

CHIEFLINE

Colorado Department of Education
William J. Moloney, Commissioner



March 25, 2003

“America will pay any price, bear any burden to assure the survival of liberty ... Therefore, ask not what your country can do for you, but rather ask what you can do for your country”

- *President John F. Kennedy*
- *Inaugural Address, January 20, 1961*

OF SNOW AND SACRIFICE: A WEEK TO REMEMBER

The snow began on Monday; the war began on Wednesday; and even by week's end, things were anything but “business as usual.”

For the majority of the state's schoolchildren “Spring” break came early and in a somewhat different format than what had been scheduled. In a state parched for water, the historic “Blizzard of '03” was manna from heaven or as the Rocky's banner headline put it: “White Gold!”.

As the snow piled up even the General Assembly granted itself a historically rare “snow day” on Wednesday. For the rest of the week however activity beneath the Golden Dome moved forward as the legislature continued to address issues of great moment to education. That legislative connection is quite evident in the next four items:

I. OF ROCKS AND HARD PLACES: BUDGET HOLE GETS DEEPER

Iraq and the snowstorm may have driven the state budget off the front pages, but education insiders know that money remains the 800 lb. gorilla of this year's session (and next year's session, too).

Last week saw the appearance of the latest state revenue projections – the last ones the General Assembly will get before their final decisions on this year's budget.

Far from brightening the picture, the numbers only got worse. One thing the numbers did do was intensify thoughts and conversations about taxes and constitutional change that would have been impossible just six months ago.

One salutary result of the state fiscal crisis is a heartening degree of unity within the education community.

A series of meetings among the leadership of CASB, CASE, CEA, and the State Board of Education have been based on the premise that whenever possible the education community must speak to the political community with one voice.

Clearly, when we offer varying viewpoints on a given issue, the effectiveness of our advocacy is seriously diminished, and given the monumental challenges education faces this year, that kind of “diversity” is a luxury we simply cannot afford.

II. THE FALL-OUT FROM ST. VRain: LEGISLATURE WEIGHS NEW MEASURES OF FINANCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY

As if the shortage of money for school districts was not enough of a problem, events in St. Vrain and Elizabeth have raised serious questions among public and legislators alike about how those monies are managed.

No less than eight bills aimed at fixing perceived problems have been introduced in the General Assembly. Some – like requiring local board approval of loan applications – have a self-evident sense and will be opposed by no one. Others, if not carefully shaped, run the risk of adding new problems while attempting to solve old ones.

Clearly, the education community must be pro-active in joining elected officials in a search for useful answers. As Representative Keith King and I were reminded during presentations before the visiting Montrose Chamber of Commerce, a public saturated by media stories on this subject wants to know “What happened?” and “What is being done about it?”.

Here again, we see an opportunity for cooperative action within the education community to work with bill sponsors and Treasurer Coffman to seek common-sense solutions. Already such joint efforts have improved pending legislation and helped avoid future problems.

III. EXPANDING CYBER SCHOOLS: SEEKING ANSWERS TO ISSUES OF FINANCE, EQUITY, AND PROGRAM QUALITY

In the closing hours of last year’s School Finance Bill, a hot issue was providing funded slots for students in Cyber Schools, who had not previously been enrolled in public schools (e.g., home schooled children). After considerable contention, the number of such slots was capped at 135.

However, in a clear clash between legislative intent and legislative loopholes, over 700 such slots were funded during this year’s October Pupil Count.

Since then, a growing number of questions have arisen about whose money went where, defining due process and equity rights for cyber students, and Special Education obligations incumbent on cyber schools.

A legislatively ordained study committee proposed useful answers in some areas, but raised new questions in others.

Currently, two remedial initiatives are afoot.

First, Majority Leader Keith King asked CDE to provide some defining language that could be placed in this year’s School Finance Bill for the purpose of restricting undesirable loopholes in present statute. Such has been provided by School Finance Director Vody Herrmann and circulated for discussion to members of the above noted legislative committee and other interested parties.

Secondly, I have asked CDE Technology Director Eric Feder and Colorado On-Line Consortium Director Tim Snyder to make recommendations for a statewide oversight committee modeled on the very successful School

Construction Committee. As with that committee, we will actively seek nominations from our education organizations.

Hopefully, by summer, we will have in place a more structured environment to shape the growth of this new component of public education.

IV. NEW STATE STUDY LOOKS AT COLLEGE REMEDIATION

Like their counterparts in the other 49 states, our General Assembly has taken note of the large amount of remedial courses to be found in higher education. They have also noted the manner in which this phenomenon has inflated costs in higher education.

At the request of the legislature, the Colorado Commission on Higher Education (CCHE) produced a study that unsurprisingly discovered that high school students who pursue rigorous courses of study are less likely to need remediation.

What the study did not point out, however, was a main reason why more students do not follow the more demanding curriculums; most colleges no longer require such rigor as a condition of admission.

This is an important conversation, but it should begin with recognition that promoting standards and high expectations is as much a responsibility of the colleges and universities as it is of K-12.

V. MORE ON HARMONIZING ACCOUNTABILITY MEASURES

Though lacking the drama or urgency of war, weather, and budget, a major focus for state educators remains the task of dealing with Colorado's various accountability measures.

Though we dealt with this subject in an earlier Chiefline (January 28, 2003), there are further developments to report. In that document we described a gathering (January 9th) of education organization leaders and representatives of the five regional Superintendents groups convened by Dr. Davidson to look at how we plan and prioritize the accountability tasks faced by people in the field.

As agreed at that meeting, attendees were surveyed about their views on prioritizing our various tasks. The results of that survey provided the focus for the follow-up meeting, which was held in the CEA building on February 25th.

At the end of a wide-ranging discussion, the group agreed that in looking at the totality of our accountability systems (Accreditation, SARs, and HR-1) two key concepts should be strongly communicated to Colorado educators. They are:

Assurances to the Field

Though many legitimate questions remain regarding Accountability, particularly in regard to the more recent federal overlay – HR-1 – none of these should impede or deter our educators from doing what they do best; i.e., serving children. Questions about these systems will continue and some may be with us for years. Nonetheless, those of us at the state level can buffer all of these questions for local educators.

CDE, with most excellent assistance from the education organizations and others represented at these meetings, properly serves as an intermediary between Washington and local districts as we go forward in dealing with the complexities of HR-1.

As noted earlier, the USDOE is still very much in a "learning" mode as it undertakes the mammoth task of implementing HR-1. Our prediction that we would see changes of interpretation and ultimately even changes in the law is already coming true. CDE, along with our state organizations who have links to Washington, has been busy in communicating to both the USDOE and the Colorado Congressional delegation what areas we think need to be revisited in the interest of successful implementation.

Due to the recognition that Colorado has received as a national leader in reform, our voice carries particular weight with the powers that be. Now it is incumbent upon all of us to convey to the field that this process of "revisiting and revising" is going on. This should give them the assurances they need to go about their work without a fear of sudden or peculiar federal interventions.

The Central Emphasis On Raising Student Achievement

This concept was very well articulated by the Co-Chairman of the Denver Area School Superintendents Council (DASSC) Dr. Monte Moses.

He pointed out that while we may have different systems of accountability with varying approaches to "score keeping," nonetheless, all of them revolved around improving student achievement.

Accordingly, if Colorado schools remain focused on that central goal, other issues will tend to take care of themselves.

If we concentrate on this task and achieve some reasonable success, we are confident that Colorado's record will stand up well against any other state. If we fall short in some areas – as we inevitably will – you can be assured that we will not be the only state in that dilemma. This circumstance will once again reinforce the case for "revisiting and revising."

At the close of the meeting, it was agreed that all should work to communicate as strongly as possible to the field this message of assurance and the primacy of student achievement.

Sincerely yours,

William J. Moloney
Commissioner of Education

cc: Governor Owens, General Assembly, State Board of Education, Congressional Delegation, CDE Cabinet, CDE Staff, BOCES, CASB, CASE, CEA, and CFT