

The 1983 Idaho Legislature

Solons favor tuition and school mergers

(EDITOR'S NOTE: This ninth in a series of 14 articles giving the views of east Idaho legislators on issues shaping up for the coming session. This one is on education.)

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Most east Idaho legislators favor a constitutional amendment to authorize student tuitions to support state universities, replacing fees which are used primarily for extra curricular activities.

They also strongly back consolidation of many public schools and Lewis-Clark with the University of Idaho but acknowledge because of political opposition it would be difficult if not almost impossible to achieve.

State Rep. Kurt L. Johnson, R-Idaho Falls, chairman of the House Education Committee, said he has supported legislation to implement tuition in place of fees for higher education.

"This would allow the institutions' use of this money for academic purposes where present fees do not."

He added tax reformation needs to be implemented for public school funding but gave no specifics.

The vice chairman of the House Education Committee, Rep. John O. Sessions, R-Driggs, said "Idaho simply does not have the resources to adequately fund three universities, one state college and two junior colleges. Until student tuition is permitted these schools will continue to deteriorate in quality."

He added the "consolidation of Lewis-Clark State College and University of Idaho may be the logical thing to do but because of political consideration it will no doubt continue to prevent this from happening."

Senate President Pro Tem James Risch, R-Boise, also called for increased tuition and also look to consolidate school districts but admitted "it is politically difficult."

He said he would favor no financial distribution formula change.

"For teachers to maintain a paying job is certainly better than being laid off as many businesses are doing," remarked Rep. Gary L. Paxman, R-Idaho Falls.

Sen. Mark G. Ricks, R-Rexburg and Dane Watkins, R-Idaho Falls, and Reps. Rich Orme, R-St. Anthony, and Linden B. Bateman, R-Idaho Falls, also favor consolidation of Lewis-Clark and UI. They also agree Idaho has too many institutions of higher education to support.

Orme also urged merger on the public school level, pointing out Canyon County has 11 districts and Bingham five which could be drastically reduced.

Orme acknowledged this might be difficult to accomplish but with the tighter funds the time is coming when legislators must face the urgent problem.

He said Fremont County, one of the largest geographically in the state, has only one school district, even though St. Anthony and Ashton are separate communities.

"If we can do it, the other counties should be able to," he said.

Ricks also said teacher salaries need to be frozen for 1984.

Bateman, a Bonneville High School history teacher, in favoring a state constitutional amendment which would grant authority to universities to charge tuition, added "students must share more of the costs. It is becoming more difficult for the state to fund four universities, plus numerous junior colleges and trade schools to support."

Watkins also said the Legislature has given the State Board of Education broad powers to meet the financial problems in higher education.

Rep. Martin Trillhaase, R-Idaho Falls, said "we need more quality at all levels, particularly in fundamentals," in commenting on education.

Sen. J. Marsden Williams, R-Idaho Falls, and Rep. Ray E. Infanger, said salaries can't be raised when so many people are out of work and cannot pay the extra taxes.

"Teacher salaries should be geared to what revenues comes in," said Infanger. "The rest of us must live that way — why exempt the teachers?"

Sen. William L. Floyd, R-Idaho Falls, in urging consolidations, said he questions offering free education for graduate work and "frivolous electives."

"What about extensive training with public dollars only to see the trained citizens depart the state for greener pastures," queried Floyd. "Should there be pay-back provisions other than the current structure of sales, income and other taxes?"

House Minority Leader Melvin Hammond, D-Rexburg, a Ricks College instructor, admitted consolidation is hard to accomplish but it is needed in many areas.

He expressed hope an education task force may come up with some good ideas on higher education.

"We have got to maintain quality education," said Hammond. "It has top priority in the state."

Hammond said the school formula appears to be working excellent.

"I hope the task force on higher education can come up with some good ideas to help solve our present dilemma," said Hammond.

Hammond said education accounts for some 82 percent of the general fund expenditures but to cut further will mean a reduction in quality education on both the public school and higher education level.

He admitted there are too many universities for the state to support but this can't be reversed at this time.

State Sen. Israel Merrill, D-Blackfoot, said "consolidation always sounds good but larger is not always better. Our small colleges are in less trouble than the large ones. Our medium school districts do better than the giants and in my opinion, give a better education. Good teacher salaries are a must."