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Shoring up public education

By Nancy Mitchell, Rocky Mountain News

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Call it the education of Andrew Romanoff - or call it the construction of his rural constituent base.

Colorado's speaker of the house is traveling the state in daylong jaunts - driving on unpaved roads to meet with kids, eating lunch in restaurants decorated with rusted farm tools, singing America the Beautiful with the Lions Club - to learn more about rural schools.

It's not always a pretty picture.

In the San Luis Valley, the high school's only math teacher is too busy with other subjects to teach calculus; in Ordway, the gym weights are prison castoffs; in tiny Joes, a teacher applies for Gerber Foods grants to buy textbooks.

In repairs alone, K-12 schools statewide need \$6 billion to \$10 billion. Which is why Romanoff may propose, for the first time in Colorado history, a statewide ballot measure to build and repair schools.

'Now we're in charge'

The 41-year-old Democrat may be known better for his work resolving the state's budget crisis - he crafted what would become Referendum C - than for his involvement in school issues.

His gutsy, hard-won success with Referendum C, passed largely with the help of rural lawmakers, taught him the value of votes outside the metro area.

It also solidified his standing as future gubernatorial material.

His position in the House and his reputation as a policy wonk capable of pragmatic solutions make it likely any education bills he backs in the coming legislative session will be taken seriously.



George Kochaniec Jr.
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Speaker of the House Andrew Romanoff, D-Denver, eyes a leaky roof during a July tour of Strasburg High School.

Romanoff has decided, as he did with the budget, that education is an area where he can build consensus.

"We've had a fairly polarizing, paralyzing debate in the legislature in the last few years," he said. "We've been pitting one group of folks who believe schools need more resources against another group of folks who believe schools need more reform. I think the truth is," he said, "we need both."

Romanoff, who routinely visits Denver schools, has long supported improving access to preschool.

In January, he deposited copies of the report Tough Choices for Tough Times on the desks of every lawmaker in the Statehouse.

The national report includes ideas as noncontroversial as early childhood education for all 4-year-olds and as radical as enrolling high school juniors in trade schools.

On the road again

The road trips began in March, with a visit to Eagle County. Through Denver, Gunnison, Montrose and Yuma, the focus was on what's happening inside schools. In July, with a trip to the San Luis Valley, the focus shifted to the conditions of the schools themselves.

Altogether, Romanoff has logged 3,200 miles, with 1,380 of those on this summer's rural tours. Next month, he's scheduled to visit the Western Slope towns of Nucla and Naturita.

Accompanying him on most trips are state Sen. Sue Windels, D-Arvada, chairwoman of the Senate Education Committee, and Rep. Michael Merrifield, D-Colorado Springs, chairman of the House Education Committee.

Lisa Weil, of Great Education Colorado, and Kathy Gebhardt, of Children's Voices, put the rural schools tours together. Both groups advocate more state funding for K-12 schools.

Expectations from such groups - as well as the teachers union - are high for reform legislation in the upcoming General Assembly.

In 2007, Democrats, seen as the traditional friend of public education, were in control of the Governor's Mansion, the Senate and the House for the first time since 1962. But they were working off a budget crafted by Owens. In 2008, they'll be working off that of Democratic Gov. Bill Ritter.

Romanoff is well aware of the expectations. "The question is, 'Now we're in charge - what are we going to do with that power?' " he said. "I think folks ought to hold us accountable."

Schools in disrepair

Romanoff is working on a three-part platform: expand preschool programs, recruit and retain high-quality teachers and find funding for school buildings.

A commission appointed by Ritter to examine education from preschool to college, the P-20 Council, also is looking at the first two issues. Romanoff said he'll feed what he learns to the council, which is issuing recommendations in November.

The recent tours have focused on critical building needs, if only because they are often obvious.

Crumbling ceiling tiles here, a rotting floor there. Portable classrooms dating to 1973. Schools built long before accessibility for the disabled became law.

Reading about the needs didn't prepare Romanoff for the reality.

"Visiting these buildings where roofs are caving in . . . ," he stopped, shaking his head. "The best use of some of these reports would be to prop up a leg of a table."

In the San Luis Valley, Romanoff met a 17-year-old who taught himself calculus because the school's only math teacher was busy with algebra and trigonometry.

"I went to the library to study calculus 2 when (the math teacher) did trig," said Peter Rose, "and on occasion I went to ask him questions."

Rose said the decrepit conditions at his school in Centennial - the one in Costilla County, not the one near Littleton - conveyed a single message to students: Why bother?

"It's kind of discouraging," Rose said. "It just kind of all leads to an atmosphere of negative energy. It's kind of like, nobody cares, so why should we?"

A facility survey by the Donnell- Kay Foundation found plumbing issues in the Centennial school that caused sewage to back up into some hallways. The foundation was cracked and appeared to have moved. Interior classrooms, including the science lab, had no ventilation.

In some states, schools can apply directly to the state for help.

But in Colorado, school districts must rely on local property tax increases, and many rural areas do not have the tax base to pay for a new school.

Centennial, for example, could raise \$6.9 million, if voters agreed. But an elementary school costs \$9.6 million, based on a national average.

The result is many districts such as Centennial must keep pumping money into repairs for their aging schools. It also means less money for classrooms.

Which is why Rose taught himself calculus and Jordan Jackson, a junior in Joes, on Colorado's plains, has never had foreign language or Advanced Placement classes. "I think it would be of my benefit to learn Spanish," she said.

Jackson wants to be a TV journalist but has little access to equipment. The school news "is sent out on a little sheet of paper that they hang on our lockers once a week."

Her counterparts in some Front Range schools star in their own TV broadcasts.

First of its kind

Romanoff, who grew up in Columbus, Ohio, and earned his bachelor's degree at Yale, compares what he's seen on these tours to the poor schools of Nicaragua and Costa Rica, where he taught English after college.

"I used to live in Central America," he said after seeing a hole in the floor of a classroom in Miami-Yoder, "and I didn't expect to see similar conditions in central Colorado."

Romanoff's goal is for lawmakers to find a funding source for K-12 building.

"If we can do that inside (the Statehouse), we should. If not, we'll take it to the ballot."

A bond issue to fund school capital needs statewide could stand on its own or be part of a larger package, along with roads and bridges, he said.

First, he wants a statewide audit of school building needs. The state doesn't track such numbers, but the Donnell-Kay Foundation, in its own 2005 survey, estimated the need at between \$5.7 billion and \$10 billion.

Amendment 23, Part 2?

The Rocky Ford Lions Club meets for lunch Wednesdays at El Capitan, a restaurant where the wallpaper is flocked red velvet.

As is tradition for the club, Romanoff had to sing for his ham- and-potatoes lunch, making his way through Git Along Little Dogies and Pistol Packin' Mama.

Then he got down to business.

"Here's where this is going. After several months of running around the state and talking to folks, we'll put together a plan to create world-class schools and it will carry a price tag, I suspect, because this stuff isn't free," he said.

It became clear on that Rocky Ford tour, his fourth this summer, that Romanoff is mulling a way - be it legislation or ballot question - to increase operating dollars as well as building dollars.

The last substantial increase in district operating budgets came in fall 2000 when voters approved Amendment 23, which requires that K-12 funding increase annually by inflation plus 1 percent.

Is Colorado ready for another school funding boost?

Maybe, maybe not, said Rep. Rob Witwer, R-Genesee, whose proposal to set statewide graduation requirements in math and science was defeated this year.

"I think more taxpayers would support more funding if they were confident that standards were being raised," he said.

Witwer's bill would have required students to complete four years of math and three years of science before graduating. It was killed by Democrats.

"We need reform, and we need it sooner rather than later," Wit-wer said.

'Dare to dream'

Romanoff bristled at the suggestion that his solutions may be partisan or pander to education groups.

"There's not a Democratic way to fix a roof or a Republican way to repair a pipe," Romanoff said.

"I happen to think the quality of your education shouldn't depend on your ZIP code," he likes to say, a reference to a funding formula relying largely on property taxes.

Some teachers, such as a woman in Manzanola, are cynical he'll do anything to make a difference.

"I have only one computer in my classroom. I think every classroom should have at least three," she told him. "If you want to help, go back to Cherry Creek and send me three computers."

Romanoff smiled and, later, shrugged it off. Cynicism about education is to be expected, he said, after many years of tight budgets in Colorado schools.

"Coloradans haven't been dared to dream" about what their schools could be, he said. "There's a real appetite for this conversation."

Money for school buildings

- How it works: In Colorado, school districts typically rely on raising local property taxes for major school repair and building needs.
- The problem: Smaller school districts often need new schools, but they don't have the tax base to pay for construction. Statewide, school capital needs are estimated to be \$5.7 billion to \$10 billion.
- Working on a solution: House Speaker Andrew Romanoff, after touring schools across Colorado, says if lawmakers can't find funding, he may propose a statewide bond issue, the first in state history.

SCHOOL LAWSUIT

- In 2000, former Gov. Bill Owens agreed to set aside \$190 million over 11 years to settle a lawsuit brought by six school districts that claimed they couldn't raise enough money for buildings and repairs. Some of the money is doled out annually in grants.
- Since 2000, school districts have filed 1,241 requests totaling \$398 million. About \$120 million has been awarded. Kathy Gebhardt, an attorney who filed the lawsuit, said it is "not even close" to what's needed.

HOW OTHER STATES HANDLE SCHOOL BUILDING NEEDS

- Arizona issues bonds against revenue from a portion of the state sales tax; the legislature makes annual appropriations to a building fund. Bonds have generated more than \$2.5 billion since 1999.
- New Mexico formerly dedicated 60 percent of lottery revenue to school capital projects but switched to regular bond issues off revenue from oil and gas severance tax. The result is \$1.1 billion generated since 1999.
- Wyoming lawmakers annually appropriate funding, relying largely on revenue from federal mine lease royalties such as coal. The state has seen \$1.9 billion for school capital needs for fiscal years 2002-08. Source: Donnell-Kay Foundation Report "Recommendations For A Statewide School Capital Funding Program"

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