

SCHOOL DISTRICT EDUCATIONAL EQUALITY AND ORGANIZATION COMMITTEE

Study Assignment

A study of the current organization of the state's school districts and whether that organization is adequately and efficiently providing equal educational opportunity to every child in South Dakota.

Summary of Interim

The committee met three times over five days at the State Capitol in Pierre. Members heard from national experts, local school officials, representatives from state education organizations, and a variety of others. They examined issues including state demographics, sparsity, transportation, data collection, No Child Left Behind, consolidation, educational cooperatives, accreditation, and curriculum requirements.

School reform expert Dr. Gene Bottoms addressed the group. He is Senior Vice President of the Southern Regional Education Board in Atlanta, GA. Dr. Bottoms heads an initiative known as "High Schools That Work." He spoke of the disconnect that often exists between the academic preparation required to graduate from high school and the preparation that is needed to succeed in college, technical school, or the workforce. To overcome that, he suggests strengthening curriculum requirements for high school students and encouraging seniors to take courses that earn them postsecondary academic credit. In his view, students should not have to wait until they reach college or technical school to find out whether they can succeed. He noted that enhanced curriculum requirements must be coupled with additional support for the students who will need extra help to complete them. States and individual school districts need to set measurable goals and work to achieve them. He stressed the importance of directing resources toward programs with a proven track record of helping students succeed.

Stephen Smith, a school finance expert with the National Conference of State Legislatures, opened the first meeting by discussing how policymakers can make decisions based on all the education data that is provided to them. He said data-driven decisions must be based on student performance, how much money is being spent, and what is being purchased with the money spent. In his view, lawmakers must discern which school districts are small by choice and which ones are small by necessity. He also discussed No Child Left Behind, which he said is the most sweeping federal education reform legislation in history. He told the committee of the challenges it brings in terms of the difficulty that some school districts will face in meeting its standards, but he also talked about the possibilities it brings and how all the data generated because of it will help parents and teachers more readily identify students in need.

The committee examined a multitude of statewide data. Dr. Sid Goss from the School of Mines & Technology presented data illustrating the state's demographic trends, and most especially its aging population. He showed that while the state is experiencing modest growth along its east and west borders and on the Reservations, the population base in the middle is dwindling, and there is no evidence that this pattern will change in the foreseeable future.

Ron Woodburn of the state's Bureau of Information Technology led the committee through an interactive session on utilizing a Geographic Information System (GIS) to analyze school district data. Committee members were able to view much of the information compiled by the Department of Education on each of the school districts in a map format rather than in a more traditional chart or graph. It allowed them to view one piece of information in relation to other information by adding layers to the maps. For example, the committee was able to examine the average ACT score of a school district in relation to the school district's size. The presentation introduced the committee members to a technology that served the committee's needs well and will continue to be an asset to the Legislature in examining school district data. The full Legislature is invited to an education issues forum on December 2, 2003, that will include a demonstration of the capabilities of the GIS in examining school data.

Another tool that will benefit legislators, school administrators and parents is a collaborative effort among the Broad Foundation, Standard & Poor's, and the U.S. Department of Education that will result in the posting of a wide variety of education data on the Internet for the general public. The data will include financial, demographic, school environment, and spending information on school districts. In time, it will also offer a unique return on resources analysis by examining the relationship between student achievement and spending given a district's learning environment, demographics, and finances. Jacque Lane and Bob Durante of Standard & Poor's described the project to committee members via teleconference call.

The committee also spent time examining what constitutes an effective school district. Dr. Tom Hawley, Interim Secretary of the Department of Education, testified that good, effective leaders are a crucial element. Wade Pogany, also from the Department of Education, presented the committee with a list of key principles of effective schools, including clear and specific academic goals and supportive home/school relationships. Dr. Robert T. "Tad" Perry, Executive Director of the SD Board of Regents, highlighted the importance of curriculum offerings in effective school districts and noted that today many students entering state universities are not prepared for college math. Tim Mitchell, Superintendent of the Chamberlain School District, stressed that school districts need to take on the challenge of being more effective and not be afraid of change.

The committee looked at accreditation standards and how they relate to school effectiveness. Melody Schopp with the Department of Education noted that many of the state accreditation standards were repealed by the Legislature in 1995. The standards that remain are not an adequate measure of effectiveness. Don Kirkegaard, the superintendent of the Britton-Hecla school district, informed the group about the North Central Accreditation, Commission on Accreditation and School Improvement. He told them that NCA Accreditation is one way to verify the quality of a school. The accreditation is based on student output, goals, and standards. Mr. Kirkegaard noted that many South Dakota schools are NCA accredited, but some small schools in the state would not likely meet NCA standards because they do not have the necessary qualified staff in place. He added his belief that the state should do more in terms of accreditation. One way to approach that would be to recognize the NCA accreditation as the state accreditation like several other states have done.

Since most of the school districts in the state have declining enrollments and are looking for ways to economize, the committee spent a lot of time learning about educational cooperatives and the services they can provide to school districts. They also heard from superintendents who are sharing services in other ways and from a variety of individuals who have had direct involvement in recent school district consolidations. Committee members were especially interested in uncovering any roadblocks that may prevent school districts from sharing services or consolidating. Pierre attorney Tom Harmon provided the committee with a history of school district reorganization in South Dakota. He pointed to some of the challenges that school districts have faced when going through the reorganization process. In addition, Patty DeVaney with the SD Attorney General's Office talked to the group about a 1994 lawsuit challenging the state aid to education formula and the Court's decision and interpretation of the formula.

Committee members concluded their work by reviewing what they had learned and targeting some key areas. The need to strengthen curriculum requirements was evident and paramount, particularly in the areas of math and science. They decided to follow Texas's lead and bring forth a proposal establishing a recommended curriculum that would adequately prepare students for their future, and to require most students to follow it. It is their hope that the proposal would begin to bridge the gap that currently exists between what is expected of a child to complete high school and what they need to know to pursue advanced studies or enter the workforce. The committee also decided to put forth a plan that would require all schools to offer the courses necessary for a student to complete to become a Regents' Scholar. In that way, no child will be denied the opportunity to take advanced coursework simply because the school the child happens to attend does not offer it.

Listing of Legislation Adopted

- An Act to allow two or more school districts to include an existing excess tax levy in their consolidation plan.
- An Act to require schools to offer a core curriculum in order to meet state accreditation standards.
- An Act to require the Department of Education to provide for computer access for certain rural attendance centers in South Dakota and to make an appropriation therefor.
- An Act to provide for a basic high school program and a recommended high school program, and to require most students to complete the recommended one.

Summary of Meeting Dates & Places and Listing of Committee Members

On April 14, 2003, the Executive Board of the Legislative Research Council created the Committee on School District Educational Equality and Organization. The following members of the South Dakota Legislature were appointed to the committee: Representative Phyllis Heineman, Chair; Senator John Koskan, Vice Chair; Senators Jay Duenwald, Robert Duxbury, and Frank Kloucek; Representatives Julie Bartling, Jim Bradford, Mike Buckingham, Thomas Deadrick, Joel Dykstra, Burt Elliott, Jeffrey Haverly, Kent Juhnke, Maurice LaRue, Ed McLaughlin, Jim Peterson, Burdette Solum, John Teupel, and Bill Van Gerpen.

The committee met at the State Capitol in Pierre on the following dates: June 23, 2003; August 11-12, 2003; and October 20-21, 2003.

Staff members were Clare Cholik, Senior Research Analyst; Mark Zickrick, Principal Fiscal Analyst; and Rhonda Purkapile, Senior Legislative Secretary.