

Legislative limelights

School consolidation proposal faces uphill legislative struggle

By BEN J. PLASTINO

Post-Register political editor

The determined efforts of J.F. "Chad" Chadband, R-Idaho Falls, to bring consolidation to the 115 public school districts of Idaho face a rocky road at the best but it's worth a try.

The paths of past efforts have been strewn with wreckage and were given scant attention even in committee meetings.

Only Tuesday, Chadband did succeed in ramming through the House Education Committee a bill that called for a \$15,000 study by a selected task force to study the emotional and complex proposal. It was referred to the Printing Committee for approval and whether it gets much farther remains to be seen.

Chadband emphasized the main purpose of consolidation is to cut costs and perhaps save enough money to hire and retain quality teachers in the mathematics and science fields. He has no figures on the number of school districts that should be merged, leaving this to the study task force to recommend.

Virtually every legislator and progressive educator know it's the proper way to go but such a move evokes the



Rep. J.F. Chadband

often passionate opposition of those who place provincial community pride above quality education and lower administrative costs.

Nearly every year the lawmakers talk about how the present 115 school districts should be trimmed to a third or less that number but nothing serious has come out of it.

On the higher educational level, legislators knew that Boise State University should not have been incorporated in the higher education system until this state's population had doubled. The state is now stuck with maintaining three full-fledged state universities, a college and a number of junior colleges.

In 1947, the entire state mandatorily underwent the traumatic experience of consolidation. School districts were slashed in 1948-50 from more than 1,300 to 117, and later sliced two more.

Bonneville had 32 school districts, now trimmed to Idaho Falls 91, Bonneville 93 and Swan Valley 92. A proposal to consolidate 91 and 93 was beaten by a 2-1 margin by the Bonneville 93 patrons in a vote, mainly because they feared losing their rural identity to their more urbanized neighbors.

However, District 93 has become more urban in recent years as the population spills eastward from the city limits.

The shoe is now on the other foot as Bonneville 93 likely would favor, but District 91 wouldn't, a merger because of 93's bonded indebtedness.

Unknown to many there is a law that could facilitate the consolidation of Districts 91 and 93, without District 91 patrons assuming District 93's huge debt, considered the main stumbling block to any merger.

Dr. Wayne Phillips, Boise, Department of Education's director of support service, explained that in a consolidation election there could be two proposals. The first is for merger with a majority required in the two districts. The second would give District 91 voters the option of rejecting assumption of District 93's huge debt but still agreeing to consolidation.

Bonneville 93's debt is placed at about \$7.8 million; that of District 91 at only \$1.6 million and this is due to being paid off soon on Skyline High School and Eagle Rock Junior High School.

Rather than moving toward consolidation the movement has been in reverse in nearby Jefferson County. Ririe District 252 split from Jefferson 251 in 1968 and the Board of Education only last week approved a vote for splitting the west side of Terreton-Hamer area into new District 253 from Jefferson.

Phillips explained under such a procedure a majority vote of both districts and of the split district must be in favor to pass. A majority opposition vote from the Rigby-Roberts area could beat the proposal.

In 1969, a Department of Education proposal called for trimming the 115 district to some 45 but didn't attract much support.

School boss asks big sales tax hike

By BEN J. PLASTINO

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Idaho's school boss, Superintendent of Public Instruction Jerry Evans, proposed a substantial sales tax hike to cure the public schools' financial dilemma.

Otherwise, he said, he sees nothing but acute financial problems for Idaho schools for this and the next fiscal year.

Evans said rather than increase the sales tax by 1, 1.5, or 2 percent, he suggests hiking it to 4.5 or even 5 percent from the present 3 percent.

Evans said in imposing a sales tax increase, it should not carry a sunset clause for its automatic closure after a certain period.



Supt. Jerry Evans

The school boards could use their authority to borrow some additional money to meet public school obligations, said Evans.

"The bankers tell me there would be no guarantee for the increased funding in a certain amount of time and it could mean a higher rate of interest on borrowing," said Evans.

The latest financial plan unfolded by the Republican leadership is leaving Evans less than happy because it calls for the Legislature to dip into a \$7.7 public education fund.

"This will create a big cash flow problem for schools," the distressed Evans said in a Post-Register telephone interview Friday.

"It means it will add to the school problems need for the next fiscal year," he said, meaning he 1984 fiscal year beginning July 1.

He pointed out the public schools for the present fiscal year are carrying over about a \$9 million fund which they plan to pay future bills.

If the Legislature takes most of this fund, he said, the schools will not have much of a carryover to pay their bills.

"It means they will need to borrow against the second half of property tax levy," said Evans, "then hope the apportionment will be fairly large. We don't know what will be the revenue at this time."

"If the Legislature is willing to pass the revenue measures that have proposed it means schools will have a tough time to get by."

Evans noted the latest Republican revenue proposal has been placed in the State Affairs Committee, apparently circumventing the House Revenue and Taxation Committee where major revenue measures usually originate.

Evans declined comment on this except to say "it looks like they are playing games. It seems to me that major appropriation bills, especially when there is a sales tax increase, should go to the Revenue and Taxation Committee."