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Idaho Legislature cuts school spending: House Democrats mount impassioned plea as session's first major budget legislation is sent to governor

Mar. 26--BOISE -- Following an impassioned 90-minute debate, House lawmakers approved the public schools budget Thursday on a near party line 50-19 vote.

The \$1.58 billion budget is the first major spending plan to make it through both houses this session. The Senate approved it Monday by a 27-8 margin.

Moscow Sen. Gary Schroeder and Moscow Rep. Tom Trail were the only Republicans to vote against the measure. All Democratic lawmakers opposed the bill.

The budget cuts overall school spending by \$129 million, or 7.5 percent. Discretionary dollars -- the money school districts use to pay for everything from health insurance premiums to utility bills -- were reduced by \$48 million, or almost 14 percent.

Democrats said the governor and majority party could pursue modest revenue proposals to minimize the cuts, such as delaying a scheduled increase in the grocery tax credit or postponing a reduction in the insurance premium tax.

By choosing to ignore such opportunities, Rep. James Ruchti, D-Pocatello, said lawmakers were marching to the same doomed tune as the Confederate soldiers who were slaughtered at Gettysburg.

"If we continue along this path, we will have the same disastrous consequences," Ruchti said. "We will change the face of education in this state. We (Democrats) fear we're on a path that will destroy the public education system in Idaho -- or, at a minimum, make changes from which we won't return for generations to come. That's why we're so passionate about this."

Rep. Brian Cronin, D-Boise, said Idaho was "squandering a golden opportunity" by approving the first decrease in overall school spending in state history.

A more prudent approach, he said, would be to combine spending cuts with reasonable revenue increases. Doing so would allow the state to distinguish itself through its commitment to education.

"Are we simply going to be reactive to what is undoubtedly a bad situation?" Cronin asked. "Or will we choose a path forward that reflects an unequivocal and unwavering commitment to educating our children, to preparing our workforce and building upon our base in this knowledge economy?"

Rep. Stephen Hartgen, R-Twin Falls, dismissed the idea that Idaho would be "engulfed in Noah's Flood" if lawmakers approved this budget.

"If this were our own family and we'd seen almost a 25 percent reduction in revenue, we'd do exactly what the (joint budget committee) did with this budget," he said. "We'd go through it line-by-line, we'd defer expenses where we could and we'd provide flexibility."

Hartgen noted many teachers and administrators actually received pay raises this year. While some may take pay cuts in fiscal 2011, he said, it probably won't compare to what's happened in the

private sector all across Idaho.

Rep. Darrell Bolz, a professor emeritus for the University of Idaho's extension service, said public schools have been held harmless the last two years, while tens of millions of dollars have been cut from other agencies.

"I think that speaks to the value we place on education," Bolz said.

Prior to the main floor debate, Democrats objected to the fiscal note on the bill, because it failed to identify potential financial impacts on local school districts.

Rep. Branden Durst, D-Boise, said cutting \$129 million from the school budget will force some districts to go to voters with supplemental levy requests. The fiscal note should have quantified that cost-shift, he said, so he made a motion to amend it.

"This fiscal note doesn't provide as much information to the people of Idaho as it should," Durst said. "For transparency purposes, are we letting people know what could happen?"

House Majority Leader Mike Moyle said fiscal notes should be vetted in committee, not on the House floor. Consequently, Durst's motion "is a waste of time," he said.

House Minority Leader John Rusche took exception to that, reminding Moyle the joint budget committee operates a little differently than other committees.

"It's a difficult to challenge this in the budget committee, especially since the fiscal note isn't written until after they approve budgets," he said.

Durst's motion was defeated by a mainly party line vote. The school budget now goes to the governor for signature.


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