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Gloomy fiscal news clouds state board meeting

A very gloomy fiscal forecast for the remainder of FY 09 and FY 10 offset an otherwise upbeat look at Kansas schools and educators at the Kansas Sate Board of Education meeting Wednesday. The fiscal forecast was part of Deputy Commissioner Dale Dennis' legislative report, the last agenda item before the consent agenda and the Challenge Awards banquet in Junction City. Six of the 10 board members, along with Dennis and Commissioner Alexa Posny, attended the seventh annual ceremony. The awards recognize schools that scored exceptionally well on state assessments in spite of above average concentrations of students in the free and reduced lunch program.

Dennis first shared information released from the Consensus Revenue Estimating Group on Nov. 4. Due to a sharply declining economy, the CREG estimated a state ending balance of a negative $137 million for FY 09 and breathtaking $959 million for FY 10. Dale contrasted that to the $935 million the state had on hand at the end of FY 07. Then Dennis showed what those deficits might look like in actual budget allocations suggested by the state's budget office. For FY 09, there would be a decrease of $9 million allotted to schools and $12 million for FY 10. The real problem, Dennis noted, in FY 10 an additional $60 million would have to be carved out of that amount for KPERS and Special Education funding. Along with additional money for necessary LOB support, there could be a cut in the Base State Aid Per Pupil. The cuts would not stop with districts. A 3.7 percent cut in the agency budget would be equal to $428,000. Along with cuts in Title V money and shrinkage in staff through vacancies, there would be a decrease of over $1.2 million, or the equivalent of 19 positions.

Dennis also pointed out free and reduced lunch applications increased by over 13,000 students. He said between two-thirds and three-fourths of districts had more students in the program.

The legislative agenda items, along with the consent agenda, were the only action items of the day, other than a vote taken to approve a segment of the commissioner's report that outlined how the state would address the process of

revising the math and reading standards. Part of that process included a commitment to use the same assessments for the next four years even as the standards might change. Dr. Posny indicated that would be the prudent thing to do as new federal guidelines could undo Kansas work if it was done without new guidelines in mind.

Other legislative recommendations approved were to put state board members on the same level as state senate candidates as far as campaign finance reporting; modify the format of the general ballot for national and state offices; adopt a three-year funding plan similar to the 2010 Commission plan (it passed on a 6-2 vote, the others were unanimous); request a interim legislative study of health insurance options available to districts; and submit to the Legislative Educational Planning Committee a request to study how time is used in schools in lieu of a request for a study of year-round schools.

The board also received a report on HR 6021, which called for a thorough examination of how students are screened for dyslexia, services for which they are eligible and the teacher preparation process necessary to ensure students receive appropriate instruction and support.

Other reports included a follow-up to one given previously on the use of seclusion rooms; the Teaching in Kansas Commission; the Kansas Educational Leadership Commission, and an update on how the Multi-tiered Support System (MTSS) is effectively being used at Junction City High School.

The board, after hearing from staff about the proposed 21st Century Learner, and Learning Environment, offered enthusiastic support for the initiative. Chair Dr. Bill Wagnon, D-Topeka, suggested it was as good a piece of work he had seen in his years of service on the board.

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