

The 1981 Idaho Legislature . . .

Legislators hope to help public education funding

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(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)

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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. Vearl 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."