



State Senate's roadshow on education can't ignore money

9 HOURS AGO

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A month-long state Senate roadshow to get citizen input on how best to fully fund basic education could be a great way to focus on the issues that must be addressed by lawmakers.

However, the senators taking the Senate Education Committee on a statewide tour apparently don't plan on dealing with where the money will come from to meet the demand of the state Supreme Court to fully fund education.

Sen. Bruce Dammeier, R-Puyallup — vice chairman of both the Senate Education and Ways and Means committees — acknowledged to The Associated Press the proposal being pitched to revamp the local school levy system and the statewide teacher pay system is incomplete. He sees money as a political issue that will be resolved during the legislative session.

That's a mistake. Money is the issue that must be addressed first.

The public needs to understand what it takes — whether it's paying more taxes, cutting current programs or revamping the current local levy system — before decisions on what will be funded can be made. It's easy to fully fund education when pulling numbers out of thin air.

Currently, the Republican-controlled Senate and Democrat-led House are hundreds of millions of dollars apart on how much money they believe will be needed to resolve the education issue.

"At this point, if we got to agreement on the size of the problem, that would be a major accomplishment," said House Appropriations Committee Chairman Hans Dunshee, D-Snohomish. "We'll talk about solutions later, after we define the problem."

And the best way to get to that point would be to involve the public in the unpleasant and necessary discussion about money.

At this time, local school districts rely on the voter-approved levies for a substantial amount of their funding.

In Walla Walla, for example, the levy approved locally accounts for about 20 percent of the public school district's annual budget. Some districts count on 25 percent of funding from levies.

If the local levies were eliminated and local school levy collections transferred into a statewide property tax to support education, as has been proposed in the Senate, the local districts would lose control over how to spend money for the extras such as music and athletics. Or, perhaps, lawmakers would opt not to fund those programs.

This is stuff that's central to the debate.

The Senate Education Committee listening tour gets closest to Walla Walla on Oct. 27 when a session will be held in Yakima at the local Education Service District offices.

This and the other five meetings being held in the state, starting with one tonight in Anacortes, must bluntly address the issue of funding.