

The Post-Register

The political pulse

Idaho Falls, Idaho, Sunday, January 3, 1982

C-5

The 1982 Idaho Legislature . . .

Mergers and fee hikes backed for education

(EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the 12th in a series of 16 articles giving the views of east Idaho legislators and the leadership on the salient issues shaping up for the coming session. This one deals on education.)

By BEN J. PLASTINO
Post-Register political editor

East Idaho legislators favor consolidations and increased fees and tuitions to stretch the education dollar but acknowledge a rough road lies ahead to bring this about.

All place education as a top priority and Gov. John V. Evans' recommended budget specifies 70.3 percent of the general fund budget goes for education on all levels, a figure most lawmakers find no quarrel with. They do feel, however, his budget estimates of \$477,035,500 is at least \$10 million too high and if there is a slash, education would need to take a proportionate cut.

In higher education, most lament Idaho, is supporting three full-fledged universities, Lewis-Clark State College, and two junior colleges. They acknowledge it is now too late to change but eventually the rapid state's population increase should gradually mitigate the problem.

Even though education leaders and legislators would like to see the present 115 public school districts in Idaho reduced to a third of that number to bring greater efficiency, increase quality, and save costs, they admit it will be hard to achieve.

In fact, the trend appears to be in reverse.

For example, in east Idaho, West Jefferson is seeking at present to split from Jefferson County School District. A decade ago, Ririe School District divided from Jefferson district.

Rep. Kurt L. Johnson, R-Idaho Falls, chairman of the House Education Committee, said the state universities would have greater flexibility if tuition were authorized through a constitutional amendment and statute. This would allow students and families being able to pay more to bring Idaho more in line with surrounding states as well as provide some of the needed finances. He also advocated studies on consolidations of present school districts.

Rep. John O. Sessions, R-Driggs, education committee vice chairman, said it is doubtful there would ever be enough support in the Legislature to consolidate Lewis-Clark College at Lewiston with the University of Idaho at Moscow, only 40 miles away.

He said also he would like to see patrons of various schools be given an opportunity to vote on the consolidating districts. He suggested this could include Idaho Falls School District 91 and Bonneville District 93, as well as others.

House Speaker Ralph Olmstead, R-Twin Falls, said he supports a modest increase in the student share for fees but not to as great a degree as in neighboring states.

Sen. Dane Watkins, R-Idaho Falls, a member of the Joint Finance Appropriation Committee, who fought for more public education funding in the last session and barely lost, said "with the demand for more dollars, consolidation at the higher education level, such as Lewis and Clark, and the local education level will have to be strongly considered if we are going to get the most bang for the buck."

Rep. Linden B. Bateman, R-Idaho Falls, a Bonneville High School teacher, said he favored tuition for higher education, in view of four major state supported colleges in a state

with only 945,000 population. He also observed many students leave the state for college, especially in South Idaho. Bateman said he would favor consolidation of Lewis and Clark with UI, and added the State Board of Education should have more power to eliminate duplication of programs in higher education.

Bateman said he believes that the property tax should be almost totally limited to property-related services, such as fire and police protection, road and street improvements, etc.

"It should not be used to fund education except for bonding purposes or as in enrichment levy," he said. "The property tax now used for the maintenance and operation of schools should be eliminated and be replaced with the sales tax."

Sen. Mark G. Ricks, R-Rexburg, said he had long felt that Idaho taxpayers cannot afford the luxury of four institutions of higher learnings, plus two junior colleges.

House Minority Leader Melvin Hammond, D-Rexburg, a Ricks College religious instructor, said sadly that he thinks consolidation will never come about, except at local level. He backed increased fees for higher education and maintains that with tight funding there is need for higher tuition.

Sen. Vearl Crystal, R-Rigby, said he voted for increased public education funding in the last session. He said he also thinks student fee increase are a viable alternative for increase income. Crystal said the Idaho Student Association plans to present a bill that will authorize charging student fees. Crystal said he does not believe a constitutional amendment is necessary to increase fees, that it can be done by state statute.

All other legislators urged consolidations but there was none who would say he planned to propose such a bill.

Sen. Israel Merrill, D-Blackfoot, called for giving more authority to the State Board of Education to bring consolidation and increased student fees.

Rep. Rich Orme, R-St. Anthony, said the university student fee was raised \$100 last year and that should be sufficient for the time being to give students as much free education as possible or else it would prevent many from going to college. He said there are too many four-year schools in Idaho and Lewis-Clark, which was dropped in 1949 and then reinstated in the 1970s, should be limited only for special nursing or vocational education. He noted teachers like everyone else are financially squeezed but they should have a decent standard of living and he favors top priority for all levels of education.

Rep. Ray E. Infanger, a JFAC member, said "teacher after teacher has come to be and said they are willing to stand their share of inflation and not ask for a salary increase if the cost of administration could be brought down."

Rep. Wayne E. Tibbitts, R-Lorenzo, said he opposes consolidating Lewis-Clark with UI as the institution gives much needed services to students in the Lewiston area.

Sen. William L. Floyd, R-Idaho Falls, called for looking again at consolidation at all levels, to heed the advice of State School Supt. Jerry Evans to change the formula to bring equal student funding, that he does not favor total state funding, and favors overrides which requires local districts to sell patrons on validity of the levies.