

6/30/2020

Hello Sublette County, this is Albert Sommers reporting to you on interim activities of legislative committees that I serve on. I am currently chairman of the Broadband Task Force and co-chairman of the Select Committee on School Finance Recalibration. The state faces significant challenges right now regarding quality broadband access and K12 school funding.

The Broadband Task Force was created by the Legislature's Management Council to push for rapid expansion of broadband services in Wyoming. In March 2020, the online resource Broadband Now ranked Wyoming among the ten worst states in the nation, based upon a rating system that included internet coverage, speed, and price. The COVID pandemic has demonstrated society's need for fast, reliable, and affordable internet service, because education, health service, shopping, and jobs have moved online. The pandemic simply sped up an already existing trend to move societal functions to the internet. When the Broadband Task Force met on June 8 and 16, it developed a recommendation to the Governor to establish a temporary program to rapidly expand broadband internet access to Wyoming residents.

Congress granted the State of Wyoming \$1.25 billion in CARES Act funding for necessary expenditures incurred from the COVID public health emergency. The federal government provided further guidance that CARES Act dollars could be spent to establish telemedicine, to facilitate distance learning, and to improve telework capabilities for public employees, if related to the pandemic. The Broadband Task Force believes the Governor has the authority and federal dollars to make a significant impact on broadband service in Wyoming. The one caveat: the CARES Act requires the money to be expended by December 31, 2020. Time is of the essence. I am a strong supporter of establishing better broadband in Wyoming. It is essential that every Wyoming citizen have access to fast, reliable internet or Wyoming will be at a distinct disadvantage compared to other states.

On June 24 and 25, the Select Committee on School Finance Recalibration met virtually to discuss K12 school funding. The Wyoming Supreme Court has issued five decisions that define K12 school funding in Wyoming: the first in 1980 and the last in 2008. In the 2001 *Campbell II* decision, the Supreme Court noted that "much of this effort took place in an environment of tax

revenue shortfalls. However, as *Campbell* made so very clear, the constitution provides that education funding is a fundamental right of our citizens and 'lack of financial resources will not be an acceptable reason for failure to provide the best educational system.'" As the State of Wyoming stares down a \$500 million shortfall in education funding for the 21/22 biennium, that Supreme Court statement will be ever-present in our discussions on education funding.

The Supreme Court decisions required the Legislature to recalibrate the K12 funding model every five years to ensure that the model remains cost-based and provides an adequate and equitable education to every child in Wyoming. This is why we are now conducting a recalibration study. In order to determine what constitutes an adequate and equitable education, the Legislature hires school finance consultants to provide Wyoming with a K12 funding model. The June 24 and 25 meetings of the Select Committee on School Finance Recalibration were the first ones to occur this interim, so they were designed to provide a refresher course to legislators on the issues of school finance.

As mentioned above, the current K12 funding model is cost-based, which means each component of education is evaluated to see what it should cost. We will examine such items as class size, number of teachers per school, utility costs, tutors needed, education supplies, and many more. At our September meetings, the consultants will provide us with their first draft of the funding model update. I truly believe the Supreme Court ruled correctly when it declared education was a "fundamental right" for every child. Education can be the great equalizer among children from all economic levels, and it is essential we keep funding "proper instruction" as the Wyoming Constitution states in Article 7, Section 9.

We will be looking for efficiencies in education as we move through this process; ultimately it is the Legislature's decision on how much Wyoming spends on education. However, we shouldn't forget that it is the Supreme Court's job to decide if we are providing a constitutional education.

I can be reached at albert@albertsommers.com with questions or concerns.

Thank you.