



Capitol Comments

Newsletter from your
Iowa State Representative
Richard Anderson

State Capitol
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Education Report Card - Learning Lessons

I was recently taken to task by a well intended constituent who felt I had not done enough to address education issues. I trust this newsletter, which I have limited to recent K-12 legislation, is responsive. As a preface, I want to make two comments. One, it is my opinion that the Iowa House and Senate education committees try too hard to micro-manage local school boards making it more difficult for them to do their work. Two, there is much discussion, disagreement, and energy spent here in the state capitol trying to find the proper balance between funding teacher salaries and all the rest of education spending. Here is the report card. I'll let you do the grading.

Race to the Top Finds Us on the Bottom

After racing to pass legislation the first week of January so Iowa could qualify for federal "Race to the Top" education money, we found out that Iowa did not make the first cut. There may be an opportunity for assistance in a later round.

K-12 Funding

Budget bills remain the central issue of this legislative session. As you know our financial situation is creating tension in all state departments and programs. Governor Culver's 10 percent across-the-board cuts are causing pain. As a reminder, Iowa's governor does not have to order an across-the-board cut. I am

convinced that it would have been better for Iowa to have cut selected non-essential programs entirely and protected our essential programs like education.

This year, the Governor is reducing the state general fund school aid appropriation by a whopping \$170 million. Local school districts have what is called “spending authority.” This is a figure set by the legislature each year. The spending authority for the year that ends June 30, 2011 is not being reduced, so school districts may address the shortfall in state funds by reducing costs, borrowing funds, or using cash reserves or increasing property taxes.

To keep Iowa in line with federal requirements there will be a 6.7 percent increase in funds for school food service, vocational education and preschool special education.

Protecting Teacher Salaries.

Contrary to the rule of not including “policy language” in budget bills, the education budget bill contains unprecedented new policy which exempts teacher salaries from Governor Culver’s across-the-board cuts. Exempting teacher salaries from across-the-board cuts creates several issues. First, it can create a \$24 million statewide property tax liability because Iowa school districts will have to go back and pay teachers the \$24 million yet this fiscal year. With just three months left in the fiscal year, districts may not have the funds and may be looking to the property taxpayer to pick up the cost. Second, morale issues arise as the janitor, the food service worker, the teacher’s aide, and the principal’s secretary must endure a pay cut while the teacher they work beside does not. Third, in difficult financial times teachers will receive preferred treatment over other essential Iowa public servants, such as those in public safety, child support services, and child care workers.

There is also “policy” language in the education budget bill which makes teachers the only licensed professionals in the state that will immediately know the name of a person filing a complaint against them. Iowa’s 32 other licensing boards do not release a complainant’s name unless the complaint becomes founded. The education budget bill debate promises to a lively debate in both chambers. Stay tuned.

Expanding Physical Plant and Equipment Levy

Iowa law permits a local school board to approve a property tax levy up to 33 cents per \$1,000 assessed valuation called the Physical Plant and Equipment Levy (PPEL). It has been used to maintain buildings and buy equipment. The Iowa House voted (on a 58-39 vote) to expand the use of PPEL to include all computers, computer related equipment, computer software, technical support services and training, and the cost to repair equipment purchased with PPEL funds, including school buses. Local school administrators have been asking for more flexibility in the use of PPEL funds, particularly in these tough economic conditions. The bill will take effect upon enactment, so it would apply to the current school budget year.

There are concerns that expanding PPEL will increase property taxes and free up school general funds which will be targeted by the Iowa State Education Association for use in increasing teacher salaries.

School Business Managers

A bill passed out of the House (on a party line 52-43 vote) requiring mandatory training for school business managers and licensing for all public school financial officers. Perhaps it is a good idea to license those who handle school funds, yet it is another in a series of unfunded state mandates coming out of this legislature over the past four years. Only six

other states have imposed such regulations going beyond local school board oversight. You might say this is a solution in search of a problem.

Clean, “Green” Janitorial Services

The House passed (by a vote of 52-47) a bill which mandates that universities, community colleges and public schools use “green” building cleaning products – over the opposition of the Iowa Association of School Boards. This bill further increases operational costs on our education system at a time when it is already strapped for cash. A public school can opt out of using the more expensive “green” cleaning products with a majority vote of the school board and completing even more paper work with the Department of Education,

AEA Task Force

There are growing concerns with our Area Educations Associations which provide media, instructional and special education support to our schools. With a unanimous vote, we are requiring the Iowa Department of Education to convene a task force to review the mission, structure, governance and funding of the Area Education Agencies to determine if the AEAs are meeting the needs of the local school districts.

Finally...The Serious Issue of Protecting Minors

Those 800 Hamburg area residents who signed the petition asking me to work to close the Iowa court-created loophole, which allows minors to strip in “theatres,” will want to know that the House Public Safety committee passed the bill. Having already passed out of the Senate, this bill is now on the House calendar. I have been re-assured by the House Public Safety chair that the bill will come up for a vote on the House floor. Hopefully this important legislation protecting minors will be voted out of the House soon and sent down to the Governor for his signature.