Legislative limelights . . .

Idaho teachers face bleak junket success

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The political pulse

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Exodus of an estimated 2,000 Idaho teachers to dramatize their demands for a 13.2 percent public school funding increase to the Idaho Legislature Friday faces dubious prospects of success.

Already, key legislators have been alienated by what they feel is a mob scene that will descend on the Capitol to ask the increase, under threat by their delegate assembly last spring to close the schools.

More than 30 years observation at the State Capitol has firmed the belief that the surest way to rejection is to threaten the Legislature.

Already, the entire Legislature leadership and members of the all powerful Joint Finance Appropriation Committee have warned against the demonstrations and expressed resentment at a strike threat if the teachers don't get their increase. Gov. John V. Evans appears more likely to welcome them.

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Idaho teachers deserve a 13.2 percent increase, but they also must realize the 1 Percent Tax Initiative has placed the Legislature in a financial straitjacket.

In the 1979 session, the teachers realized the situation and appeared satisfied with a 6 percent hike, which wasn't much, but it was the largest for any state agency.

Even Don Rolie, Boise, executive director of the Idaho Education Association, expressed satisfaction the Legislature did about as well as could be expected under the circumsantces. Yet, he now objects to a higher increase with the financial conditions about the same, or even worse.

Dr. James Parley, Idaho Falls District 91 superintendent, who is held in high esteem by the Legislature, has repeatedly complimented the 1979 Idaho Legislature.

There is little doubt the schools are not adequately taken care of when one considers their needs and funding levels. Idaho schools are not keeping up.

Yet, 72 percent of the Idaho general fund budget in 1979 went for schools and this is intended to be increased to 75 percent this year. Any increased amount schools get would, of necessity, be siphoned off from some other agency, likely such as social programs for the ill, handicapped and poor of the Department of Health and Welfare.

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Rep. Linden B. Bateman, R-Idaho Falls, a Bonneville High School teacher, suggest that representative delegations contact their legislators. He said "a mob scene" might be counter-productive.

House Speaker Ralph Olmstead, R-Twin Falls, one of those who says he bristles at a strike threat, echoed Bateman's views, adding the educators likely could accomplish more by lobbying lawmakers from their own districts.

Olmstead and other legislators pointed out the Legislature has appropriated more for education than the governor has recommended the last six years.

Rep. Doyle C. Miner, R-St. Anthony, observes with justification the educators are likely the world's worst lobbyists, judging from their plan to demonstrate.

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Gov. John V. Evans has recommended an 8.8 percent increase for education, the highest of state agencies. Most legislators appear to agree with this figure.

Some 35 school districts, nearly a third of the 115, have announced plans to close schools for Friday's demonstration. This includes East Bonneville 93, Blackfoot, Snake River and Fremont from East Idaho. Teachers from other school districts plan to take personal leave to attend, including 22 from Idaho Falls District 91.

This means the day lost will need to be made up later at inconvenience to parents and children, as well as teachers.

The Associated Press reported that the two largest schools in the state, Boise and Lewiston, will close for the demonstration. Boise with some 22,035 students is the largest, but Lewiston actually is only the ninth largest, with 5,583. The largest, next to Boise, are Pocatello 12,093 enrollment, Meridian now surged to third with 11,184, Idaho Falls 8,965, Coeur d'Alene 7,190, Twin Falls 6,551, Nampa 6,336, and East Bonneville 6,093, then Lewiston. Actually, Idaho Falls and East Bonneville, which cover most of Bonneville County, combine for the second largest in the state, with a combined 15,056.

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Lt. Gov. Philip E. Batt noted that while Idaho ranked 42nd in teacher's salaries and 48th in expenditure per pupil, its income is low, on the national average. He contends if this factor is considered, Idaho would rank 26th which is near midway, but certainly not a place to stop.

Batt also points out Idaho graduates are competitive with other states, based on criteria of college entrance scores, literacy percentages and military acceptance nerms. The quality of life in Idaho also is a factor.

Many teachers will spend their hard-earned money and time for the trip to Boise, but it can be safely predicted now that they won't get much more than the 8.8 percent recommended by the governor.