



# ***MEMORANDUM***

**To:** Representative Del Mcomie, Co-Chair, Joint Education Committee  
Senator Hank Coe, Co-Chair, Joint Education Committee

**From:** Lawrence O. Picus

**RE: Distance Education**

**Date:** January 11, 2008

## **Background**

During the 2006-07 interim, the JEC has considered the issue of distance education in depth. The WDE appointed the Wyoming Distance Education Task Force (DETF) to consider the issue and make recommendations to the committee. The task force report, dated September 2007<sup>1</sup> was presented to the JEC at its meeting in December 2007. That report outlines a clear process for supporting and encouraging distance education programs for K-12 education in Wyoming.

Lawrence O. Picus and Associates believes that distance education programs represent an important approach to helping ensure that all of Wyoming's school children have access to a diverse offering of high quality courses that both meet the state's standards and give children in all parts of the state an opportunity to take classes of interest to them. This memo offers the JEC our recommendations regarding the structure of the distance education program for Wyoming.

Overall we are in general agreement with the recommendations made by the Task Force. We have a few suggestions for modifications of those recommendations, all of which are made with our over-arching goal of helping Wyoming establish an efficient and cost-based education program that meets the requirements of the Basket of Education Goods and Services and that gives each student the opportunity to meet the State's academic performance standards.

## **DETF Recommendations**

Rather than repeat all of the recommendations from the DETF's excellent report, in this section, we summarize the DETF's general outline for the operation of a distance education program in Wyoming. In the discussion, we identify the areas where we suggest modifications to their recommendations.

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<sup>1</sup> Wyoming Department of Education. (2007). *Report from the Wyoming Distance Education Task Force*. Cheyenne, WY: Wyoming Department of Education. (September). Mimeo.

The DETF recommends that a Wyoming Switchboard Network (WSN) be established to help the WDE manage and monitor distance education programs in the state's school districts. The WSN would provide hosting capacity for distance education courses as well as serve as a clearinghouse to help maintain the quality of distance education programs and to help coordinate offerings to minimize duplication. We strongly support the establishment of the WSN as a tool for managing the technologically complex and rapidly changing demands of distance education programs. We further support the requirement that all distance education programs be approved as meeting the State's requirements for content and quality.

The DETF envisions three possible distance education delivery modes:

1. A student engages in distance education programs in his or her resident district. This could be either for part or all of his or her educational program.
2. A student engages in distance education in another district for part of his or her education program and completes the other part of his or her education in the resident district. The education program in the resident district could be done either in a traditional classroom, or via distance education.
3. A student enrolls in a full-time program of studies in a district other than his or her district of residence.

The DETF report outlines the process for each of these scenarios. In all instances, the student is required to have an approved Distance Learning Plan (DLP) – a concept with which we wholeheartedly agree.

If the student participates in distance education programs in his or her own district, a DLP must be developed to monitor his or her progress, but there is no fiscal impact in terms of the funding model.

If a student participates part time in distance education in a non-resident district, the DETF recommends that the DLP specify the portion of the student's program to be provided by each district (resident and non-resident) and that the ADM funding for the student be allocated to the resident district. Funding for the distance education courses taken in the non-resident district would be paid for by the resident district through a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the two districts. The DETF recommended a funding split of 20% for the resident district to monitor progress and 80% to the district providing the coursework, for the proportion of the student's day undertaken through the distance education program.

It is our recommendation that this process work as described, with the exception that suggested proportions of funding not be specified. Our view is that the most efficient approach to funding these programs is to let the districts themselves determine the appropriate proportional shares of the costs of these programs, and by letting them negotiate the terms of this cost sharing in a "market" approach. This will encourage efforts on the part of both districts to seek the most efficient and cost based approaches to providing and securing distance education courses.

The DETF also suggested that the portion of a student's ADM that is provided through Distance Education be funded at the minimum per ADM funding level for districts in the state. While this

approach seems attractive on the surface to help monitor costs, it is our view that it adds needless complexity to the system, and may distort the educational decisions made by districts. Therefore we suggest that funding for that student to the residence district be at the level of per ADM funding for all students in the district as computed on the summary page of the Funding Model.

Some explanation for this recommendation is needed. Suppose the resident district is a small rural district with a relatively high level of per ADM funding. The district providing the distance education program is assumed to be a larger one with a lower per ADM funding level. The resident district will continue to have costs associated with monitoring the progress of the student enrolled in the non-resident district. Those costs will be borne under the district's existing cost structure, and it seems to us that if the portion of the student's program devoted to distance education courses were funded at a lower level, the district would either have a hard time funding the necessary services, or would have to negotiate a lower payment to the non-resident district. In either case, one of the districts would either be reluctant to enter into the agreement, or would have to reduce the level of services available to the student. We are concerned that this scenario could lead to districts making financial decisions that are not in the best interest of the student's educational program. Consequently we recommend funding the student at the ADM level of the resident district.

In the special instance of a student taking 100 percent of his or her program in a non-resident district, we concur with the DETF recommendation that the ADM funding for that student be sent directly to the non-resident district. However, again, rather than provide the non-resident district with the minimum per ADM funding in the state, we recommend that the funding for that student be at the non-resident district's ADM funding level as determined by the summary page of the Funding Model. Our logic here is the same as above. The cost structure facing the non-resident district does not change, so we feel it reasonable to provide the same level of funding it receives for other students. Since the non-resident district would now be responsible for all of the educational services of the student – including development of the DLP, the resident district would have no role in the student's program and consequently, there is no need to fund the student through the resident district.

These recommendations lead to one more recommended change from the DETF proposals. Currently, districts providing distance education classes receive an incentive payment of \$500 for every student completing the course. In the past, the purpose of this incentive payment was to provide funding to help districts develop distance education courses, and to provide funds to train and support teachers of those classes. The DETF recommends increasing this incentive to \$850 per pupil. The incentive was developed in part because under current law, there is no way to insure districts providing distance education services to students from other districts will be paid for providing those programs. The DETF recommendations – and our enhancement to those recommendations – resolve this issue more efficiently.

Consistent with our October 12, 2006 memo on this issue, we recommend the elimination of the incentive funding. An "after the fact" incentive seems a poor approach to encouraging districts to develop distance education classes. Moreover, since the DTEF recommendations propose a way to split the ADM funding among resident and non-resident districts –and our recommendation on this issue would provide districts even more money than the DETF recommendation – we see no need for incentive funding for course development, nor for teacher training and support.

Funds for teacher training and support are very clearly included in the evidence based approach used to develop the current Wyoming School Funding Model, and all districts should have sufficient funds to provide for such training, particularly if they are able to recoup distance education course offering costs from the districts enrolling children in the program.

Further, if the state wants to establish an incentive for the development of distance education courses – and we would support and encourage such a goal– we recommend establishment of a competitive grant program administered through the WSN or another agency within the WDE. This would further the WSN’s role in coordinating the offering of distance education courses, and enable the WSN to focus resources on areas of greatest need for distance education.

In summary, we believe the DETF recommendations are commendable and deserve to be implemented with two major changes. First, funding for the portion of a student’s program in distance education should be at the ADM funding level of the resident district, or in the case of a full program being taken at the non-resident district, at the ADM level of that non-resident district. Second, we would eliminate the incentive funding for distance education course taking and replace it with a competitive grant program for the development of additional distance education courses.