

Education listening tour stop in Yakima focuses on fair funding

By Rafael Guerrero

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Zillah School District Superintendent Kevin McKay knows the “eyes of our nation” are looking at Washington and how the Legislature handles the McCleary decision. His father, he said, studies public education on a national level, and there is great interest in what is happening — and not happening — in Olympia.

“We are being looked at by others in other states,” McKay said Tuesday evening at a public forum on education in Yakima.

The hearing hosted a who’s who of regional education officials, as well as educators and parents who came out to speak to the Senate Early Learning and K-12 Education Committee. The committee has been on a road trip to gather local input about how state lawmakers can deal with McCleary, the groundbreaking state Supreme Court decision requiring full funding of basic education.

The meeting, described as a “working/listening tour,” was held at the ESD 105 offices. Attendance was between 150 and 200, with about one-third speaking directly to the panel of legislators.

The panel included Sen. Curtis King, R-Yakima; Rep. Norm Johnson, R-Yakima; Sen. Bruce Dammeier, R-Puyallup; Sen. Christine Rolfes, D-Kitsap County; Sen. Ann Rivers, R-La Center; and Sen. Jim Hargrove, D-Hoquiam.

At the heart of the discussion were two issues: an overreliance on local levies to support basic education and widespread teacher shortages. One speaker after another maintained the two are more related than they might appear.

“I strongly encourage you to implement a statewide educational funding system that is balanced, equitable and fair to all students, staff and school districts,” said Yakima school board president Martha Rice. “The disparity between school districts and their ability to attract and retain highly qualified educators is immense.”

The dependence of school districts on property taxes has created a disparity between property-rich districts and property-poor ones. Simply put: the greater the taxable property base in a community, the better the odds for schools to deliver high-quality public education.

This puts schools within the ESD 105 boundaries at a general disadvantage, whether from the expanse of nontaxable reservation lands, more open space or low-income neighborhoods where property values are perennially low.

Such issues have caused problems in districts like Mabton. Junior-Senior High School teacher Ted Raihl said levy inequality is especially felt in the technology the school is equipped with. Resources have to go elsewhere and not to new technology.

“Computers we have at my school are cast-offs from the state government,” he said. “And it’s especially problematic in my community” because the vast majority of the students live in households with no computer or Internet access.

Grandview Superintendent Kevin Chase said levy dollars are spread thin.

“Special education funds, school security, STEM, career, college, smaller class sizes, IB, AP, Jazz Club, fine arts, those are the things we have to provide with levy (dollars),” he said. “The levy killers are salaries and benefits that have to be paid off with local funds, special education costs, technology.”

Differences in levy dollars mean some school districts will pay their teachers — and administrators — significantly more than others.

School districts like Grandview act as a “farm league” of sorts for teachers, using their schools as launch pads to better-paying jobs in other school districts, said assistant superintendent Brad Shreeve.

It even hits local principal pay. New Selah High School principal Jennifer Kindle took a pay cut when she took the job earlier this year to return to the Valley. She believes pay should be equal across the state for each respective level.

“As I moved from Franklin Pierce (near Tacoma) to Selah, I took a \$20,000 cut in pay. Both high schools are virtually the same size. I moved from Yelm to Ellensburg; there’s no change in cost-of-living, other than a reduction in my salary.”

This was the last of seven stops the bipartisan committee has made over the past month. Not all of the committee members have participated on the listening tour. Rolfes said each stop has been “pretty reflective of the differences across the state,” such as a greater emphasis on rural education in Yakima than in other regions.

509-759-7853

rguerrero@yakimaherald.com