

Campaign launched for education trust fund

Becky Kramer

Initiative, which would raise sales tax by 1 cent, needs 200,000 signatures.

With more than 200,000 signatures to collect by July 2, the League of Education Voters is starting to fire up its initiative campaign.

After a year of collecting input from parents, educators, business people and community members throughout the state, the group has developed a proposal that would generate a dedicated stream of money for all levels of public education.

Money would come from a 1-cent increase in the state sales tax rate, which would bring the state rate to 7.5percent. Local taxes are added on top of that, so the actual sales tax in Spokane, for instance, would increase from 8.1percent to 9.1percent.

The group met with about 60 local business and education leaders at the Davenport Hotel on Wednesday night to explain more about the Washington Education Trust Fund.

Officials describe some of the difficulties educators face.

Children starting kindergarten are at such different levels in their learning that it is challenging to develop ways to get them all to the same place, Spokane Public Schools Superintendent Brian Benzel said.

Bill Marler, president of the board of regents of Washington State University, said that when his daughter graduates from high school in 10 years, there will be 45,000 more people wanting to get into college than there is space for now.

And of 100 kids who start kindergarten in Washington, 71 will graduate from high school, 42 will start post-secondary education and just 18 will get degrees, said Lisa Macfarlane of the League of Education Voters.

"That is unacceptable," she said. "We need significantly better outcomes for our state."

Among other things, the education trust fund would:

- * Create 10,000 new spaces for high-needs preschoolers.
- * Fully fund Initiative 728 - approved by voters in 2000 but scaled back by the Legislature - which reduces class sizes.
- * Provide incentives for teachers to obtain professional skill development.
- * Provide 25,000 more enrollments at community and technical colleges and universities.
- * Expand Promise Scholarships and financial aid.

A citizens oversight board would be set up to make sure that the money is

spent on authorized uses and that it does not take the place of existing funding, Macfarlane said.

"This is a bold step down the long road of making Washington's public schools the best in the world," said Nick Hanauer, a co-founder of the League of Education Voters.

The group must collect 190,000 valid signatures by July 2 to get the measure on the November ballot.

Some already are sharing their opinions.

The Washington Education Association board of directors voted to support the trust fund initiative "because it will help ensure students receive the well-rounded education they need to be successful," said WEA President Charles Hasse on the association's Web site.

The Washington State School Directors Association has not taken a formal position, but the organization reported in its newsletter that WSSDA remains "concerned that the proposal provides dollars with no analysis of need, increases an already volatile and unreliable sales tax and includes a dedicated revenue source for I-728."

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