

High Country News

Rural Education 2.0

by Samuel Western

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The man in the Sodbuster Bar walks with a slight limp, the result of old injury. “I was operating a seismograph rig when it went off a hillside outside Meteetsee, Wyo.,” he said. “It fell 382 feet with me inside. I wasn’t supposed to make it, but I did. I eventually got a settlement. Made a lot of lawyers rich in the process, though.”

Springfield is the seat of Baca County. Tucked away in the southeast corner of Colorado, the county is much more closely aligned, both in politics and soul, with Oklahoma or the Texas panhandle than with Denver. It’s flat, windy “tomorrow country,” as in, “OK, things are tough, but they’ll get better tomorrow.” It’s the kind of place where used farm equipment is a prized lawn ornament.

In 2004, Baca County ranked as one of the 50 poorest counties in the nation, both in adjusted gross income and in wages. It’s lost 10 percent of its population in the last decade, and its population is about to drop below 4,000. But like the man in the bar, the county is a survivor.

In fact, one of its school districts is doing more than surviving. Vilas RE-5 has the highest growth rate of any of Colorado’s 178 school districts. Its enrollment is up 405 percent since 2002. It had 3,800 students during the 2006-2007 school year. Most of these students, however, do not reside in Baca County, nor do they sit at desks in the Vilas school district. They live all over Colorado, but mostly around Denver, and many of them are low-performing, “at-risk” students. Thanks to Vilas, they attend high school online.

Until very recently, online teaching efforts in the West centered on programs that augmented normal high school coursework — advanced placement chemistry, for example — and were based in urban areas.

Such supplemental classes are the darlings of futurists who have big plans for online education. In March, Microsoft founder and educational philanthropist Bill Gates told Congress, “We do think that some of these technology things where you can go and get great courses over the Internet and have even rural areas sharing with each other — where one is very good at one thing and one is good at another thing — that those can be quite advantageous ...”

Gates was answering a question about Vermont, but online schools in the Rocky Mountain West have pioneered in out-of-the-way places: The Idaho Distance Education Academy in Deary (population 512), for example, started in 2004 and now serves 1,160 students from every Idaho county.

In a similar reverse of standard educational dynamics, rural Vilas District RE-5 now serves thousands of urban students, offering a full range of courses. Vilas RE-5 actually runs three

separate schools: Vilas School, Vilas Online School, and a charter school authorized by Vilas, Hope Co-op Online Learning Academy.

Hope, which is headquartered in Centennial, Colo., offers what's called a hybrid, a curriculum that combines online and face-to-face delivery at 81 "learning centers," scattered mostly along the Front Range. The hybrid's popular.

As the state auditor noted in December, Colorado has experienced a surge of online education, with "students from large Front Range school districts enrolling in online schools that were established by small, rural districts such as Vilas and Branson (in Animas County)." Because Colorado funds its school districts based, in part, on the number of students they teach, this online surge has transferred state money from urban schools to Vilas and Hope Academy.

Last year alone, Denver Public Schools lost 600 students and more than \$4 million in state funding to Hope and Vilas. But why are urban students flocking to these rural online schools? The answer to that question revolves, at least in part, around the rise of standardized testing, as required by the federal No Child Left Behind Act and similar state laws that penalize school districts that fail to meet educational standards. And it's an answer that makes some educational professionals squirm.

The students making the switch to online are, by and large, poor performers on standardized tests. When these so-called "at-risk" students transfer from a large urban school district to an online school, they take their bad test scores with them. Denver and other large school districts deny they encourage at-risk students to go to online schools simply to improve the district's showing on standardized tests.

But Vilas school officials have a different view.

"No Child Left Behind is a big driver in our growth," Vilas superintendent Joe Shields says flatly.



Students walk toward the old school in the dwindling farming community of Vilas, Colorado. KEVIN MOLONEY

"We're getting calls from districts," Vilas school board president Dennis Thompson says. "They phone us up and ask us to take a certain student. But they won't admit that."

Some observers view the urban-rural online shift as temporary and benign, or even positive. "What you're seeing is a shortcoming of the larger, physical urban school," says Jared Polis, founder of the Polis Foundation, which supports education, technology and community throughout Colorado.

"Smaller districts can act entrepreneurially," Polis says. "They provide new options, gearing their classes around an urban student's busy life. Some students work; some have children." Polis says that larger schools are "much slower at evolving," although he believes they will eventually catch up.

But the state audit of Vilas raises troubling questions about online education, not just in Colorado, but across the nation. The auditor's report pounded Vilas and Hope Academy for poor

accounting, low test scores and unlicensed teachers. It also accused Vilas and Hope of blurring the separation of church and state, by using public funds to hold classes in church schools.

Many rural school districts seem locked in permanent decline, with ever-smaller enrollments translating into less and less state and federal funding. The Vilas district has fought the trend with entrepreneurial flair.

But does online schooling, Vilas-style, constitute a boon for at-risk students, and a solution to the financial problems of declining rural school districts? Or is it simply a clever maneuver that transfers state money to the countryside while disserving students? The answer is unclear now, and may remain so. As this article was being researched, Vilas RE-5 and Hope Online Academy began negotiations that could result in the end of their partnership.

In general, rural school districts have been losing population and students since World War II. As America urbanized, small towns shrank and financial activity in them contracted, reducing the local tax bases that had been the major source of support for rural schools. As the tax money dried up, the number of school-age children also fell. The result has been a death spiral: Lacking both money and students, rural school districts have been forced to merge, one after another.

Vilas is used to dealing with shrinkage and consolidation. In 1880, it had a population of 750, a printing office, a bank, six saloons, a 20-room hotel, several cafes, livery stables, real estate firms and a blacksmith shop. Now, Vilas is home to about 100 people and has almost no commerce other than the steel-gray Tempel Grain elevator on Route 160. The median price for a home: \$46,600.

As the county has shrunk, so have its schools, some hovering painfully close to the 65-student cutoff that leads to forced school mergers.

Thompson was on the school board in 1999 when he heard about a workshop on online schools; he and then-Vilas superintendent Bill Hines decided to attend. At the time, there was just one online school for K-12 students in Colorado. The Monte Vista Online Academy (which actually served grades four through 12), opened in 1995 in the San Luis Valley. “We decided to try it,” Thompson says. “We had to do something. People are leaving this area, and they ain’t coming back. Baca County now has four school districts with under 100 students.”

Distance learning is nothing new; the University of Houston offered televised college credit classes as early as 1953. But in the 1990s, conservative educational theorists fed up with what they saw as the poor performance of conventional schools began to see big potential — ideological and financial as well as educational — in online elementary schools.

Since then, online classes for elementary and secondary schools have grown explosively. According to a November 2006 report from the Sloan Consortium, a pro-online group formed with funding from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, online learning in the nation’s primary and secondary schools has increased more than tenfold in six years. In 2005-2006, some 700,000 students were served online. In Colorado, the number of such students has increased more than 80 percent during the past three years, from 3,400 students in 2004 to almost 6,200 in 2006.

To start the Vilas online program, Hines contacted an Englewood, Colorado-based online learning company, Jones Knowledge. “The first year we focused on at-risk students, those kids

who, for whatever reason, weren't making it in a brick-and-mortar school, like a girl that was pregnant or someone's who's bashful or picked upon," Thompson says. "We got 32 students."

At the time, Heather O'Mara was the president of Jones Knowledge. When Hope Online Academy was formed as a nonprofit school in 2004, it named O'Mara president. She found a natural ally with the Vilas school district, which granted Hope charter-school status in 2005.



A charter school must be authorized by a local school board, but once authorized, it receives public funding while operating more or less independently. Without a charter, Hope Academy was merely a nonprofit organization with ambitions to educate kids online. With the backing of Vilas, it became an online powerhouse.

The Vilas school district has established an online school in this next-door building to serve students all over the state.

KEVIN MOLONEY

The partnership with Hope sent Vilas' enrollment through the roof. The district went from having roughly 400 students in 2004 (100 in the brick-and-mortar school and 300 in the online program) to 1,500 students in 2005. By 2006, it had 3,800. People started to notice. And some of them asked questions.

In October 2006, Rocky Mountain News education writer Nancy Mitchell began investigating the connection between Hope and Vilas.

"I was following up on the collapse of Manual High School (a troubled Denver school that closed in June 2006)," says Mitchell. "Some kids transferred into Hope. I chose one girl and followed her around for a day and was appalled. I thought that this sort of thing can't be publicly supported. At this learning center, kids were playing on the concrete parking lot and chasing a rat. I thought I better call the DPS (Denver Public Schools) and check it out."

Mitchell ran a series of hard-hitting stories, questioning almost every aspect of Hope Academy's existence: its connection with Vilas; the source of its money; its murky relationship with supporters of vouchers (i.e., public funding of private schools) and church schools. Mitchell also took aim at the academy's inexperienced teachers and its high student-to-teacher ratio.

Mitchell did not know that the Colorado Office of the State Auditor was also conducting a study of Hope and Vilas. The auditor's report came out in December 2006, hammering Vilas RE-5 and its two wayward charges, Hope Academy and Vilas Online.

Specifically, the audit noted:

- Low test scores. In 2006, only 16 percent of Vilas Online students scored at or above grade level in math on the Colorado Student Assessment Program, or CSAP. At Hope Academy, the figure was a mere 11 percent. Scores were only marginally better in other areas. In fact, in grades six-10, Vilas Online students did not come close to making the average statewide test scores in any subject — reading, science, writing or math.

- A lack of licensed and highly qualified teachers. Hope Academy had three or sometimes four licensed teachers in 2005-2006, overseeing 165 mentors who acted as tutors and proctors for some 1,500 elementary and high school students at any one time.
- Public funding that supported private and religious education. Two of the five learning centers auditors visited were located in private religious schools. “The Colorado Constitution prohibits a school district from using public funds to support any school controlled by a church or sectarian denomination,” the report said.

Even before the auditor’s report, ugly rumors had begun blowing across the prairie. Vilas was rolling in dough, people said; Vilas shuttled kids around in limousines; Vilas had built a stadium in back of its tiny schoolhouse. These accusations were silly, but the charges leveled by the auditor’s report were not.

The people of Baca County generally present a country openness. But because of the recent negative publicity, those connected with the Vilas school district are still licking their wounds.

Joe Shields, a slight man who has spent most of his educational life teaching industrial arts in schools and prisons, is the superintendent of both the Vilas brick-and-mortar and online schools. “I’m just wondering if that gun pointed at me is cocked and loaded,” he says as I sit across the desk from him.

Still, he cheerfully agrees to show me around the Vilas brick-and-mortar school.

If Vilas is getting rich from its online ventures, it doesn’t show. Built in 1929, the physical school is worn, with low ceilings and painted concrete beams. The federal Works Progress Administration built the “new” addition, as the school calls it, in 1936. The whole K-12 school has only 99 students, half of whom are poor enough to qualify for free or reduced-price lunches.



Vilas School Principal Dan Schmidt holds the door for girls’ track team members.
KEVIN MOLONEY

The kindergarten classroom is suffering a three-bucket leak due to an unusually heavy snowfall. It houses just three students. Teacher Alan Packard, a burly former football player, watches his squealing charges and declares, “I’ve got the best job in the district.”

Everybody seems to know one another. “People live and breathe this place. It’s like one big family,” Shields says. He and his wife, who works in the school office, live on campus. Modular homes line the south edge of the school grounds. “I’ve got to give housing to attract teachers,” Shields said.

Across a muddy parking lot from the old school is a new metal building. It’s also a school, but there are no kids inside. It’s spacious, carpeted and clean, with only a handful of offices, one of which is the computer center that handles all the computers given to online students. Its small mainframe computer serves as the storage and service center for all of Vilas’s online students and their teachers.

Like others in the Vilas online community, Shields clearly sees himself as an educator, not a parasite preying on the weak spots of other districts. “This is about kids, not money,” he says. “You run your district well, and the truth is we’ll get very few of your kids.”

Shields acknowledges that most of Vilas’ online students are underperformers, but says he would like the world to “judge us on the merits of the student and his educational development, not his test scores.” It’s an understandable position to take; Vilas Online’s test scores are, in fact, abysmal. Shields doesn’t deny the problem but wants more time to work out the kinks and repair any faults.

Others, however, feel the school has already been given too much leeway.

In his December 2006 report, the state auditor took Colorado Department of Education Commissioner William Moloney to task for not disciplining Vilas RE-5. For three years, Vilas had been on an accreditation “watch list” due to the performance of its online schools. Only after the outcry caused by the audit did the education department put Vilas RE-5 on probation, an action that could eventually lead to dissolving the school district.

Moloney announced his resignation in February, effective in June, citing “unspecified personal and professional reasons,” one of which involved the election of new Democratic Gov. Bill Ritter, according to the Denver Post. Though his supporters consider him an advocate for education reform, Moloney had been criticized for passivity; last year, the Colorado Association of School Executives even issued a report calling for stronger education leadership.

In three interviews conducted just before his resignation announcement, Moloney strongly defended his decision to wait so long before sanctioning Vilas RE-5.

“Yes, we have to ensure quality control, but it’s not a cookbook situation,” Moloney said. “Our purpose is not to stigmatize rural districts. They’re in crisis. They are strapped for cash. You’re not going to get some crackerjack AP (advanced placement) teacher going out to places like Vilas. Somehow we have to make them viable.”

Shields agrees, saying most people are unaware of the kind of students with which Vilas works. “We sign up juniors who can’t read at an eighth-grade level,” he says. “How did this kid get to be a junior? He’s really a freshman. He requires intensive intervention.”

Which brings up the prickly subject of academic dumping. Thousands of academically struggling urban students have transferred into Vilas’s online world. Some say this has happened with the blessing and encouragement of city school districts. Lisa Schiff, communications director for Denver Public Schools, says, “We don’t believe that is happening in this district.” School officials in Trinidad and Pueblo also denied passing off their bad students in this way.

But that doesn’t jive with the experience of Shields and Thompson. They say complaints about the low test scores of their online students miss the point. “Look,” Thompson says, “if we take a kid who’s scoring 20 percent on the CSAP and in one year’s time double his score to 40 percent, yes, we’re still below the statewide average. But we’ve doubled his score. Isn’t that better? That person can still graduate and pay taxes and be a productive member of our society.

“That person can still work at McDonalds.”

Still, Vilas RE-5 students are clearly not doing well by standard measures. In grades seven through 10, most Vilas Online CSAP reading, writing, and math scores declined from 2003 to 2005-2006. Scores in eighth-grade reading, for example, fell from 37 percent of the class scoring above proficient level in 2003 to 28 percent in 2006.

Meanwhile, the statewide average for eighth grade reading in 2006 was 66 percent above the proficiency level.



Tanisha Hinds uses a digital chalkboard to teach reading to first-graders. KEVIN MOLONEY

From offices run out of its suite in Centennial, Hope operates 81 learning centers, most in and around Denver. These learning centers take many forms, including rooms in churches and schools with religious affiliations. Each center has about 18 students working online, under the eyes of a mentor. Teachers travel from center to center to oversee students and mentors.

Bill Hines was superintendent of Vilas in 1999, when it started the Vilas Online school. Now, he works out of his home in Oklahoma as a consultant for Vilas and other schools. Hines also operates his own for-profit online school, ABCyber School, which has a Vilas address and aims to “provide a complete package for any school in the US to start and run their (sic) own online school,” according to its Web site.

“You know what this fuss is all about?” he asks. “Jealousy. ‘Li’l old Vilas is stealing our money.’ Jealousy and money is what it is. We’ve taken money from other schools, but those students we took had not been successful. Students are not the issue for the other districts, it’s money.”

But what about the money?

Property taxes play a big role in school funding in Colorado, and not all Colorado school districts were created equal in terms of property values. In 2006, property in the Vilas RE-5 school district had a total assessed valuation of \$5.1 million; school property tax revenue came to \$195,000, or \$1,950 per student. Compare this to, say, the Steamboat 2770 school district in Routt County, which had a 2006 assessed valuation of \$634 million and revenue of \$16.2 million — \$7,762 per student.

On the surface, the Vilas brick-and-mortar school and the Vilas online schools are separate. But because both operate under the auspices of Vilas RE-5, they can commingle funds. “In this local-control state, we’re reluctant to tell districts what they can do with the money,” Colorado Education Commissioner Moloney says. “All the money flows into the district. What they do with it is up to them.”

According to Mary Lynn Christel, a finance specialist with the Colorado Department of Education, a school district with 100 kids (such as Vilas’ brick-and-mortar school) would ordinarily have a budget of about \$1 million dollars under state funding formulas. (That estimate would not include categorical funding, such as transportation and gifted and talented and special education programs.)

Vilas' online efforts have brought it funding well above the \$1 million mark. Documents from the Colorado education department Web site show that in 2005, Vilas RE-5 received about \$3 million in revenue, of which \$2.4 million came from the state, not local sources.

According to documents supplied by Hope Academy after the December auditor's report, the academy received \$5,865 of per-pupil revenue in 2006, of which Vilas retained \$950 as management and curriculum fees. With an overall enrollment of some 3,800 — the vast majority in Hope — the revenue from 2006 adds up, not just for Vilas, but at Hope, which was expected to bring in more than \$20 million in 2006.

Having so many online students — and the state funding that follows them — lets the Vilas physical school offer more elective classes, Shields says, such as home economics, music, shop and choir. It also allows the district to pay its workers better: Shields makes \$75,000 per year, while Hines made \$121,371 as a consultant to the district.

But clearly, most of the money goes to Hope, and now the future of Vilas's online education — and the extra revenue it brings in — is cloudy, to say the least. In mid-April, Shields acknowledged that the Vilas RE-5 district and Hope Online Academy were negotiating a possible end to Hope's charter arrangement with Vilas. "It's in the works," says Shields. "It's really difficult to say if it will happen. I can't say any more than that.

"Ultimately, it's probably for the best for those kids. We're so remote. We can't sit there and watch things closely. You have to make assumptions, and you end up with egg on your face."



Anthony Zavala, at his dad's garage, says he never would have graduated if it weren't for one teacher, who encouraged him, and Vilas Online. KEVIN MOLONEY

potential income that ranges from \$28,000 to more than \$50,000.

Vilas online teacher Carrie Veatch answers her telephone on the first ring. She carries it with her everywhere, from 7 in the morning until 9 at night, even on Saturdays and Sundays. "I want to be here just in case a student needs help."

A former brick-and-mortar teacher who lives in eastern Colorado, Veatch switched to online teaching in 2002. "I saw an ad in the Rocky Mountain News," she says.

Vilas online teachers work under contract and do not receive the health and other benefits offered to most public school teachers; they must supply their own computers and toll-free telephone lines. Pay is \$350 per student, per year, Shields says. A typical online teacher has between 80 and 150 students, meaning a

Veatch teaches history and American geography to about 80 students, mostly from Trinidad and Lamar (population 9,077 and 8,414, respectively) and other even smaller eastern Colorado towns. "I love my job," she says.

At Hope Academy, each student goes to a learning center in the morning to work on his or her online classes on a computer. By contrast, Veatch's students generally work from their own homes.

Veatch teaches almost exclusively by computer, e-mail and telephone. There's no teleconferencing; students don't see her on their computer screens. "Everything, the presentation, the assignment, the activities, and the assessment, is online," says Veatch.

And there's no such thing as a typical student. "Some work all day, then come home and get online," she says. "They get on the computer (which Vilas supplies) log on to the Vilas online Web site, look over the assignments that are due, and start their work."

Multiple-choice tests are corrected by software. Tests with written answers are submitted to Veatch; she usually gets them back to students within 24 hours. The students have schedules, she says, along with homework and quizzes; in world geography, for example, they read one chapter a week.

She contacts students via e-mail or through a computer program that allows her to talk with them in real time. There's lots of telephoning. "I've got one student who called me four times today," she says. "Sometimes it was about the quiz, sometimes it was just to chat. Not a lot of role models in her life. I'm always there."

But is it really possible for a student to bond with an online teacher, to engage in that teacher-student dynamic so critical to effective learning? "Absolutely," Veatch says. "Look, in a typical brick and mortar school with 30 kids in the classroom, how much individual attention can you give each student? In this process, you get to know these students."

Citing confidentiality issues, Shields declines to provide the names of any Vilas Online students. But I ask around and find Anthony Zavala at his father's auto repair shop on Main Street in Springfield. When I arrive, he's talking to his grandmother on the telephone.

He's bearded; his arms are lined with tattoos, and he has bright, black, piercing eyes that don't look away when I ask questions. When I ask about Vilas Online, he perks up. During his senior year at Springfield High School, Zavala explains, his girlfriend got pregnant. He dropped out of school to work. Although his girlfriend lost the baby, he did not return to school.

In 2004, he says, a speech teacher from school, Jill Negrete, began pestering him to get his diploma. "I ended up taking classes online with Vilas," he said. "I'd go to Ms. Negrete's house three times a week. She was my mentor. She kept after me if I didn't show up."

Zavala is clearly grateful for Ms. Negrete's persistence — and for Vilas Online. "Online schooling worked really well for me," he says. "I never would have graduated if it weren't for a program like Vilas."

But Zavala is hardly the typical Vilas/Hope student. According to Shields, 43 percent of students who sign up with Vilas Online do not get a diploma. As even Shields acknowledges, "That's not a good percentage."

Since statehood, the Front Range has looked down its nose at its country cousins, watching smugly as the Eastern plains slowly lost power and standing. As Bill Hines says, "The mindset in the state of Colorado from the Front Range point of view is that anybody south of the Arkansas River is automatically 10 points lower in IQ."

The folks of Vilas have long been sick of Denver calling the shots, educationally and otherwise. In desperate financial circumstances, the prairie populists of Vilas RE-5 used the knowledge they'd gleaned from a century of agriculture. In farming, if you don't get bigger, you don't survive. With its brick-and-mortar schools losing students and revenue, Vilas decided to get bigger — virtually.



Teacher Carrie Veatch works out of her remote Deer Trail home office and is on call, 7 a.m.-9 p.m., for students from around Colorado. KEVIN MOLONEY

There's nothing wrong with the concept of economies of scale. But students were the currency at hand, not wheat or corn, and Vilas foundered in taking its online experience — gathered from rural towns and smaller cities — to an urban environment. Through Hope Academy, Vilas took on thousands of kids, many of them at-risk, and, according to the Colorado auditor, it served them badly.

But David Hakala, a Denver-based technology journalist who has chronicled the evolution of online education since 1988, says Hope and Vilas are two very different enterprises. They aren't equally culpable, he says: "They are distinctly different operations. I think of Hope and Vilas as predator and prey, respectively."

Initially, the Vilas online experiment seemed a recipe not just for survival, but for revival, both rural and urban. Indeed, the Hope Online Academy that Vilas sponsored has many testimonials in its favor, including one from the Urban League of Metropolitan Denver.

True, Vilas also saw Hope Academy as a major source of revenue, and a lot of money flowed into Vilas RE-5. But most of the money flowed right back out to Hope Academy, which had its own agendas, financial and political.

(What those agendas might be, precisely, remains an open question. When the Rocky Mountain News began its investigation, it discovered that the Foundation for Academic Innovation — a nonprofit with no phone number and no Web site, but with connections to those who support school vouchers and charter programs — has given or loaned Hope more than \$3.7 million in the past two years.)

In various newspaper stories, Hope president Heather O'Mara has taken responsibility for Hope's problems. Public relations spokesman Stephen Shapiro says the school knew of its difficulties and was already working on addressing them before the press accounts and state audit became public. But Hope seems to see itself as more of a business than an educational institution, despite the old saw that "you can't run education like a business." O'Mara, for example, has never spent a day as a teacher. She remains the president of a company, rather than a superintendent or principal.

In the meantime, Shapiro says, Hope has stopped opening learning centers, pending the fate of legislation currently before the Colorado Assembly. State Sen. Sue Windels, D-Arvada, a teacher, is leading the charge for reform of online schools. She is seeking to limit the independence of online programs and to create extensive state oversight of them. Shapiro doesn't deny that Hope may sever its relationship with Vilas RE-5. "Given the pending legislation, Vilas and Hope are exploring all of their options," he says.

Those with big-picture aspirations for online education see Vilas' struggle as a painful but necessary part of growth in the field. John Watson was a consultant for the Trujillo Commission on Online Education, a group convened by the Denver-based Donnell-Kay Foundation to examine the issues raised by Colorado's state auditor.

Watson, author of *Keeping Pace with K-12 Online Learning*, acknowledges the current gulf in online education between the supplemental programs offered by urban schools and the complete educational systems offered out of rural schools. But he is convinced the split will end. The future of online education in the West, especially the rural West, looks very bright, he says.

"It has huge ramifications. In five years, a lot of these funding issues will have been worked out," he says. "They will be seen as bumps in the road. There will be other, larger stories. In 10 to 15 years, online education will be quite common." Back in Baca County, Shields is confident that Vilas RE-5 will survive, no matter what the state does — even if Vilas and Hope part ways. "I will change," he says.

"We'll do what we have to, to survive."

Samuel Western writes from Sheridan, Wyoming, and is happy to see daffodils trying to grow next to the snowbank.

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