

Educators urge lawmakers, candidates to hike school funding

By *GAIL SCHONTZLER Chronicle Staff Writer*

The Bozeman School Board sat down with nine local legislators and candidates Monday night to start talking about school funding issues that could again be a battleground in the 2009 Legislature.

Montana educators contend that state government still hasn't done enough to meet its constitutional obligation to fund public schools. Bozeman School Board trustees stressed that funds are almost always tight and most years they have to make budget cuts.

Lawmakers stressed the realities of their political and financial limits. "For all but two years I've been on the board, we've cut the budget," Trustee Carson Taylor told the group. This year, another three teaching jobs had to be cut at Bozeman High School, on top of seven eliminated last year, Taylor said. That means 50 fewer classes are being offered, so students find it harder to get into the courses they want.

Trustee Bruce Grubbs said the Bozeman district has 1 million square feet of buildings to take care of, but it places a higher priority on educating students. "All over the state, there are districts with facilities that are falling apart, Grubbs said. "Money doesn't solve (all) problems, but you need money to solve problems."

"Keep in mind the constraints of the economy," said Rep. Franke Wilmer, D-Bozeman, who served on the House Education Committee and is running for re-election.

As a grandmother of a Bozeman school student, Wilmer said she's aware of the school district's inability to hire the math specialist teachers it wanted to help teachers and students with the new math curriculum.

In the 2007 Legislature, Wilmer said, lawmakers tried to correct some aspects of education funding, but in many cases it had to use one-time only money. There is a consensus among lawmakers that the complicated formula the state uses to funnel money to individual school districts needs to be less sensitive to declining enrollment, Wilmer said. That's why the Legislature added money to the formula for "per educator" funding, she said. It's true the Legislature has added funding to the formula so that schools are hurt less when enrollment drops, but the additions only add up to about 5 percent of state funding, Assistant Superintendent Steve Johnson said later during discussion of next year's budget.

Montana schools are about 30 percent short of what they need, Superintendent Kirk Miller said. The state should add about 3 or 4 percent above inflation each year until that level is reached, he said.

About 38 percent of the state's budget goes to public schools, Wilmer said during the talk with lawmakers and candidates.

Ted Washburn, a Republican candidate for House District 69, said if he's elected, he'd like to serve on the Education Committee, even though "I know it's a suicidal mission." U.S. schools don't compare well with others in the world, Washburn said, because families have broken apart in the past 40 years and kids don't value education.

What Montana should do, Washburn said, is follow Wyoming's example, and maximize tax revenue from development of coal, oil and gas. Rep. Brady Wiseman, D-Bozeman, called school funding "the most complicated, confusing and politicized (issue) in state government." He said he doesn't understand the complex funding formula, but he's willing to help Bozeman schools, "just tell me what you need."

Rep. Mike Philips, D-Bozeman, said school funding will depend a lot on what Gov. Brian Schweitzer proposes in his budget later this year. He recommended strongly that school advocates work with Wilmer and Sen. Bob Hawks, D-Bozeman, who serve on the education committees.

Also attending the discussion were Republican candidates Nick Mahan, Gordon Vance and Mike More, and Democrats Robert Bastrup and Anne Millbrooke.

"I think this is very helpful to get legislators together," Washburn said after the meeting.

Miller thanked the nine who attended, saying he had invited 25 lawmakers and candidates.

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School funding trial on calendar

Posted on May 25 - *By the ASSOCIATED PRESS*

HELENA - A trial on whether the state of Montana is still underfunding public schools is scheduled for late September in Helena. The trial is expected to last a week before District Judge Jeffrey Sherlock.

It will begin either Sept. 22 or Sept. 29, depending on whether an unrelated trial goes ahead as planned on the 22nd. The September trial is the latest episode in a legal and political battle that began in 2003. A coalition of school districts, unions, education groups and parents sued the state, saying it failed to live up to its constitutional obligation of funding a "free, quality" system of public schools.

The schools won the lawsuit, but went back to court earlier this year, saying the state still isn't meeting its constitutional obligation. The school argue that many school districts are facing budget cuts this fall, in large part because the state isn't keeping up its share of funding and hasn't properly revised its school-funding formula as ordered by Sherlock in 2004.

The state will argue at trial that funding increases and changes in 2005 and 2007 have addressed the problems, Montana Attorney General Mike McGrath said last week. "Our case is that the state has complied with the court's request" from 2004, he said. "The system is not unconstitutional."

The state hasn't compiled its list of witnesses for the trial, but lawyers for the schools said they expect state Budget Director David Ewer will be one of the witnesses.

Among the schools' expected witnesses at the trial are Billing Schools Superintendent Jack Copps, Bozeman Schools Superintendent Kirk Miller and Helena Schools Superintendent Bruce Messinger.

The Billings and Bozeman school districts are looking at program reductions and possible layoffs this year.

If the schools win their case, it likely would be appealed to the Montana Supreme Court, which may not rule until early next year, when the 2009 Legislature will be in session.

Earlier this month, Sherlock rejected the state's request to dismiss the case, saying the schools have "provided evidence that the same defective funding formula that was before this court and the Montana Supreme Court in 2004 and 2005 may not have been changed as required" by the courts.

However, he also said the schools will bear the burden proving that current state funding is inadequate.

The original lawsuit, filed in 2003, said years of under-funding by the state had led to widespread program cuts, accreditation failures and difficulty in recruiting teachers, among other things.

Sherlock ruled in the schools' favor in April 2004, and his order was upheld by the Montana Supreme Court later that year.

The high court also left the case open and under Sherlock's jurisdiction.

Report rates school facilities as good or fair

BY KRISTEN CATES • TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER • JULY 16, 2008

A new report compiled by state officials shows that more than 95 percent of Montana's school facilities are in good or fair condition. The report, compiled by the Department of Administration Architecture and Engineering Division, was aimed at taking an inventory of Montana's schools for future planning and financial allocations.

"It shows us that our school districts have been very conscientious about keeping their schools in good shape," said Superintendent of Public Instruction Linda McCulloch. The K-12 public schools facility condition assessment was authorized by the 2005 special legislative session. The first phase, which was completed by September 2006, consisted of surveys completed online by individual school districts.

The second phase began this year with site surveys at each school across the state. Nearly 2,200 buildings were surveyed — including schools, shops and other school-related property.

"Basically, we just had no idea, even on the size of our buildings," McCulloch said. The study focused on facility condition, educational characteristics of buildings, energy use and technology equipment.

There are only 45 school buildings in use built before 1910, and the largest period of school construction growth was from 1950 to 1970, in the post World War II-era. In the past decade, 42 schools or school-related buildings have been built in Montana.

When it comes to facility conditions, the largest structural problem facing schools is that nearly 60 percent of the damages and worn-out facilities come in the form of floors, ceilings, walls, doors and frames.

"Our buildings are not perfect," McCulloch said. She added that the survey also indicates that school buildings are still worth investing in. The survey also compared the buildings' square footages and enrollment, comparing the two to see how much of the building is being used.

The report doesn't include a cost analysis of investing in the school buildings.

"That was never the purpose of (the report)," McCulloch said. She said the 2007 Legislature set aside \$40 million that could not be tapped until the report for each school district is complete.

Last year, the Legislature gave \$30 million to school districts for capital improvements and deferred maintenance.

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