

Dunwell

Continued from page 1A

day having conversations with legislators,” he said. “You have to remember, what makes this bill very unique is this is the first time we’ve looked at it. There is a lot of legislation that you think moves quickly and does move quickly because it’s the third or fourth time we’ve looked at it.”

The AEA proposal and its amendment is brand new and will require a lot of extra studying from legislators, many of whom may not even grasp how AEAs or how special education works in public schools. There is a quick learning curve for lawmakers, Dunwell said.

While Dunwell has stated that he does not support the original proposal and is undecided on the governor’s amended proposal, he did tell the audience that he is never against looking for effectiveness and efficiencies, and he suggested decision making should be about the kids and making sure there are outcomes.

“The challenge of looking at a bill like this is: Do these changes actually create those things? Does it create more efficiencies or make it more effective? Are we seeing greater outcomes when it comes to special ed?” Dunwell said. “...One of the things I keep saying to the governor and staff is begin with rural in mind.”

Larger school districts have more flexibility in terms of spending as opposed to the more rural school districts, like Baxter, Lynnvile-Sully and Prairie City-Monroe. Dunwell said bills like this garner a lot of emails. He encouraged the practice but asked that people include where they are from.

“It makes a tremendous difference because we get some that are just from all over the place, so knowing you’re from Newton or Pella or wherever it happens to be is extremely helpful,” Dunwell said. “They’ve been very thoughtful, and they provide a great context, typically, of what’s going on in the services AEAs provide.”

As well as the impact those services have the lives of families, kids and teachers. It has been quite the experience the past 13 days, Dunwell added.

“I anticipate the next month or month-and-a-half to be filled with it,” he said. “People always ask me, ‘What do you think is going to happen, Jon?’ I think some grand compromise is going to be reached. You don’t unveil a bill like this without anticipating some sort of compromise or something coming out.”

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Rozenboom

Continued from page 1A

governor was going to look at the AEA structure, and because I knew that I started about four months ago visiting with superintendents and school boards and teachers and parents, and this notebook is kind of my own research,” he said, displaying the notebook in one hand.

Rumors were swirling around potential legislation affecting the AEAs long before lawmakers convened for the 2024 session. Iowans were officially informed of the governor’s plan to rework the agencies during her Condition of the State address. The details of the proposed bill were released shortly after to much criticism.

“It was not quite what I expected,” Rozenboom said. “It was probably more aggressive than I expected. For the next few days I started trying to study the bill and study the ramifications. But I stayed away from discussions with colleagues because I wanted them to ... create their own perceptions.”

Shortly after the bill was unveiled, it was clear the AEAs would be forced to stop providing a large majority of general education services and focus solely on improving special education.

Reynolds said in her address that Iowa’s special education students are performing below the national average.

However, pushback from Iowans prompted Reynolds to amend the bill to include general education services. In an open letter to Iowans, the governor said her amended bill would allow AEAs to continue providing special education services and allow districts to get their share of AEA funding for education services, too.

At the time of the school board meeting, Rozenboom had not acquired the amended legislation, but he kind of knows what it says. To him, it is a much more acceptable bill than the original proposal. The senator was convinced that not a single legislator would have voted for the first proposal.

“I don’t know that and I don’t want to overstate it, but I didn’t sense a lot of, ‘Yeah! Let’s get this done!’ Last Wednesday when she talked about some revisions, I warmed up to it some,” Rozenboom said. “I’m not there yet. I’m keeping my powder dry.”

Rozenboom has served 12 years in the Iowa Senate, but this year is unlike any other in the sense that the AEA legislation has “sucked a lot of the oxygen out of the room” and is dominating every legislative conversation thus far. The senator

is feeling the public pressure.

“I’ve been up here 12 years but I’ve never quite felt the pressure that I feel right now,” he said. “There is a half million Iowa kids that are depending upon us getting this right. And you’re depending on us getting this right. I don’t know what all that means right now. I’m being very open and honest with you.”

But Rozenboom wanted the audience to be reassured about one thing: Despite what they may have heard, the statehouse process “is very transparent,” he said.

“You’ve heard it said that watching legislation get made is a lot like watching sausage get made,” he said. “A lot of truth to that, folks. But I want to reassure you it is all open and transparent. This will be no different. We’ll have all the eyes of Iowa on this as we proceed.”

Although Rozenboom is unsure where he is at on the AEA bill, he agrees with the governor that significant changes are need. He also believes the AEAs are “administratively heavy and performance light.” Regardless, he said he has made the commitment to listen well and be thoughtful and informed. To the greatest extent possible.

“And with one primary goal at the end of the day, and that’s to serve our kids well,” he said.

Jobs

Continued from page 1A

Department of Education while going over the AEA proposal and teacher pay increases.

School board member Travis Padgett started by questioning the sustainability of the increased teacher pay, particularly if school districts are to make up the difference at some point. Padgett said the school district is not able to sustain it now, and neither will a 2.5 percent increase in Supplemental State Aid.

“We’ve heard 2.5 repeatedly and it’s not always been the case in my 11 years now on school board — almost the same time as you’ve been there (in the Iowa Senate),” Padgett said to Rozenboom, who has served 12 years in the Iowa Legislature. “I just think there is a sustainability problem.”

Increasing the minimum starting pay for teachers to \$50,000, he added, and then bringing up other teachers to comparable amounts could hurt school finances.

“Is that the cut of the AEA to fund those?” Padgett asked.

School board member Liz Hammerly, who also works for Heartland AEA, said, “No, they’re going to move positions to the (Iowa Department

of Education).”

“Right, because they’ve already applied. They’ve already started hiring.”

Rozenboom and Iowa House Rep. Jon Dunwell confirmed that, yes, the state Department of Education has already posted new job openings. To Padgett, that tells him it is “a little bit veiled” or “backhanded” and “somehow they knew these postings were coming,” particularly when a bill had not even been passed yet.

The Des Moines Register’s Stephen Gruber-Miller reported on Jan. 11 that the Iowa Department of Education posted 29 job openings for a new Division of Special Education one day after Iowa Gov. Kim Reynolds called for widespread changes to Iowa’s special education system and the state’s nine AEAs.

“I’m not trying to be negative or challenging, but that’s just kind of the things that we feel,” Padgett said.

Rozenboom said, “I will be negative. That was not smart. I respect the governor, but that was not—”

“It looks like instead of smacking the hand of the Department of Education for not getting things achieved, we’re going to smack somebody else down the line. If we have nine AEAs they are all going to be

different. But isn’t that the responsibility of the Department of Education to get them in line?”

Rozenboom was unsure the state department administrators had the authority to do that. Padgett said they should. Rozenboom said perhaps that could be an option. Padgett argued the AEA restructure feels like a punishment for not achieving and that lawmakers should focus on filling service gaps.

Hammerly circled back to job postings. Originally, she had an open mind for the AEA bill, especially if it meant more teachers and more associates. As a consultant of Heartland AEA, Hammerly serves 15 teachers, 197 students, five buildings and two districts.

“I get one day at Baxter, one day at Berg, three days I spend between Newton and WEST Academy, I had one day where I collaborated,” Hammerly said. “Today I was collaborating with a teacher for 30 minutes solving one paperwork issue ... How does this proposal change what I’m able to offer?”

Hammerly sees more impact to improving student achievement across the state if lawmakers can get more boots on the ground.

“But I don’t see that,” Hammerly said.

Dunwell said law-

makers do not know what the amended proposal looks like just yet. But legislators are trying to get at the bottom of the issues with administrative positions in the AEAs. Dunwell said the governor wants to replicate those positions in the Department of Education down to about 140 positions from 400.

In conversations with his leadership team, Dunwell told them to give him the benefits of the AEA restructure bill.

“If we’re going to go from 400 down to 140 and we save money, does that mean that money can now go out for more Liz Hammerlys to be working with our special education teachers in school? If that is what happens, then you start looking at that being a very positive outcome,” Dunwell said.

From there the state could put more effort into helping special education teachers, he added.

“Please understand the Department of Education, which is an executive branch, advertising 30 positions — I’m going to say this boldly — was offensive to the legislature,” Dunwell said. “Because we had never seen a bill. We had no idea and it had not been approved. So, Travis, you are correct. That was an offensive move by the Department of Education.”

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