

Huntsman lobbies education secretary

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SALT LAKE CITY -- Gov. Jon Huntsman spent an hour Tuesday with U.S. Education Secretary Margaret Spellings, laying out Utah's objections to the No Child Left Behind education law.

Utah's conservative Republican legislators have threatened to reject President Bush's education reforms, saying the law undercuts local control of public education. In the just-ended legislative session, lawmakers passed a resolution delivering what many say was the sharpest rebuke of the law among the states.

But Huntsman convinced them to put off a vote on a more formal bill that would have directed education officials to give priority to state education goals over NCLB, and to spend as little state money as possible to comply with its rules. Lawmakers agreed to delay action until April 20, giving Huntsman time to negotiate a settlement.

"We certainly have their attention," Huntsman chief of staff Jason Chaffetz said Tuesday from Washington, D.C., after the governor met with Spellings and her top deputies.

Huntsman's education deputy, Tim Bridgewater, "will continue with a day-to-day dialogue and in-person meetings next week" with federal officials, Chaffetz said. "We have a tight timetable, so every day counts."

Chaffetz said the Utah delegation met with Spellings for "a good solid hour."

Spellings' office released a statement saying, "The secretary and the governor had a very congenial, productive meeting with substantive conversation, and the secretary looks forward to continuing this dialogue."

This is the second consecutive year Utah legislators have rebelled against the program championed by President Bush, a fellow Republican. Last year, they threatened to opt out of the No Child program, but retreated when White House and education officials warned Utah could lose \$106 million in federal education aid.

Rep. Margaret Dayton, R-Orem, who has been leading the fight, wasn't optimistic the latest negotiations would resolve anything.

"The Department of Education has offered suggestions before that really did not grant any flexibility," Dayton said Tuesday. "If we were to judge the future from the past, I'd be quite cautious that anything was going to be different."

Dayton deferred to state Supt. Patti Harrington, who at the AP's request released briefing notes she prepared for Huntsman's negotiations.

The papers start out by noting federal officials already accepted Utah's rules for establishing qualifications for elementary school teachers. That concession relieved Utah from imposing more onerous federal rules. Now state officials are asking for permission to establish qualifying rules for special education teachers and others who are expected to teach multiple disciplines.

Utah is asking for permission to use its own testing regimen, called U-PASS, rather than the federally mandated program.

"Goals will be established year-by-year for all children, schools and districts. The state expects to show growth across performance levels for all students. The department has requested that Utah provide detailed, technical information for its proposed growth model. Such detail, in terms of achievement scores, will be available in late August or early September 2005," Harrington's briefing paper says.

Among other points she made:

"Utah has agreed both to report and to hold schools and districts accountable for subgroup performance. Utah has proposed and the department has agreed that Utah will report subgroup performance results at the school and district level for subgroups with 15 or more students and will hold schools and districts accountable for subgroups with 40 or more students."

"Utah believes it needs more than the existing one-year flexibility for the testing and accountability for newly arrived non-English speaking immigrants and students."

"Utah desires to pursue additional options for the testing of students with disabilities, including the use of off-level assessments for students beyond those with the most significant cognitive disabilities."

Other states, also critical of the mandates, are standing behind Utah and asking for changes in how the law is applied.

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