

10/17/2022

Hello Sublette County and LaBarge, this is Albert Sommers reporting to you from the interim of the 66th Legislature. On October 10, I participated virtually in a meeting of the Joint Education Committee (JEC). In the morning, the committee heard presentations and discussed the issues of K-12 personnel retention and recruitment. In the afternoon, the Joint Education Committee met with the Joint Appropriations Committee (JAC) to hear reports from our education consultants on an External Cost Adjustment (ECA) for K-12 education.

Our first presentation about recruitment and retention of K-12 personnel was from Governor Gordon's Reimagining and Innovating the Delivery of Education (RIDE) Advisory Group. The RIDE Advisory group's primary goal is to elevate Wyoming's primary and secondary education system into a position of national leadership. RIDE chairman John Masters talked about three issues related to improving recruitment and retention: First, relieve pressure in the classroom by reducing the number of standards and standardized tests; second, increase mental health supports for teachers and students; third, focus education on early years, particularly early childhood education prior to kindergarten to reduce stress on teachers and students to improve reading in grades K-3. These are primarily tools for teacher retention. There was considerable discussion about creating new pathways to become a teacher, specifically through partnerships with the Professional Teaching Standards Boards. This would include opportunities to advance Wyoming paraprofessionals and substitute teachers to teachers.

The morning also included presentations by the Wyoming School Boards Association, the Superintendent of Natrona County School District #1, University of Wyoming's Mark Perkins, third-grade teacher Kimberly Amen, and the Wyoming Education Association. The takeaway I got from these presentations were that educators, particularly teachers, do not feel trusted and respected by legislators, parents, and society as a whole, which makes recruitment and retention of educators difficult. I find this societal shift disturbing, because teachers and public education are critical to the development of children and the advancement of society. These presenters also discussed the need to dial back the number of standards being taught, and the need for higher pay for teachers.

In the afternoon, the JEC and the JAC heard presentations by our LSO staff, our consultant Dr. Stoddard, and Trent Carroll of Wyoming Department of Education. The topic was the Monitoring Report for the K-12 funding model. The Legislature is mandated by statute to evaluate inflationary pressures on the K-12 funding model to determine if an External Cost Adjustment is warranted. This statutory requirement resulted from a Supreme Court decision that mandated the state look at inflation between those years when a full recalibration of the funding model is required. In the Monitoring Report developed by our staff, we examine the cost of education as developed by our consultants' Evidenced Based Model and compare that to the actual model the state uses to fund education, which is called the Legislative Model.

From 2006-2016, the Legislative Model was funding education at a higher level than our consultants recommended in their Evidenced Based Model. From 2017-2019, the Legislative Model and the consultants' model funded education at about the same level. However, from 2020 through projections for 2023, the consultants' model funds education at a higher level than the Legislative Model. By school year 2023-24, without the inclusion of an ECA, the Legislative Model is projected to be nearly \$91 million less than what our consultants recommended.

Dr. Stoddard evaluated the cost pressures on teacher salaries, and determined:

- According to National Education Association (NEA) and U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) data, **teaching salaries in Wyoming have remained flat over the past several years.** In adjacent states and the U.S. as a whole, the increase in teaching salaries has been larger, at 1- 2 percent per year.
- Wages in Wyoming are 10 percent higher than in adjacent states and North Dakota. Wyoming's advantage relative to the region has fallen in recent years relative to the high over the last 10 years of 21 percent. **Model salaries now lie 3 percent below the average salary in the region.**

Based upon the fact that our Legislative Model was nearly \$91 million less than what our consultants recommend, and our neighboring states have caught up with Wyoming teacher

salaries, I made a motion to recommend to the Joint Appropriations Committee to fully fund the ECA based upon our consultants' four recommended inflationary indices.

The four inflationary indices utilized to develop an ECA are: the Wyoming Comparable Wage Index for professional labor inflation; the High School Comparable Wage Index for non-professional labor inflation; a combination of the Producer Price Index for electric power, for natural gas, and for light fuel oils for energy inflation; and the Producer Price Index for office supplies and accessories for education materials inflation.

The energy category inflation index was the highest at 27.58 percent, followed by the education material index at 12.76 percent, the non-professional labor index at 5.38 percent, and the professional labor index at 4.25 percent. The use of these indices results in an increase of funding to K-12 education by \$70 million for school year 2023-24.

Our LSO staff is confident that K-12 revenues will exceed the \$70 million I proposed in the motion. The motion passed the committee. It is clear to me, every time I buy something, that inflation is significant, and we have a responsibility mandated by the Wyoming Supreme Court to adjust K-12 funding to account for inflation. I can be reached with questions or comments at albert@albertsommers.com.