The CSG West Education Committee convened on July 18, 2019 during the Annual Meeting in Big Sky, Montana. Led by Wyoming Representative Dave Northrup and Nevada Senator Mo Denis, the respective chair and vice chair of the committee, the session focusing on two key topics: teacher retention and recruitment and competency-based education.

The discussion on teacher retention and recruitment was led off by a brief presentation from Tara Kini of the Learning Policy Institute. In her remarks, Ms. Kini summarized that there are four elements that matter most to teachers: compensation, excellent preparation to be a teacher, mentor programs for new teachers, and good working conditions, including good strong leadership by administrators. She followed with six policies that have demonstrated effective retention and recruitment. These include solid induction and mentoring programs, leadership development programs, high retention pathway programs like teacher residency and apprentice programs, “grow your own” teachers programs using teacher aides via community college and higher education institutions, and better compensation using incentives, bonuses, and salary increases. Highlighting her remarks, she provided specific examples of successful state programs.

The roundtable discussion following Ms. Kini’s presentation gave rise to avid conversation. Many members talked about the lack of respect and stature the teaching profession has garnered of late. Members also mentioned that surveys of young people regarding career choices indicate that the teaching profession did not rate high as an option. Other members spoke of efforts to bring retirees back into the system but balanced the suggestion with concerns that it would put a strain on the retirement system. New Mexico Representative Linda Trujillo spoke about a program in New Mexico that added days to the school year specifically to be used for deep clinical training for teachers. Additional conversation addressed the failure of the federal government to adequately help fund special education. Wyoming Senator Hank Coe stated emphatically that in Wyoming the most effective tool for teacher retention and recruitment is compensation.
The second topic the Committee explored was competency-based education (CBE). Prior to the open discussion, Kelly Brady from the Idaho State Department of Education gave a briefing of the state’s efforts to initiate CBE. Providing a summary of the history of the program and how it has progressed in 19 initial incubator school districts, she covered decisions that were made about what the competencies would be, what assessments would look like, and what the outcomes for students, teachers, and parents should be. She also spoke about focus groups conducted with students, teachers, and parents and of their observations of the program. The presentation concluded with a listing of six program benefits, which are: more transparency on expectations in the education system, more desire to learn from students, more flexibility, more successful student outcomes, and stronger academic knowledge.

Following Ms. Brady’s presentation, the committee facilitated a roundtable discussion led by Senator Denis who spoke about how legislators from Nevada had visited Idaho to learn more about their CBE program. Ms. Brady fielded an array of questions from members focused on the efficiencies of the program in rural areas, pairing of students with different traditional grade levels, and incorporating special education students with the general student population. Montana Representative Moffie Funk spoke about parental push back to CBE experienced in Montana. Ms. Brady responded by sharing that Idaho struggled with parent push back as well and concluded that all public relations efforts in incubator districts must include extensive parent education outreach on CBE. Other questions addressed students moving in and out of districts, transcripts for colleges from CBE districts, and the flexibility of group learning along with individual one-on-one learning.

In the CBE session, as with the previous session on teacher retention and recruitment, the need to elevate the sense of professionalism of the teaching profession was noted as a common priority.