



AUGENBLICK,
PALAICH AND
ASSOCIATES

Date: September 28, 2017

To: Members, Select Committee on School Finance Recalibration
Senator Coe and Representative Sommers, Co-Chairs

From: Augenblick, Palaich and Associates (APA)

Subject: Stakeholder Feedback Process and Key Themes

This memo is intended to provide: (1) greater detail about the stakeholder feedback process that APA completed in August and (2) key feedback themes.

Stakeholder Feedback Process

The study team gathered stakeholder feedback through three avenues: interviews, practitioner panels, and an online survey.

Interviews

Two APA study team members conducted one-on-one and small group interviews in Cheyenne the week of August 14th (supplemented by phone interviews as needed). Interviews were 1.5 hours long. Interviews with professional associations included about four representatives from districts of varying size and from different parts of the state. Overall, about 50 individuals participated in these interviews.

These interviews were held with:

- Office of the Governor: Governor Mead and Policy Director, Mary Kay Hill
- Wyoming Department of Education: Superintendent Balow and staff
- Wyoming State Board of Education
- University of Wyoming, School of Education: Dean Reutzel
- The following Wyoming professional associations:
 - Wyoming Association of Elementary and Middle School Principals
 - Wyoming Association of School Administrators
 - Wyoming Association of School Business Officials
 - Wyoming Association of Secondary School Principals
 - Wyoming Association of Special Education Administrators
 - Wyoming Curriculum Directors Association
 - Wyoming Education Association
 - Wyoming School Boards Association

Practitioner Panels

APA also convened practitioner panels in four locations in the state to gather educator feedback. Between August 14-17, practitioner panels were held in:

- Rock Springs
- Cody
- Buffalo
- Cheyenne

Two different practitioner sessions were convened at each location: 1) one session to discuss the impact of the state's Educational Program and 2) a second to discuss the current Funding Model. Over 200 educators spoke at the sessions, with additional educators, students, parents, and community members in attendance.

Online Survey

Finally, APA conducted an online survey that was open to all, including educators, parents, students, business leaders and other community members. All questions were asked as open-ended text responses, so respondents were not inhibited in the feedback they could share. Additionally, respondents were not required to answer each question and could instead provide feedback on whichever question or questions they wanted to address. A total of 1,240 respondents answered one or more survey questions. Forty-eight percent of participants were parents, 44 percent of participants were educators (many noting they were both an educator and a parent/community member), and eight percent were community members, business leaders, students or others.

Stakeholder Feedback Questions

The following set of stakeholder feedback questions was used in the interviews, practitioner panels, and online survey:

Educational Program

1. What does it mean to be postsecondary and workforce ready in Wyoming?
2. How well does Wyoming's current educational program prepare students to be postsecondary and workforce ready?
 - a. Are there any areas or requirements that need to be added or emphasized?
 - b. Are there any areas or requirements that are unnecessary or over emphasized?
3. Are all schools or districts able to provide the opportunity for students to meet the requirements of the Hathaway Scholarship program?
4. How well do Wyoming's current requirements for special needs students (special education, English Language Learners, economically disadvantaged, gifted and talented) support the success of these students?

Funding Model

1. How responsive do you feel the current funding model is to the different needs of students, schools, or districts?

2. Does the current funding model provide the resources needed for schools or districts to offer the required educational program?
3. Do you see any opportunities for costs savings, such as through shared services?
4. Do you have any specific feedback about the current funding model:
 - a. Related to the calculation of the base resources?
 - b. Related to regional adjustment, external adjustment, or hold harmless?
 - c. Related to reimbursements?
 - d. Related to recapture or entitlement?

Key Themes: Educational Program

Interviews

Interviewees discussed that to be considered postsecondary and workforce ready, Wyoming students should be prepared for whichever path they choose. This included attending a postsecondary institution, joining the military, entering a career training or certification program, or immediately entering the workforce. Interviewees added that Wyoming students should not be just ready, but competitive. Further, interviewees stressed the importance of having a 21st century workforce to attract companies in new industries to Wyoming, which would help reduce the impact of mineral boom and bust cycles.

Overall, interviewees felt that the educational program, as defined by the basket of goods and services, was generally the right set of skills and knowledge that students needed to be postsecondary and workforce ready. There was some discussion of a need to review and modernize the language basket, but few changes were recommended. Many interviewees stressed the importance of CTE offerings, in both “traditional” Wyoming industries and the technology industry. Relatedly, one potential area of change – particularly from the perspective of state-level stakeholders – was to either add computer science/coding or revise the applied technology component to address it. This was related to ensuring that Wyoming students are prepared for emerging technology careers and creating a 21st Century workforce in the state. Interviewees from schools and districts, however, expressed caution. While many agreed with the need for increased emphasis on technology instruction, they also identified potential challenges to being able to hire the trained staff that would be needed. It was also strongly emphasized that it would be difficult to add new requirements to the basket while at the same time cutting funding. More than one interviewee said the push for coding felt like an unfunded mandate. Other areas of potential change included eliminating the K-2 language and cultures requirement and eliminating (or again, at least modernizing) keyboarding.

Many interviewees also indicated that they thought that postsecondary readiness was currently being overemphasized, at the expense of workforce readiness. One key reason for this was the requirements of the Hathaway Scholarship program. According to the stakeholders we interviewed, while the Hathaway Scholarship program was originally intended to be just that, a scholarship program, it has ultimately had a broader impact on student, school and district choices. Since eligibility for the Hathaway Scholarship is a component of the accountability system, districts face pressure to ensure that

all students are eligible, regardless of if the student is interested in pursuing postsecondary education. School and districts are making staffing and course offering decisions based upon the opportunities they need to provide students to be eligible; for example, providing a fourth year of math. Schools need to be able to offer enough sections to ensure all students can take the classes they need, which means they need to redirect teaching staff resources and reduce opportunities in other areas. Interviewees noted that they are having to decrease elective offerings, including arts and CTE, both because of needing to redirect staff resources and because students have less time in their schedule to take the other offerings. A number of interviewees shared anecdotal stories about students having to choose between their interests (such as art) and pursuing the scholarship money, as well as students taking fewer challenging courses, such as AP, in order to protect their GPA and scholarship eligibility. The fourth year of math requirement was also a source of debate, with many arguing in favor of applied math courses instead of theoretical math; though some mentioned challenges related to who was certified to teach these courses.

Providing the basket of goods can be an issue in the rural schools and the inequity of offerings, including higher level courses needed for Hathaway, was cited as a concern. A number of interviewees talked about the use of distance or virtual classes to supplement what they could provide locally, but stressed that it still required staff time, was not necessarily the best way to provide instruction, and that a recent legislative change to require all courses to be taught by Wyoming-certified teachers created a barrier for purchasing needed courses from outside the state.

Finally, interviewees indicated that they felt special education students were well served in Wyoming and that extended opportunities for at-risk students have been valuable to promoting their success. ELL students and gifted students were not seen to be as well served.

Practitioner Panels

Thirty-four percent of practitioner panel speakers want the educational program to stay the same. Participants in the practitioner panels feel very fortunate to have such a well-rounded set of resources and feel they cannot afford to have anything taken out of the educational program. The common core of knowledge and the common core of skills are both important. The common core of skills makes Wyoming students more employable and able to succeed in a postsecondary setting. According to educators in Wyoming, every student in Wyoming today deserves the same type of education as students in the past.

Sixteen percent want to make sure that electives such as band, arts, P.E, and foreign language are not cut from the educational program. Individuals spoke about how the arts and foreign language classes reinforce what is taught in the common core of skills. Arts and foreign language promote problem solving, foster creativity, and support the development of many other life skills. Similar to the arts, speakers presented on the benefits of band and P.E; for example, P.E is shown to increase test scores and health, better behavior, and improved mental health.

Fourteen percent of the educators who spoke at the practitioner panels across the state want there to be a higher emphasis on career and technical education (CTE). Educators spoke about how the emphasis

on the Hathaway scholarship has taken away from the CTE classes offered in schools. The Wyoming community views Wyoming as a blue-collar state with opportunities for students to work for many different industries, which may not require postsecondary education. The state needs to be able to prepare the students for these industries through CTE program offerings.

Ten percent of educators participating in the panels cited the legislative cuts as having an effect on the basket of goods. Every time the legislature cuts spending, the cuts end up impacting how the basket of goods is offered. The cuts have a larger impact on the smaller schools/districts in the state who already struggle with making sure all of the required course offerings, including Hathaway, are provided.

Ten percent of educators who spoke believed that special education resources need to improve for students with severe needs. There is no designated school in Wyoming for the deaf and the blind. There is a need for students who are blind and deaf to get out of their districts and learn to navigate their way around a different city, experience different events, and learn to use an escalator. The students with severe special needs require many more services than the small districts can offer in order for them to live a life outside of their small towns.

Educators brought up additional topics in the practitioner panels that were not as frequently heard. Some educators spoke about how the Hathaway Scholarship is more difficult to implement in the smaller and more rural districts. Other educators spoke about the need for mental health services for their base student population. There are a lot of mental health issues occurring amongst children in schools and the schools need more supports. Lastly, the certification process was a frustration for many educators and hindered districts' ability to recruit high-quality teachers.

Survey

What does it mean to be postsecondary and workforce ready in Wyoming?

Respondents were slightly more focused on addressing workforce readiness, but did discuss what both postsecondary and workforce readiness meant for students in Wyoming. Respondents defined college readiness as the ability to succeed in college without remediation, while workforce readiness was defined as having the skills to start and maintain employment in an entry level job. A number of respondents also distinguished career readiness from workforce readiness, defining that as knowledge of a specific trade. Many respondents also indicated that there should not be a distinction between the two and emphasized that students should have the ability to choose either or to be prepared for any opportunity that presents itself. Respondents stressed that soft skills, such as showing up on time, work ethics, accountability, and collaboration, were crucial to readiness, as these skills will help students in life, academics and employment. Further, students being well-rounded was also emphasized as important for both postsecondary and workforce readiness.

How well does Wyoming's current educational program prepare students to be postsecondary and workforce ready?

The majority of respondents – educators and parents/community members – felt that the education system leaves students generally prepared for postsecondary education, but that workforce readiness is

not being sufficiently addressed. Further, many believed that postsecondary readiness has been emphasized at the expense of workforce readiness. Respondents often argued that not every student is going to go to college, so the educational program should ensure that they can be successful in whatever path they pursue. To meet this need, respondents frequently suggested the need for more CTE courses and workforce opportunities; this suggestion was made for both the “traditional” CTE fields and in technology (with some mentions specifically of computer coding). Relatedly, a number of respondents stressed that there should be more applied math and science. While not noted often, a number of educators indicated that an unintended effect of the Hathaway Scholarship Program was this greater emphasis on postsecondary vs. workforce preparation.

The second most frequent response was that there needed to be a greater emphasis on skills to prepare students for the real world and future employment. These skills included personal finance, life skills, work ethics and accountability, critical thinking, collaboration and interpersonal relationships, and problem solving.

Feedback on this question did not generally involve adding anything new to the basket of goods and services, and instead promoted increasing emphasis on existing elements (CTE, applied technology – assuming STEM and computer science are an extension of this category – financial literacy, and soft skills) and ensuring that no current elements of the basket (particularly the arts and other electives) was cut. Many stressed how important it was that students were well-rounded through a variety of offerings. Few respondents indicated that anything should be removed from the basket.

Are all schools or districts able to provide the opportunity for students to meet the requirements of the Hathaway Scholarship program?

There was not a broad consensus about whether all schools or districts were able to provide the opportunity for students to meet the requirements of the Hathaway program. Among educators who answered this question, over half generally agreed that all schools or districts are able to provide the opportunity for students to meet the requirements of the Hathaway Scholarship program, about 20 percent do not believe the opportunity is available statewide, and a quarter did not know. Many educators believe their district provides the opportunity, but were unsure about other districts across the state. The view from non-educators is slightly less positive, with less than half generally agreeing that all schools or districts provide the opportunity. Seventeen percent believe the opportunity is not provided statewide, and a larger proportion of respondents (about 35 percent) did not know. Very few indicated they were unfamiliar with the program.

Among educators and non-educators, and among those agreeing and disagreeing that all schools or districts provide the opportunity for students to meet the requirements of the Hathaway Scholarship program, respondents expressed concern for small school districts’ ability to provide the necessary opportunities. Respondents particularly noted challenges for small districts in meeting the foreign language requirements, for having the required highly qualified teachers, and in rural settings, for having on-site opportunities for students to meet the requirements. Respondents believe there is inequity in the diversity of options for students pursuing the program, often between the larger and

smaller districts. For example, a small district may only offer one foreign language, while a larger district may offer multiple foreign languages from which students may choose.

There is a belief that school districts are “doing their best,” but concern voiced throughout the survey that with any additional cuts to funding, districts may have a hard time maintaining the needed opportunities for students to meet the scholarship requirements.

Respondents also provided the following themes on the impact of the scholarship requirements:

- There is a belief that the Hathaway Scholarship program assumes every student is headed to a 4-year college, and might negatively impact opportunities for non-college bound students to participate in vocational and other career-training opportunities, with such a heavy focus on the program.
- Respondents voiced concern that program can impact elective options provided by the school or district. Particularly for small districts and schools, respondents were concerned that the only electives offered were those required by the Hathaway Scholarship program.
- The use of technology and cross-district partnerships, particularly in rural areas, to provide opportunities for students to meet the scholarship program requirements was viewed as a positive method to ensure all students were provided opportunities to meet requirements.

How well do Wyoming’s current requirements for special needs students (special education, English Language Learners, economically disadvantaged, gifted and talented) support the success of these students?

While survey respondents were asked about requirements for different student categories that fit under the umbrella of special needs (special education, English Language Learners, economically disadvantaged, gifted and talented), the majority focused their answers on special education. Of that group, respondents were divided on whether the needs of special education students were being met. Educators were significantly more likely to indicate that the needs of special education students were being met in Wyoming and that the state’s requirements supported the success of these students, with some respondents going even further, suggesting that Wyoming is one of the best states in the country with regards to special education students. The other half of respondents, largely parents, felt that special education needs were not being met, mainly due to issues of resource allocation (both funding overall and specific resource elements like teachers and technology).

Another key theme was that it is more difficult for smaller districts to meet the current requirements for special needs students (across student groups). This also applied to smaller schools within larger districts. Respondents believed there was not a fair distribution of resources within the state and within school districts.

Key Themes: Funding Model

Interviews

Across the interviewed stakeholder groups, the general consensus was that the funding model worked well, but that recent reductions is making it more difficult for schools and districts to provide the

educational program. Overall, they found the system to be transparent and responsive, and stressed how essential the flexibility of the block grant was to their districts and their ability to serve students in the best way they could. Recent funding cuts, particularly related to the external cost adjustment, have been an issue and are negatively impacting districts. They expressed concern over future cuts and unease about the uncertainty of their funding. Interviewees explained that having predictable and sustainable funding is crucial to being able to hire staff and provide programs and services. To that end, interviewees also expressed the need for more stable revenue sources, indicating that the issue of education funding was not related to the funding model itself, but to how it is funded. More than one interviewee suggested it was time to consider raising taxes or identifying other tax sources.

Salaries was another key area of concern for interviewees who highlighted that they have to pay salaries that are much higher than the average salaries in the model to attract and retain high quality teaching staff. Districts have been making tradeoffs between the resources recommended in the model, particularly class sizes, and providing higher salaries. Many felt that their ability to pay more than surrounding states has led to the success they have seen in Wyoming. Further, interviewees highlighted that other states are getting more competitive in their starting salaries, so if they have to reduce salaries to the level in the model, they will lose staff to other states. A number of interviewees said that their districts are already starting to see vacancies at schools; this means schools and districts have to settle for whoever applies and not the highest quality.

Interviewees believed the 100 percent reimbursement approach to funding special education was the best way to support these students. Many interviewees expressed pride in how well they serve special education students in Wyoming compared to other states, which they attributed to having an adequate level of funding. Some interviewees also believed that Wyoming had fewer lawsuits and saved money by providing the level of services needed for students. It was also highlighted that due to federal laws around Maintenance of Effort (MOE) of special education funding, the state would not be able to fund less than current levels without a waiver from the federal government. Interviewees believed there could be cost savings by reducing identification rates through providing a well-funded base with meaningful response to intervention systems in place and offering early intervention/early childhood education. A decrease in the number of identified special education students is an allowable reason for reducing required MOE. Finally, it was noted that while the 100 percent reimbursement model was supported, it did create a cash flow issue for smaller districts if a high cost student enrolled in their district (since they would have to fund that student's needed services out-of-pocket to be reimbursed in the future).

Some interviewees indicated that there could be further cost savings through shared services, such as through the existing Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) structure or working cooperatively with other districts. The current BOCES structure allows districts to raise up to one-half mill levy to fund their BOCES, but only 40 percent of districts do so. Instead, they typically hire their own staff and the three BOCES that exist now primarily provide residential placements instead of being more robust regional special education service providers as is the case in other states. The current 100 percent reimbursement model provides little incentive to use either the BOCES or work with another district, which can lead to higher special education costs. Many interviewees expressed reservations

about sharing staff that work directly with students, due to lost time for traveling between schools and districts (“windshield time”).

However, interviewees thought there could be sharing possibilities for “back room” services that do not involve working directly with students, such as shared maintenance, IT, business services like HR and procurement, professional development, common purchasing, and shared administration staff. Many districts are already sharing services, particularly around professional development.

A number of areas were noted in more than one interview as being underfunded: CTE, gifted and talented, ELL, insurance, maintenance – particularly groundskeepers, food service and early childhood education. Several interviewees also noted athletics was a high cost area that schools and districts spent more on than was allocated and they felt hampered in their ability to have any cost savings in this area due to the requirements of athletic associations, including the high cost of transportation to play assigned teams, and community expectations.

Practitioner Panels

The consensus in all the funding model feedback sessions was to maintain the current level of funding. It ensures sustainability and stability for districts. Further, the block grant model is the most efficient way for such a diverse set of school districts across the state to meet their diverse needs. Several educators stated that it is important to them to be good stewards of public dollars and they do not spend taxpayer money frivolously. Educators are opened to looking at efficiencies, but not at the cost of compromising the quality of education. Areas that were highlighted as potentially costly but crucial included: (1) keeping class sizes small to maintain the quality of education in Wyoming, especially for at-risk and special education students; addressing rural issues, including the cost of substantial travel, ability to give students the same services, fluctuating enrollment, and remoteness and isolation, and (3) the salaries needed to attract and retain quality staff, as the state does not produce enough teachers of its own and recruiting from outside states is necessary. Most superintendents that spoke indicated that the recent budget cuts have already decreased resources; districts that were saving money on their own felt further penalized by the budget reductions. About 10 educators spoke about the regional cost adjustment and would like to see it held at 100 percent (the statewide average). Several of them mentioned the cost of bringing goods and materials into remote and isolated locations should be reflected in this adjustment. Participants also expressed how important fully funding the external cost adjustment was to their schools and districts.

Additionally, participants spoke in favor of the 100 reimbursement approaches for special education and transportation, feeling that both were necessary and should be maintained. The majority of educators who spoke addressed special education funding. About three educators in different meetings said their districts already have to save money by using psychologists, speech pathologists, and other specialists over video conference and it is not an ideal manner to deliver services. Participants felt that transportation reimbursement was particularly important to small rural districts that have to provide a lot of transportation just to meet basic student needs; rural roads also wear on vehicles more. Consolidation was discussed by about a dozen educators and most of them said that it would not actually save money for the state.

Career and Technical Education (CTE) funding was also addressed in a number of ways. Wyoming schools have CTE comprehensively in school unlike other states and is considered a positive aspect of the educational program that should continue to be funded. Finding qualified CTE teachers is very challenging, recounted a couple of educators. Not related to funding, but still relevant, it was suggested that the Hathaway Scholarship should be opened to vocational training to be fair to all Wyoming students.

The following items were identified as underfunded areas by at least one person: utilities, facilities, and maintenance, groundskeepers, technology, ELL, elementary counselors and school resource officers. Participants also shared potential efficiencies and cost savings that can be explored: bus leasing, reducing reporting requirements, cooperative purchasing programs, and sharing professional services. Revisiting the new requirement for special education teachers to be included in worker's compensation insurance should be addressed and is a possibility for savings.

Survey

As noted, for the survey participants were asked to answer the four key guiding questions in this area. Feedback for each is provided separately below. However, there was also feedback across the questions regarding the impact of funding cuts. Survey respondents highlighted the negative impact that the past funding cuts have had on students, schools and districts, and expressed concern over what further cuts would mean for the education provided in Wyoming. Further, respondents suggested that the real issue of the finance system is not the model itself, but the way it is funded, indicating that the state needs to find a more stable funding source.

How responsive do you feel the current funding model is to the different needs of students, schools, or districts?

Respondents were divided on how responsive they believed the current funding model to be, with roughly an even number of respondents that felt it was or was not responsive. Respondents were far more likely to think it *is responsive* if they were educators and far more likely to think it *is not responsive* if they were parents. Many of the respondents who said the system is responsive also said that the recent funding cuts are hurting the state and limiting the ability of the funding model, and therefore schools and districts, to be responsive. The flexibility of the block grant model was also stressed as essential for responsiveness.

Areas where some respondents felt that the model was not responsive enough included the needs of small schools and districts, and gifted and talented students.

Does the current funding model provide the resources needed for schools or districts to offer the required educational program?

Survey responses were similarly divided on whether or not the current funding model provided the resources needed (about 40 percent of responses in either group). Of respondents that felt there were not adequate resources, a number of respondents indicated that recent funding cuts have limited the ability of the funding model to provide the resources needed to offer the educational program (25

percent of educators and about 15 percent of parents and community members). About 10 percent of educator respondents indicated that the funding model provided the resources needed in larger schools, but not in smaller schools. Other areas where survey respondents indicated that there were not enough resources were: non-core classes, including CTE, technology; supports and services for special needs students; and classroom supplies.

About five percent of parents and community member respondents felt that too many resources were provided (as did two percent of educator respondents), specifically in areas like central office, facilities, and athletics.

Do you see any opportunities for costs savings, such as through shared services?

About forty percent of respondents either (1) indicated that they did not see any opportunities for cost savings, (2) argued against cuts, consolidation, or more shared services, or (3) that they were already sharing services as best they could, so there were no additional opportunities.

Of those that did identify opportunities for cost savings, four changes were recommended by five to 10 percent of respondents:

- Cut administrators/administration
- Increased shared services/courses
- Consolidation
- Cut sports/activities

The largest recommended opportunity for costs savings was to cut administrators/administration. These recommendations centered around reducing the number of administrative positions and cutting administrative salaries. Increased shared services/courses included sharing student support services (such as speech pathologists or special education services), as well as sharing courses such as high-level mathematics. Recommendations for cost savings through consolidation included recommendations to consolidate schools in the same city, and to consolidate districts in the same region or county. Recommendations to cut sports and activities often mentioned the costs of travel for multiple teams.

Seven additional opportunities for cost savings were identified by at least 10 people: cut facilities costs; cut instructional facilitators; offer online classes or increase automation; cut student travel/transportation; change staff/course offerings; eliminate school of choice/ open enrollment; or move to a four-day school week.

Do you have any specific feedback about the current funding model: related to the calculation of the base resources? Related to regional adjustment, external adjustment, or hold harmless? Related to reimbursements? Related to recapture or entitlement?

Specific feedback on funding model components was limited, with less than half of survey respondents answering the question and no more than 50 providing feedback on any given model component. Overall, respondents in this area indicated that the model worked well when fully funded and that resources should not be cut. Several respondents felt that the model was too complex or that certain

elements of the base resource model were underfunded, including class sizes, salaries, and technology. About five percent of respondents indicated that the state needs to diversify its revenue base, with several also indicating that education should have a dedicated revenue base.

More specific component feedback (with a limited number of respondents) included:

- The external cost adjustment should be fully funded.
- The regional cost adjustment is inequitable and does not accurately account for factors driving differences in costs across regions.
- Recapture districts is unfair to the counties contributing revenues and that they should be allowed to keep their excess revenues.
- Special education and transportation should continue to be 100 percent reimbursed.