

Legislature will give education top priority

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

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East Idaho legislators strongly agreed that public education will get top ranking in funding, but they resent the ultimatum of the Idaho Education Association that teachers will close the schools if they don't get a 13.2 percent budget increase.

There are reports some IEA leaders plan a demonstration early in the session to dramatize their demands.

Rep. Kurt L. Johnson, R-Idaho Falls, chairman of the House Education Committee, contended "teacher salary increases are still the responsibility of the individual school districts. It will depend on the total additional revenue available as to how the school boards can satisfy the demands."

Rep. Melvin Hammond, D-Rexburg, a Ricks College instructor, said he favored giving education what is possible, but frowned on making demands of certain percentages.

"I do agree that if any group needs help, it is education," he said.

Rep. Doyle C. Miner, R-St. Anthony, co chairman of the Joint Finance Appropriation Committee, said he would not oppose shifting slightly more state funds to public education, but he opposes 100 percent state funding. He said he would be willing to appropriate a 13.2 percent increase if there is enough revenue, but estimated it will be more like 10-11 percent.

Everything possible

Nearly all of the legislators also said they would do everything possible in behalf of public schools, but doubted the budget increase will be as much as the 13.2 percent requested.

A Bonneville High School teacher, Rep. Linden B. Bateman, R-Iona, said there is a need to move away from the property tax and towards a broader base tax. He agreed 13.2 percent increase is needed, but said it cannot be granted as there isn't enough money in the general fund.

"Any attempt by the IEA to apply undue pressure on the Legislature will only hurt education," he said.

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Bateman also advocated a bonus fund to provide incentives for the exceptional teacher, pointing out the ineffective teacher receives the same salary as the "master teacher." He noted the only criteria in determining salaries is the number of years of service and the training level.

Rep. John O. Sessions, R-Driggs, ranking majority member of the education committee, expressed hope that enough funds will be appropriated for teachers and also other public employees to at least offset increased inflation costs.

Said Rep. Gary L. Paxman, R-Idaho Falls: "I feel the IEA is unrealistic with its demands and threats. NEA (National Education Association), has been declared a union, not an education association. I wonder if IEA is not pursuing the same course."

Backs education

Departing from the views of most of his colleague, Rep. Ray E. Infanger, R-Salmon, considered one of the most conservative legislators, surprisingly said he feels education should have 13 mills, adding "I felt badly the governor vetoed the 2 mill bill."

Rep. Wayne E. Tibbits, R-

Lorenzo, said he felt "cool" towards the 13.2 percent increase and "cold" to its threats of a teacher walkout.

Sen. Israel Merrill, D-Blackfoot, ranking minority member of the Senate Health, Education and Welfare Committee, expressed hope funding will allow for the increased IEA demands, saying "they need help."

Rep. Elaine Kearnes, R-Idaho Falls, said she felt the IEA demands are too high in comparison with what other agencies will get. She said she "is strong for education but it

can't be one sided."

Sen. J. Marsden Williams, R-Idaho Falls, said he thought the IEA's ultimatum for a teacher walkout was unprofessional.

"They should be smarter than that," he said. "I think education has done well and everyone seems to be of the opinion it gets the best it can. Higher education didn't get much this year, for example."

Rep. Wendell Miller, D-Idaho Falls, said he favored adequate education funding but said "the IEA demand is the incorrect way to approach the Legislature."