

New rules for schools

Written by By Molly Ann Howell Sun Correspondent
Friday, 21 January 2022 06:05



Steinhaus expected to act to attract teachers, expand broadband in 2022

With the new year comes a new legislative session. The Gallup-McKinley County Schools board meeting focused on the new horizon at its Jan. 10 gathering.

Two lobbyists set forth some of the issues they believe will affect the district.

Lobbyists Jim Smith and Mark Fleisher told the board how the beginning of the Second Session of New Mexico's 55th Legislature was proceeding and how the issues discussed could affect the school district. A significant focus of their presentation concerned New Mexico Secretary of Education Dr. Kurt Steinhaus' priorities for the session and his FY23 public school support requests.

Smith explained Steinhaus' priorities for the session.

His first priority is a response to the Yazzie/Martinez v. State of New Mexico ruling.

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According to the New Mexico Center on Law and Poverty, “In a landmark 2018 decision, the court ruled in *Yazzie/Martinez v. State of New Mexico* that the state was violating New Mexico students’ constitutional right to a sufficient education and that the state must invest in the programs and services necessary to close opportunity gaps and fix deep inequities for low-income, Native American, English Language Learner students, and students with disabilities.”

According to Smith and Fleisher, Steinhaus’ second priority is addressing unfinished learning and student achievement.

“I’m not telling you guys anything [when I say that] students who have not been in school have suffered somewhat, and there are a lot of school districts around the state that are saying some of their students lost a year or two years of learning through the pandemic,” Smith said. “Some said they didn’t, but [Steinhaus] wants to make sure that unfinished learning and student achievement are addressed.”

The third priority, and the most significant focus, is the educator workforce crisis. Smith said Steinhaus is looking closely at teacher vacancies.

Steinhaus is suggesting the legislators assist in addressing these concerns with funding.

He is proposing \$10 million should go to broadband. Smith said Steinhaus did not say where the broadband would go, but he hypothesized it would probably be installed in libraries.

Steinhaus would also like to see \$14.8 million flow through the Indian Education Act with \$1.3 million earmarked for the teachers who have a 520 Native American Language and Culture certification, allowing them to teach in their native language.

Another component of Steinhaus’ plan for this session is retaining current teachers. He supports

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the salary increase for teachers this year, Smith said.

New Mexico has a three-tier teacher license advancement plan, based on how long a teacher has been teaching and how much education they have. Steinhaus is in favor of a \$50,000 starting salary minimum for Level 1 teachers, a \$60,000 starting minimum for Level 2, and \$70,000 for Level 3. In total, that would come out to a \$200.5 million increase to the public education support budget.

Another portion of the effort to keep teachers in New Mexico is \$10 million to improve teacher residency programs and mentoring.

“This is not the time that we want to be losing any public school employees, so [Steinhaus is] asking for a \$79.8 million increase to the public school support fund,” Smith stated.

GMCS Assistant Superintendent of Business Services Jvanna Hanks called the increase in teachers’ pay something that was “long-needed.”

“I believe that we can all agree that we need to be a lot more competitive with our salaries in the state, especially if we’re to compete with the states that surround us,” Hanks said. “I think that we need to value our staff, and by valuing them we need to pay them more.”

After discussing the pay boost, the discussion moved on to a potential bill to increase transportation funds.

Smith explained that transportation funds were cut back during the 2020/2021 school year because fewer students were riding school buses.

“The transportation distribution was cut back quite a bit because less (sic) students were basically riding the bus,” Smith explained. “The way I understand it is, you’re paid as a district per student that rides, so they’re going to take it back to the pre-pandemic levels, which is

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when, say you had 17,000 students then, and now you have 16,000.”

Hanks described the issue in further detail.

“So unfortunately many districts – and we were one of them, as well – were impacted by that, because we didn’t have the students to report, although we maintained the costs because our transportation department ... really stepped up and did their part during the remote learning to be sure that our students had what they needed,” Hanks said.

She pointed out that the district’s transportation department delivered meals and packets, so that the students could continue learning during the pandemic.

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