The Colorado Legislature convened on January 8 for the 2020 legislative session, and already has introduced more than thirty bills related to public education. In her opening day remarks, House Speaker K.C. Becker called the 2019 session “one of the most historic (and) productive in our state’s history,” and lawmakers have signaled they want to address substantive issues again this year at the Capitol. Pertaining to public education, we know that includes school finance, teacher pay, school safety, the accountability system, and more.

CASE’s advocacy efforts are strongly member-driven and I encourage you to stay engaged through this bi-weekly communication, by attending our Legislative Committee meetings, and sharing with us any thoughts or feedback you might have about the work occurring at the Capitol. The Legislative Committee next meets on January 24 at CASE, where we’ll discuss both the topics below and other legislation.

As always, please don’t hesitate to contact me with any questions at lescarcega@co-case.org.

- Lisa Escárcega, CASE Executive Director

School funding and teacher pay stand out as top focus for legislators
The Interim Committee on School Finance announced in early January that it would not be introducing any committee-recommended legislation this session. As we’ve shared with you, this committee has worked since early summer to reach consensus on updates to Colorado’s school funding formula, which has not been reworked since it was put into law in 1994. Although there is overwhelming bipartisan agreement that updates are necessary, the committee was unable to agree on recommended changes to the formula, as well as how much—if any—new revenue should be infused into the K-12 funding system.

The committee released a bill draft in early December that proposed more money for students living in poverty, ELL students, and those with disabilities. However, no dollar amounts were included in the legislation, which made it difficult to gauge the financial impact on districts. Superintendents were clear that they could not support any bill that created financial winners and losers, and committee members disagreed about whether new revenue was necessary for the School Finance Act. With the legislative session one week out, the committee simply ran out of time before they could come to agreement on a bill.

Although school finance legislation isn’t coming forward from the interim committee, we do expect that individual lawmakers may introduce their own school funding bills. Generally speaking, Democrats believe that new revenue is critical while Republicans argue that education is receiving more funding than ever before, and the solution is that districts be more strategic and thoughtful about how current funds are used.

Related to the school funding conversation is a large focus on teacher pay. Here too, party differences are significant and illustrated by the below bills that aim to address teacher pay in very dissimilar ways.

**Senate Bill 74: Bonus Program for Highly Effective Teachers**: This legislation, sponsored by Republican Senator Paul Lundeen, would create a $50 million program from which highly effective teachers would be eligible to receive an annual bonus. CEA quickly indicated their opposition to this bill and any like it, citing the need to focus first and foremost on improving teacher pay across the board.
**Senate Bill 89: Educator Pay Raise Fund:** Democratic Senator Jessie Danielson introduced on Monday this CEA-backed legislation that would create a new state program to support districts in raising teacher salaries to a required minimum amount, with priority given to the highest need districts. Applying for these funds would be optional and the program would be implemented by CDE.

**Discussions continue about uniform mill levy legislation**
For months, conversations have been in the works about a bill this session to address the imbalance of school and state contributions to K-12 funding, and the variance in those contributions across districts. Nothing has been introduced yet, but the draft being circulated would set mill levies at a uniform rate of 27 mills or the number of mills that would result in enough property tax revenue to fully fund a district’s total program—whichever is less. A school district required to increase their mills based on this legislation would need to get voter approval and would not be required to increase by more than one mill each year, and could opt to phase in the increase over multiple years. The draft legislation requires that the state share of total program funding must increase each year by inflation and student enrollment and that additional monies coming in from mill levies would be used to buy down the budget stabilization factor.

CASE Lobbyist Elisabeth Rosen, superintendents, and district CFOs have been actively engaged in discussions about this issue and the potential legislation. As we shared with you in a previous communication, one of CASE’s challenges is that there is no clear consensus among districts about the impact of the bill—some support the concept and others are strongly opposed, believing that school funding needs to be addressed systemically at the state level and not left to districts to solve.

We will discuss this bill draft at the January 24 meeting of the CASE Legislative Committee and continue to keep you posted as conversations move forward.

**More legislation to watch**
CASE has a complete list of bills we are working on and monitoring on our website; it’s updated in real-time and you can access it by clicking here.

The below bills help provide a sense of some of the public education-related legislation that has been introduced over the last week; we’ll cover all of these at next week’s Legislative Committee meeting.

- **School safety:** An interim committee met over the summer and fall and ultimately recommended a number of bills pertaining to school safety, including:
  - **House Bill 1005: Improving the Safe2Tell Program.** Would require the development of a process to ensure a crisis operator receives all calls and texts, with non-crisis calls and texts being routed appropriately. Requires an annual advertising campaign to increase awareness of Safe2Tell.
  - **Senate Bill 1: Expand Behavioral Health Training for K-12 Educators.** Would require CDE to create a voluntary train-the-trainer model to build capacity in school employees to promote and support youth mental and behavioral health.
  - **Senate Bill 14: Excused Absences in Public Schools for Behavioral Health.** Allows student behavioral health concerns to qualify for an excused absence.
  - **Senate Bill 23: Colorado Working Group on School Safety.** Creates an interagency working group on school safety to study and identify best practices/recommended changes.
House Bill 1007: Increasing diversity in the public education workforce. Would require CDE and the Department of Higher Education (DHE) to form a workgroup that will study the barriers in recruiting, preparing, and retaining a diverse educator workforce. The group would be charged with making recommendations to the Legislature in 2021.

House Bill 1032: Timing of review of education standards. Would stagger the timing for review of education standards for pre-K through twelfth grade to ensure that all standards are reviewed one time every six years.

Republican education reform bills: House and Senate Republicans introduced a package of bills pertaining to public education with the stated intent of improving choice and freedom for parents, teachers and students. Although CASE does not anticipate that these pieces of legislation will have majority support and pass, we still will be working with legislators to explain our concerns and provide testimony in committee hearings.

New tool available through Colorado Vision 2020

Join us at a CASE Legislative Committee meeting
Whether or not you’re on the CASE Legislative Committee, we invite all CASE members to come to these meetings and participate in the conversation. Save the below dates for these upcoming Legislative Committee meetings, and if you would like to participate remotely, please email CASE Director of Communications Melissa Gibson at mgibson@co-case.org.

- January 24, 2020 – 1:30 PM to 4:00 PM, CASE
- February 7, 2020 – 1:30 PM to 4:00 PM, Westin Hotel in Westminster, CO, following the conclusion of CASE Winter Leadership Conference
- February 28, 2020 – 1:30 PM to 4:00 PM, CASE
- March 20, 2020 – 1:30 PM to 4:00 PM, CASE
- April 17, 2020 – 1:30 PM to 4:00 PM, CASE