

Holyoke participating in CASB Rural Agility Project

Written by Brenda Johnson Brandt

Recovering rural Colorado's freedom to govern locally is project focus

With an eye on more local control and relief within the law from mandates and state requirements, Holyoke School District is participating in the Colorado Association of School Boards' Rural Agility Project.

CASB Executive Director Ken Delay outlined the project at a breakout session at the organization's annual convention last December.

Since August, Holyoke Superintendent Bret Miles had been promoting discussions among superintendents and had several conversations with Delay, who said he would give time from his lawyers to pursue options for rural schools.

Miles and Holyoke board members Kris Camblin, Dennis Herman and Pat Wiebers attended the CASB convention breakout session in December. Miles said the room was filled with interested rural board members.

It was there that Delay introduced the Rural Agility Project by noting that there are three small statutory schemes that might provide the best way to remove bulky mandates from rural districts.

Ultimately, this could free up resources to provide innovative educational programs that put rural districts' natural strengths to work. These strengths include agility, ingenuity, teamwork and common sense.

The three targeted statutes are the Waiver Statute, Innovation Schools Act and Charter Schools Act.

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Through the Waiver Statute, a school district holds a local public hearing on its intent to seek a waiver, then outlines its waiver request to the State Board of Education.

The application includes statements of how the waiver will enhance educational opportunity and quality, how implementing the current legal requirements limits educational opportunity in the district and explaining how the district will comply with the intent of the law.

Miles said the waiver provision hasn't been utilized very well and could be beneficial.

A request for waivers through the Innovation Schools Act is more complex, according to Delay's CASB convention presentation.

In addition to the waivers requested, the application will describe innovations the public school would implement, the academic performance improvements expected to be achieved, cost savings and efficiencies expected, and community buy-in.

The buy-in is reflected in consent to change by a majority of administrators, teachers, staff and school accountability committee.

The Charter Schools Act permits single-school districts to convert their school to a charter school. The process for achieving waivers this way starts with authorizing the conversion of the school to a charter school under a contract with the charter's governing board.

The contract would include a list of waivers, which the charter would bring before the state board. Some waivers would be granted automatically and others if they're deemed necessary.

Delay pointed out that all waiver laws are designed for single-district applications to the State Board of Education. However, nothing prevents rural districts from sharing significant portions of the work at the front end or back end of the innovation process.

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By example, a joint innovation plan might propose a new cooperative program between districts. Or several districts might work together to develop a rural education model that each district would implement on its own.

CASB believes pursuing a joint application model for recovering rural agility could yield great benefits for rural school districts. It also recognizes that CASB is the sole organization providing the vast majority of rural school districts with legal support, policy support and an advocacy bridge to the policymakers at the State Capitol.

CASB has invited school board members and superintendents to join this collaborative effort to achieve more flexibility for rural Colorado school districts.

At the Holyoke School District's board retreat in January, involvement in the Rural Agility Project was discussed.

Miles emphasized that the local board did not commit to trying waivers, innovation or charter. However, they did direct Miles to participate in the project to gather all information so a thoughtful decision can be made.

The superintendent further shared this information with the district's leadership team of principals and teachers at the team's January meeting. On Feb. 7 at morning staff meetings, Miles told the staff of the board's interest in gathering information for the project.

Miles was especially pleased with the Feb. 11 meeting which he attended at the Colorado Department of Education.

Commissioner of Education Robert Hammond and four of his senior staff and the CDE attorney met with Delay, CASB attorney Beth Friel and Miles.

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Noting that the meeting ended with an agreement to meet again, Miles said Hammond pledged to work together in a problem-solving way rather than working opposed to each other.

Miles, who had communicated with Hammond prior to the Feb. 11 meeting, said Hammond is a good guy and he cares. It makes it easier to call him and to communicate effectively.

A CASB meeting for districts interested in the Rural Agility Project was scheduled for Wednesday, Feb. 19. It was touted as a joint effort to pursue a package of waivers of state law requirements currently burdening rural districts.

Miles and local board member Kim Killin were scheduled to attend the meeting to obtain details in order for the local board to make a good decision.

Miles anticipated that the CASB group would finalize some options to pursue with the state board and to create steps that others can replicate if they choose.

He emphasized that it's nice to have an organization like CASB that wants to do something for rural schools.

Miles cited four areas that the Holyoke board has thought about in terms of potential waivers, and others could potentially come forward from other districts.

Ideas the Holyoke board has thought about for waiver potential include the teacher evaluation process, statewide graduation requirements, Colorado Reading to Ensure Academic Development Act and teacher licensure requirements.

Miles said the teacher evaluation process has turned out to be an unfunded mandate requiring extra staff time and/or the purchase of software to handle the required data.

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New statewide graduation requirements propose the entrance into a four-year college institution without remediation in order to graduate from high school.

Local board members don't believe that requirements for high school graduation and entrance into a four-year institution should be the same thing.

The Colorado READ Act, passed last year, sets up how to identify third-graders' reading readiness. Miles said the Colorado Basic Literacy Act of 1998 did the same thing and Holyoke teachers were already doing what the law said and doing it well.

Teacher licensure requirements are more cumbersome for rural districts that don't get the pool of applicants that larger districts do.

Miles said this certainly doesn't mean that rural districts aren't interested in having good teachers. It just means they're interested in fewer strings and fewer requirements for getting good teachers when they can't be obtained from the traditional course of college grads or recruits from other districts.

"There's a practical side and a philosophical side," said Miles. Sometimes rules are made without consideration of rural Colorado and how things are different and unique in smaller-school settings.

"Rural schools have real accountability," added Miles, noting that patrons know the principals, the superintendent and the board members.

Parents in rural schools don't need a bigger system of linking test scores with teacher performance to get a sense of whether a teacher is doing a good job of getting their job done.

Miles has been on the front end of statewide discussion on this topic. This past August, he and Merino Superintendent Rob Sanders started circulating a paper to promote discussions among

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superintendents.

The process led to communication with Commissioner Hammond, CASB and Colorado Association of School Executives.

With CASB's involvement through the Rural Agility Project, Miles is optimistic that some options can be considered to better serve the rural school districts.

Holyoke Enterprise February 20, 2014