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September 17, 2007

# *Update*



from DWIGHT D. JONES

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COMMISSIONER OF EDUCATION

Welcome to *Update*, the latest communication from the Colorado Commissioner of Education. Previously *Chiefline*, *Update* will keep you informed on the issues being addressed and the topics being discussed by leadership at the Colorado Department of Education.



**1. CASE Conference ~ Breckenridge ~ Aug. 1-3, 2007**

It is indeed a new day for education, not only in the department, but across the state! From the onset of my days as commissioner, CASE Director John Hefty and his staff have extended a warm reception, and that positive relationship continues as we work collaboratively to address the challenges facing Colorado educators. It was my pleasure to provide opening remarks at the conference, and I enjoyed many good conversations with CASE members. CDE staff, both those who presented workshops and those in attendance, were warmly received. The atmosphere was positive and hopeful, and the opportunity for forging new relationships and partnerships was evident.

**2. Colorado State Board of Education Retreat ~ Colorado Springs ~ Aug. 28-29, 2007**

All seven members joined together for two full days of strategic planning. Great progress was made in regard to how the board and I can maximize our time, communication and interaction; how the department can best work with and assist the board; and how the board – as individuals and as a group – can be involved with and best support the schools, districts and communities they represent. Department leadership presented its “Forward Thinking” plan (see below) and outlined specific actions, which were enthusiastically embraced. Along with their input, the board was in complete agreement in their encouragement for the department to move forward with the plan. I continue to appreciate the steadfast commitment of each board member to the importance of making a high-quality education and rich experiences available to every child in the state. They may have varied opinions on how to best accomplish that task, but they do indeed desire the same end result.

**3. “Forward Thinking: The Voice (and Future) of CDE”**

“Forward Thinking” is the result of three months of in-depth survey, analysis and thinking by leadership of CDE. It began with an independent agency’s survey of staff opinions of both the department and their work, which later led to frank discussions of department issues at a two-day retreat for the leadership team. At that retreat, staff developed a concept statement for the department of education, outlining the image,

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service and affect they wanted CDE to have – both internally and in the field. Senior staff then took themselves to task to outline a plan that aligned with that statement. “Forward Thinking” is that outline. What follows is excerpted from the executive summary:

“Intended to complement P-20 efforts already underway, ‘Forward Thinking’ strives to improve the education of young people by moving forward on a variety of fronts, including:

- Creating private-public partnerships that enhance the growth of K-12 education
- Establishing a Legacy Foundation (funded privately to serve public K-12 interests)
- Revising standards and assessments (initially funded without taxpayer dollars)
- Hosting a summit to provide an arena in which Colorado leaders may collaborate in addressing education issues
- Improving conditions that contribute to success especially for those students who are poor and minority
- Setting quality standards for the provision of online education programs
- Enhancing the system of support for schools through model curricula
- Introducing a Council on Innovation and Entrepreneurship to see that critical industry skills are embedded in standards
- Establishing a Legacy Scholars program to provide scholarships that underwrite the tuition for 100 top seniors who agree to enroll in Colorado colleges in exchange for service after graduation in hard-to-staff teaching assignments
- Restoring the CDE reputation by modeling self-improvement, i.e., publicizing the results of annual stakeholders’ surveys
- Creating a Futures Center to support development of a long-range vision for public education
- Making budget processes transparent and understandable
- Applying discretionary dollars to areas of greatest academic need
- Improving the collection, reporting and management of data.”

*To view “Forward Thinking” in its entirety, visit*

<http://www.cde.state.co.us/Communications/download/PDF/ForwardThinking.pdf>

On Wednesday, Sept. 12, Deputy Commissioner Ken Turner and I hosted an all-staff meeting, at which time we presented an overview of the plan to staff and encouraged their buy-in. We met with the governor’s office, advised the house and senate majority and minority leaders on the plan, and on Thursday, Sept. 13, released “Forward Thinking” to the public and press. A copy was also hand-delivered to every legislative office in the capitol.

“Forward Thinking” is in alignment with the state board’s strategic plan. In creating it, staff remained mindful of possible outcomes of the P-20 Council and what might be the recommendations of its subcommittees. Thus, “Forward Thinking” is meant to be a fluid document, one that evolves and is strengthened over time as we receive input from educators, administrators, corporate society, civic leaders and community members. For

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example, later this week CASE is hosting a conference for superintendents in Keystone. You can be certain we will welcome and look forward to receiving feedback and suggestions from many in attendance there.

#### **4. State content standards review and analysis ~**

If our goal is to prepare students for a successful life after graduation, we must make sure that what they are being required to know and be able to do is indeed appropriate and applicable to today's market or high education opportunities. The current standards are 13 years old; much has changed since 1994. In the coming weeks, CDE will issue an RFP to find an outside agency to oversee the review process as we scrutinize our content standards; results and recommendations from this review are anticipated to go before the state board in the fall 2008. *Please note: Our intent in reviewing the standards should in no way be seen as an intent to "dumb down" grade-level expectations. Instead, our goal is to maintain the highest level of rigor and to keep the commitment to accountability that the public deserves from its schools.*

The next step in the process will include a thorough examination of the CSAP assessments, and how they align with any new or improved standards – are the tests still applicable? We anticipate taking assessment recommendations to the state board in the fall 2009. This timeframe aligns with the assessment contract we have with CTB McGraw Hill, which is due to be up or renegotiated in 2010.

#### **5. Unit of Online Education ~**

Pursuant to requirements outlined in SB 07-215, the department is optimistic and pleased with its appointment of Pamela Hoppe Ice as the director of Online Education. Though she officially joins CDE on Oct. 1, Pamela has been working with the department to meet and fulfill the bills other deadlines and requirements. We also want to take a broader look at how CDE can support and develop the best online programs in the country, and soon will be seeking input from educators, community members and other interested parties.

#### **6. School Accreditation Process ~**

One of the goals of the department reorganization is to better align NCLB requirements with state accreditation requirements. Again, with input from the field, the department plans to examine what changes or revisions may be required to make this process better. Findings will be presented to the state board in the form of recommendations. While we appreciate the additional year we've been granted, the clock is ticking and we need to take action. We are also looking to increase our data capacity so that less will be required of districts to submit, and so that they can focus on recommendations and improvement rather than collecting and reporting data.

In an effort to make better use of our time and resources, CDE staff is also working to create a rubric to support a three-year accreditation review process. For school districts that are doing well, we are considering that a visit and review every three years might be sufficient. Schools that miss the mark in a couple of areas but seem steady overall

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would be reviewed every other year, while struggling schools and districts that are struggling would be evaluated annually to allow staff the time and opportunity to better address needs and concerns. Of course, all districts would be encouraged to consult with their regional director at any time and would continue to have access to CDE services and support.

### **7. High School Reform ~**

The intent of the aforementioned standards review (see number 4) is also to look at high school standards, which will in turn determine whether we have the right assessment at the high school level. I am well aware of the many conversations taking place with regard to ninth- and tenth-grade CSAPs and the eleventh-grade ACT. Please know that as we seek to address these concerns, we recognize the need to maintain coherence.

We have seen what a lack of coherence can bring. Amendment 23, Gallagher and TABOR is one example of policies that collide. If insufficient attention is paid at the outset to the importance of coherence, then a price will be paid later. Unintended consequences of public policy create doubt. It is vital that the new system be appropriate for its purpose.

We take notice of well-intended suggestions that the CSAPs for eighth grade and beyond be replaced with components of ACT's assessment package. As yet there is no solid evidence that the U.S. Department of Education would accept ACT for the purpose of NCLB. We need to tread carefully to ensure we get this process right.

On a related note, CDE staff briefed me on a recent ACT retreat and mentioned that presenters spoke of how poorly K-12 schools prepare students for the rigor of higher education. As I listened, I was struck by a thought: *Just what are the standards for these college-level courses?*

While K-12 content standards have been in the public eye for more than a decade, I do not recall seeing a similar set of standards for college/university coursework. I am unaware of a national or statewide consensus on the content of such standards.

I do not know enough to be cynical. However, without these measurements, most of our students will be ill-prepared by default. Only a few students will hit the mark (invisible though it be) courtesy of the law of chance.

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Some final thoughts: In the brief time I've been with the department, we have evaluated staff and programs, noted areas where we've fallen short and solicited much input and feedback from you in the field. The department has been tasked with many important objectives, and we are mindfully addressing each of these as priorities. However, all of these changes are *reactive*.

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Implementing “Forward Thinking” is proactive. Its creative approaches and innovative methods give legs to ideas and put them into motion. By acknowledging what isn’t working, “Forward Thinking” deepens the department’s commitment to “a new day.” It aligns with the state board of education’s strategic plan, and its positive outcomes will help return both the board and the department to a position of leadership for education in Colorado. In short, its fundamental premise of service and support will indeed serve the state well.