

STATE NEWS WEEKLY SUMMARY CONTINUED

the principal of a linked small business loan when the loan is renewed if the business is expanding and additional jobs will be created.

HB2959: Provides three separate tax incentives for agriculture-related investments.

—GERRY CHERRY
10/30/96

CORRECTIONS

DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS RECOUNTING PRISON BEDS

■(GIT) The number of available beds in Oklahoma's prison system will effectively increase or decrease within the next two months when the Board of Corrections accepts a new board legal capacity number.

"It has been some time since the capacity number was certified by the board," corrections board chairman Mike Roark said in an interview with *Capitol Network News*.

Roark said the number has fluctuated because of decisions to add to and subtract from the previously accepted number. Some of those decisions resulted from added space, while other decisions were based on changing health and fire safety codes and requirements of the American Corrections Association, which accredits prison systems.

The new number is expected to be determined sometime this week or next, said Jerry Massie, public information officer for the Department of Corrections.

Massie said the issue will likely be before the board no later than its scheduled meeting in December, although the possibility exists that a special meeting could be called in November to discuss the issue and other corrections matters.

Currently, the board certified legal capacity is 11,369 inmates, Massie said. Nearly 15,000 inmates are currently incarcerated in the prison system, Massie added, putting the state prison system at 131 percent of capacity, its highest ever.

Asked how the new number will compare with a private consultant's review of the state's prison system, Roark said, "I think it will dovetail into that effort. We don't know what conclusions that review is going to come to and we don't know that specific capacity numbers will be a part of that. If anything, I think the two efforts will complement one another and will be more enlightening."

Another reason underlies the effort, too, Roark said: His desire to build confidence

in the Department of Corrections, which has been the subject of heated discussions as of late.

"When I became chairman of the Board of Corrections," Roark explained, "that was one of my primary goals. I wanted the department to improve on its credibility with state leaders and with the public. I think we're doing that."

"I think it's important that we renew the confidence of everyone we work with."

—SHAWN ASHLEY
10/29/96

EDUCATION

GARRETT DISPUTES KEATING ON EDUCATION ISSUES

■(GIT) Oklahoma's Superintendent of Public Instruction and Governor continue to have differing opinions over the state of public education and ways it might be made better.

Speaking to members of the Association of Professional Oklahoma Educators earlier this month, Governor Frank Keating again criticized the state of public education in Oklahoma, rattling off a lengthy list of statistics to prove his point, and renewed his call for education's improvement through school choice, charter schools, and tougher curriculum.

The governor's assessment of public schools, however, is not shared by Sandy Garrett, Superintendent of Public Instruction. Speaking to reporters last week, the state superintendent was reluctant to openly criticize Keating's ideas, but stopped short of fully embracing them, saying that in many respects the governor's goals were already being pursued.

On the issue of school choice, which the governor said would allow parents to remove their children from poorly performing schools and to place them in higher performing ones, Garrett said, "We are a state of public school choice, but it's a local choice."

Specifically, the superintendent noted, some 28,000 public school students were allowed to move from one school to another during the current academic year. The only barrier to such transfers, she said, was the number of students already attending some schools.

Garrett's position on charter schools, institutions which implement new teaching techniques, was similar. The superintendent

said she "stands in support of charter schools," but added, "I'm not certain we need a law to do it."

During Thursday's state school board meeting, Garrett pointed to the alternative school system as another example of charter school efforts. Calling it "the most promising program the state has ever invested in," Garrett said, "It is similar to what other states are doing in the area of charter schools, because it gives the students involved a greater chance for success."

The issue on which Garrett and Keating appear closest to agreement is that of tougher academic standards and curriculum. Earlier this year, the governor advanced what he calls his "4x4" proposal, requiring high school students to take four years of math, science, English and social studies.

Garrett, however, said the state already has a similar proposal in place that requires school districts to offer four years of instruction in each of the identified subject areas. The only difference, Garrett explained, is that students are not required to take the courses.

"It is something," Garrett said, "that we can talk about."

—SHAWN ASHLEY
10/29/96

ATTORNEY GENERAL OPINION EXPECTED SOON ON EDUCATION FUNDS

■(GIT) State Superintendent of Public Instruction Sandy Garrett told members of the state school board that she expects the state's attorney general will soon release his opinion on the expenditure of certain funds currently being withheld from the education department.

While explaining a \$2.6 million proposed budget item for professional development, Garrett told the board that her request for an attorney general's opinion on whether money appropriated for the 1997 fiscal year could be spent despite the governor's veto of a bill directing the funds' expenditure was scheduled for discussion last week by the attorney general and his staff, possibly setting the stage for its release.

The opinion is expected to determine the fate of \$4.3 million allocated for staff development, as well as other funds.

At issue is a move by the Office of State Finance to withhold from the state educa-

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