the new education effectiveness department was run completely on grants, gifts and donations.

The superintendent from Center talked about his turn-around district showing good growth in CSAP scores. However, he said they're doing that with a big grant and don't know what will happen to scores after the grant is gone.

Panelists included five superintendents: Miles of Holyoke, Tom Arensdorf of Arriba-Flagler, Nikki Johnson of Campo, Joe Petrone of Moffat County in Craig and George Welsh of Center.

Also serving on the panel were Randy Boyer, executive director of San Juan BOCES; and Colorado Dept. of Education Commissioner Robert Hammond, who provided a state perspective in a video interview as he was called out of state at the time of the forum.

Holyoke School Board members Jeff Tharp, Dennis Herman and Linda Jelden attended the forum and were pleased to have the largest representation of people who are not part of the

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school.

This included Tom Bennett and Jay Knutson, serving on the budget and finance committee; Tiffany Watson, Standard of Excellence team; Cecilia Marquez; and Jessica Johnson, District Accountability Advisory Committee.

Miles said his recommendation as a follow-up to Thursday's forum is to do more of that type of informational session where they keep telling real stories to inform the public.

Watson came away from the forum with a better feeling about Holyoke's situation, realizing there are other districts in much worse shape. However, it's important for Holyoke to realize the financial situation the local schools are facing.

She said the most critical piece now is for communities to rally around the schools and invest in the kids—to determine their role to help schools.

Getting the word out is extremely significant, according to Watson.

Holyoke's School Board appreciates community members who give their time for committees and for attending forums such as the one last week in Brighton in order to be better informed.

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