

WEA's Comments Regarding Joint Education Committee Subcommittee on Education Deficit Reduction – Wyoming K-12 Education Funding Deficit White Paper

WEA would first like to express appreciation to the members of the Committee for their willingness to tackle these very difficult issues, and for having begun the opening up of a dialog about solutions. We recognize what a very difficult challenge is before the Committee. WEA appreciates the opportunity to provide its comments.

While WEA appreciates this opportunity to comment, the issues are too complex and the time too short for the Legislature to obtain proper input on these critical matters. Any one of the items listed in the White Paper could be the subject of extensive discussion. Collectively, it is almost impossible in this kind of comment to discuss the pros and cons of the list of items in the report. Moreover, given that the comment time has fallen during the holidays, few citizens are likely to be aware or provide public input.

Clearly economic developments beyond the control of the State have thrust this problem upon all of us. Whether it has been wise to depend so heavily for so long on mineral revenue to fund public schools, or whether it was wise to divert funds from public school accounts to other items in the past was wise, it is clear the problem is real. The need to find reliable funding mechanisms is very evident. Finding the right revenue streams and making any appropriate fine tuning to the finance system are major undertakings.

While revenues have declined creating this serious problem, failing to fund public schools at a level that will produce quality education for every child is not an option. The White Paper observes: "The Wyoming Supreme Court has required that the system of public education in Wyoming to be complete, uniform, adequate, thorough, and efficient. Additionally, the Court has required the funding for education to be the Legislature's paramount priority whereas competing budgetary priorities not of a constitutional magnitude are secondary." We agree with the White Paper. Not only is there a legal obligation, but as a matter of public policy quality education is vital to the quality of life and the economic future of Wyoming. Maintaining funding is not just the legal thing to do, it is the right thing to do for Wyoming's citizens and their future.

It is important to remember that the current funding system was developed painstakingly over more than a decade by the Legislature with massive input and discussion. It was approved by the Supreme Court as meeting constitutional mandates. Just as importantly, it works. Real educational progress is occurring. The public schools enjoy strong public support. It is essential to resist the temptation to jump on any quick-fix, arbitrary solution. It would be a critical mistake to attempt to remodel or make any major revisions to the finance formula without full study and the support of the public.

We learned by sad experience that when cuts are made, programs are lost, many of the best educators go elsewhere and it takes a decade to recover. Kids who are in school can't wait for better times to get a quality education. Even what appear as minor changes to the funding

system can have major unforeseen consequences due to the interrelationship of model components. What might seem like small cuts will undermine the validity of the model.

The history of school finance legislation is that both the formula and the issues related to the formula are complicated, often coming with unforeseen consequences when changes are made without careful study and thorough public vetting. It is essential to understand the practical impact of changes on the schools from changes in the formula or its funding level.

There is not sufficient time to develop the kind of comprehensive plan required to address the shortfalls in future years. There is not sufficient time to educate the public about the problem, and marshal public support behind solutions proposed. Furthermore, as a practical matter, there is very little time between the end of the legislature and the statutory and policy deadlines for school districts to make personnel decisions for the next year. If significant changes are made to 2017-18 school funding this session, many districts would be put into a kind of educational and financial chaos. School districts would be scrambling without adequate time to carefully evaluate what programs or services would be cut, the personnel involved and provide notices within mandatory timelines.

The discussion of the shortfall has focused too much on the total gross dollars projected for multiple years ahead, rather than seeing the issue as it is – a series of funding adjustments to be made incrementally. If the problem is broken into its component pieces rather than attempting to address the entire shortfall instantly for all future years at once, it becomes more manageable.

WEA recommends:

1. That the Legislature fund public schools at the current level with the current model for one more year.
2. That the Legislature create a framework for study, research, and dialog regarding the finance system and finding reliable revenue streams to support it.
3. That extensive opportunities be provided for input from both the educational community and the public with ample opportunity for input and hearings in all the major regions of the state.
4. That when decisions are made, any alteration of the formula or change in the level of funding be timed so that school districts have ample opportunity to implement plans to adapt to changes.