

The 1981 Idaho Legislature...

Legislators hope to help public education funding

(Editor's note: This is the 7th in a series of 16 articles giving the views of East Idaho legislators and leaders and the salient issues shaping up for the coming session. This is on public education)

BY BEN J. PLASTINO
Post-Register political editor

Most East Idaho legislators and the leadership are sympathetic toward public education, which generally gets two-thirds of the general state funds but they are fearful that the stringent financial outlook may prevent them from allocating as much money as they would like.

Rep. Kurt L. Johnson, R-Idaho Falls, chairman of the House Education Committee, suggests using revenues from utilities and large public-serving corporations, such as power companies, telephone and railroads, for general supplementary and equalizing funding for public schools.

He also says school districts should be further consolidated in many counties.

Rep. John Sessions, R-Driggs, the committee vice chairman and ranking majority member, said he is hopeful the legislature can appropriate sufficient funds for an increase which would at least offset inflation and cost of living increases.

Sessions said he has always opposed forced consolidation of school districts, adding these districts and patrons can consolidate now if they so desire.

Rep. Linden B. Bateman, R-Idaho Falls, also an education committee member and a Bonneville High School teacher, proposed formation of a legislative interim committee to give serious study to the issue of school district consolidation.

"As education funding becomes more difficult, consideration in certain areas may be required," he said.

Sympathy for school districts also was expressed by Sen. Veal Crystal, R-Rigby, member of the Senate Health, Education and Welfare Committee.

He said legislators have allowed school districts to get all the funds needed and available. He suggested funds be apportioned on the basis of 80 percent from the state and 20 percent from local districts. He also suggested shifting 11 mills property tax from local to state.

Most of the leadership appears to take a tougher stand on public education.

Senate President Pro Tem Reed Budge, R-Soda Springs, said he thought school districts have received generous state funding, reaching 72 percent at present.

"In 1960," said Budge, "we allowed the public schools only \$1 million, now it's \$186 million."

He also said consolidation is a local matter and should not be forced by the state.

Senate Majority Leader James Risch, R-Boise; House Speaker Ralph Olmstead, R-Twin Falls; Majority Leader Walter E. Little, R-New Plymouth, and Minority Leader Melvin Hammond, D-Rexburg, all said they would grant as much money as possible but saw little chances for much increase. They also said school district consolidation should be a local matter, not for one the state should force.

About the same views of giving as much possible to public schools as the revenue would permit and against forced school consolidation were expressed by nearly all legislators responding to a Post-Register questionnaire.

Sen. Dane Watkins, R-Idaho Falls, member of the Joint Finance Appropriation Committee, observed the funding formula the Legislature passed the last session most likely will remain the same.

"With decreasing enrollment, Idaho Falls District 91 will continue to have financial problems," he said. "The dollars will go where the students are."

Sen. William Floyd, R-Idaho Falls, said he would like to review programs, that salaries should be equitable in the state or quality teachers will be lost.

"Let's cut programs, not teachers," he said.

Floyd said he also would like to find out if it is true that Boise school districts has 80 electives.

Rep. Elaine Kearnes, R-Idaho Falls, said she would like to see some school consolidation as a means to pare school administration costs. She also said she expects the state will seek to give the 72 percent state fund for schools as was granted last session.

Sen. Israel Merrill, D-Blackfoot, a JFAC member, said "Idaho has a good education system and shouldn't be messed up in time of crisis. We have done enough of that with the 1 percent initiative."

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Legislative limelights...

Democrat solons few but appear potent

BY BEN J. PLASTINO
Post-Register political editor

Idaho Democratic legislators are the fewest in at least a quarter of a century for the 46th Legislators but that doesn't mean they are not going to be a viable force.

Republicans dominate the Legislators but their numbers are so overwhelming they already are fighting among themselves in the House, and to a lesser extent, in the Senate. They control the Senate 23-12, just one vote shy of veto proof, and the House 56-14, or a total of 79 Republicans and only 26 Democrats, a ratio of 3-1.

These figures are deceiving because most Democrat candidates received approximately 40 percent of the vote on an average except for President Carter, who was drubbed 66.5 to 25.2 percent, an almost 3-1 margin.

However, in the congressional races, the Democrats, although losing, attracted a considerable vote. Sen. Frank Church drew 49 percent of the vote against Steve Symms; Diane Bilyeu 41 percent against Rep. George Hansen, and Glen Nichols 46.3 percent against Larry Craig in the 1st District. The election results generally showed Democrats polled about 40 percent of the vote.

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The Democrats have two new outstanding minority leaders in each chamber who will offer Republicans all they can handle on partisan issues. One is Sen. Ron Twilegar, D-Boise, a brilliant attorney and a past master in parliamentary procedure, who replaces Sen. Cy C. Chase, D-St. Maries, who did not seek re-election. In the House it will be Rep. Melvin Hammond, D-Rexburg, a low key but effective legislator, who ousted the liberal Rep. Patricia McDermott, D-Pocatello.

There is a Republican challenge to the election of Sen. John Peavey, D-Carey, for alleged election irregularities but information uncovered so far indicate this has little substance.

Hammond's elevation to the minority leadership may help the small but tight band of House Democrats as he is a conservative and one who is highly respected by his colleagues on both sides

of the aisle. A couple of years ago, Hammond was voted in a poll among political observers, legislators and newsmen as the House legislator considered with the most integrity and honesty.

His presence likely will be much more effective than that of Miss McDermott, considered by most of her colleagues as the most liberal legislator in the lower chamber. This is hardly a popular label these days in view of the strong conservative tide manifested in the last election. It would follow then that the conservative Hammond likely can work better with the opposition.

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Lt. Gov. Philip E. Batt, in a recent news release, warned against Republicans seeking to run roughshod over the Democrats, pointing out they still represented about 40 percent of the voters. He also observed in a somewhat regal air that once the Republicans made their decision, the Democrats might find it difficult if they didn't comply.

Democrat Gov. John V. Evans is well aware of the situation and can be expected to seek greater cooperation among the Republicans. He really doesn't have much choice. His latest statements indicated a strong desire to avoid bitter partisanship.

Evans likely won't encounter much trouble with the Republican House leadership under Speaker Ralph Olmstead, R-Twin Falls, who has demonstrated fairness.

The Senate may be something else where the Senate leaders under Senate President Pro Tem Reed Budge, R-Soda Spring, have been less than enthusiastic in the last two sessions working with the chief executive. Budge refused to even attend the governor's weekly leadership meetings during the last session.

The Democrats can find their strength far more potent than their numbers indicate by cooperating with the Republican moderates and the traditional conservatives in both chambers. These groups represent the decisive majority as compared with the far right, and the rigid conservatives.