

Politics

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Statehouse sidelights

Education funding already key 1984 election issue

By BEN J. PLASTINO

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Political developments that have taken place the first half of this year have already set the political stage for the 1984 legislative elections.

It means education funding shapes up as the paramount issue, although what takes place in the 1984 Legislature and what develops in legislative reapportionment will have important bearing.

In the 1984 elections there will be no state offices up for grabs. They will be limited to the 105 legislative positions, plus the U.S. Senate, U.S. representatives and county sheriff, prosecuting attorney, one county commissioner, and vacancies such as assessor in Bonneville County.

The key education issue centers on the arguments by Republicans that they allocated the maximum amount without wrecking state finances and by the Democrats that there was enough in the anticipated revenue increase to give more.

The situation is unique because in the last 12 years the Republicans have appropriated more than a Democratic governor has recommended except for 1982 and this year, according to records at the Legislative Council Office, said Legislative Auditor John Andreatson.

Most Republican legislators say their constituents tell them in overwhelming numbers, sometimes as much as 20-1, they are against

more education funds. The say Democrat Gov. John V. Evans is incorrect and that they are much closer to the taxpayers views.

Evans and his legislative Democrats reject this argument, insisting all signs point to demand for more education funding. Evans cites prominent business and corporate leaders and hundreds of letters and cards he has received asking for more state education appropriation.

He said that up to now 21 of 23 school districts have passed override levies to make up the shortage brought about by the Republican controlled Legislature.

Evans again appealed for more education funding when he delivered the keynote talk at the Harry S. Truman Banquet here Wednesday night. He asserted the Democrats are on the right side of the issues and predicted Democratic gains in the 1984 elections.

He noted Idaho is second from the bottom in the amount of money the state spends per pupil and wants Idaho to vault to top of the heap in the nation.

Education, unlike past years, became a strictly partisan issue in 1983. In the May special session, all of the 72 Republicans except one senator and eight state representatives opposed increased funding. In contrast, all of the 33 Democrat legislators voted for more education appropriations. Furthermore, in the State Board of

Examiners session last week, the two Republicans, Attorney General Jim Jones and Secretary of State Pete T. Cenarrusa, accelerated the sharp partisan division. They cut the governor's holdback release request by one-third.

On the Republican side, only Sen. John Barker of Buhl joined 14 Democratic senators in opposing a measure in the special session that called for the same funding as approved in the regular session. He said this was mostly because he wanted more vocational education appropriation.

In the House, 11 Republicans joined 19 Democrats in opposing increased funding. However, three of them, Rep. Ray E. Infanger, Salmon; JoAn Wood, Rigby, and Walter E. Little, New Plymouth, say they did so because they thought the \$215 million figure approved was too high, much less than favoring increases.

The moderate Republicans who wanted more school funding were Reps. Steve Antone, Rupert; Tom Boyd, Genesse; Kitty Gurnsey, Boise; Lloyd Harris, Boise; Dan Kelly, Mountain Home; Lawrence Knigge, Filer; Jim Lucas, Moscow; and D. Cornell Thomas, Pingree.

One bright spot is the statements of many Republicans who voted to hold the line this year say they would be willing to vote for supplemental funding in the 1984 session if the economy continues to improve.

Watkins sees extensive reforms in property tax

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By BEN J. PLASTINO
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State Sen. Dane Watkins, R-Idaho Falls, co-chairman of the Interim Legislative Tax Structure Committee, said recently he looks for extensive reforms in the state's property tax system.

He said the Division of Financial Management handed out a 85-page study on sales tax exemption that it made last year.

"I am hopeful our committee can bring back Sen. Dane Watkins some concrete proposals that will be beneficial to the state," he said.

Watkins said keen interest has been shown for the committee and about half of the legislators have asked to be named to subcommittees to study the different phases of taxation.



Watkins said the committee is planning to form subcommittees to help in the study.

He said the next meeting is scheduled for late July and it likely will meet at least once a month the remainder of this year so it can present a report to the 1984 Legislature.

"I'm excited over this committee," said Watkins. "I wish it had been formed earlier so that a more equitable tax system could have been inaugurated. It may have headed off the 1 Percent Tax Initiative and the Home Residential Initiative."

He said these two initiatives have each seriously restricted Idaho's property tax system.

"We have 26 major sales tax exemptions that lose about \$200 million to the state each year," said Watkins. "If the state loses this money then an entirely new taxing system will be needed."

Watkins said he viewed this new tax structure committee as perhaps the most important in legislative history to bring about comprehensive tax reform.

He said the committee is looking at everything from tax exemptions to a state lottery.

Watkins said the committee will look at tax reform studies made in 1955 and in 1966 but it will probably use Legislative Council staff members and others to help compile results of this latest study.