

## Rural advocacy insights from Weld County Commissioner Mike Freeman



Former Weld Re-9 school board member, CASB director and CASB president

With only a handful of the state's 100 legislators representing rural Colorado, the need for school board members to build relationships with legislators who aren't from rural areas and to help bridge the rural-urban divide is more important than ever.

"School board members often think of themselves as nonpolitical. Unfortunately, when you are an elected official, everything revolves around politics to some degree," said Mike Freeman, Weld County Commissioner and former Weld Re-9 school board member.

"Rural education leaders need to step up more, become more political and have bipartisan conversations with their legislators," he said. "It's the most effective way to get them to truly understand the challenges that rural districts have and the economic impact rural communities have."

Because local school boards are the ones who recognize the needs of their students and what works best in their district, it's crucial they educate and interact with legislators who have the ability to make changes.

"We continue to pass cookie cutter, one-size-fits-all legislation that says, 'If it's good for Denver, it's good for the rest of the state.' But just because something works in Denver or Colorado Springs, doesn't mean it makes sense in Cortez or Akron, and we need to let legislators know that," he said.

Mike also stressed the value of local control and allowing communities to operate their schools in a way that works best for their students. With that local control comes a strong sense of community – a community that bands together to identify local school district needs and then pitches in to help, whether it's through a mill levy campaign or a local fund raiser to offset program budget cuts.

"When you talk to the right people, get buy-in from the community and get the right people in

place, you can make great things happen,” he said.

Despite the many challenges rural education leaders face, Mike remains hopeful they will continue to stand strong and support citizens in what matters most in their local district.

“We can’t get frustrated or say ‘It doesn’t really matter what we do because they don’t care about us at the state capitol anyway,’” he said. “We need to continue to have a strong voice and continue to make sure that even if people don’t agree with our message, it continues to hit them and hit them. At some point, people will pay attention and that’s what we need to continue doing for rural Colorado.”

### **The journey of SB 15: Small rural issue becomes statewide solution**



Rep. Millie Hamner, Cheryl Miller, Sen. Ellen Roberts and Jane Urschel watch as Gov. Hickenlooper signs the electronic meeting participation bill (SB 15) into law on March 29.

The journey of a bill allowing local school boards to [adopt a policy](#) permitting members to participate in meetings electronically began early last October with a casual conversation among Telluride board members in the car on their way home from a CASB regional meeting.

“We just got talking about engagement and how to get people more involved in school boards,” said Cheryl Miller, Telluride R-1 and CASB board member.

The discussion then turned to a recently departed board member who resigned primarily because he had to travel so frequently for work. The board’s attorney said some other school districts had board members who participated in meetings electronically, but the state law was very vague.

“We thought it would be nice to have that law cleared up so we didn’t feel like we were taking a chance by having electronic participation,” Cheryl said.

From there, she took the idea and quickly ran with it. Cheryl drafted a floor resolution for her board to approve, and then forwarded it to her colleagues on the CASB Board of Directors to share with their regions prior to the [CASB Delegate Assembly](#) in mid-October.

Once a slightly modified version of the resolution was approved at the Delegate Assembly, CASB's board identified it as a key priority for the advocacy team to keep front and center during the legislative session, and the next step was to find a legislative sponsor. Cheryl reached out to Sen. Ellen Roberts, who understood the travel and weather issues rural districts face and with whom she had already developed a relationship. The senator was eager to sponsor a bill that helped address a challenge for parts of the state that are outside the Front Range. Meanwhile, Jane Urschel recruited Rep. Millie Hamner to co-sponsor the bill in the House.

During the legislative session, Cheryl provided written testimony for both the Senate and House Education Committee meetings – which were full of thoughtful discussion and lively debate. Ultimately, the [final amended bill](#) ended up being much better and more comprehensive than Cheryl anticipated.

“Our board was looking at a very specific situation – board members who couldn’t be at a board meeting at a critical time – so I hadn’t even thought of issues like executive session and privacy,” said Cheryl, who was on hand to watch Gov. Hickenlooper sign the bill into law on March 29.

She added, “It was quite gratifying because I’ve been on the Western Slope for 25 years so I’m very familiar with the sentiment ‘no one is going to listen to us.’ It was exciting seeing a small problem in our district become a solution for the entire state.”