

Nevada public education funding options remain elusive

By Sean Whaley, Nevada News Bureau

RENO – Northern Nevada state lawmakers and candidates in the November general election identified a number of public education priorities at a forum here Monday, from ending social promotion to paying the best performing teachers more to making much-needed capital improvements to older Washoe County schools.

But those participating in the event at Reno High School at the invitation of the nonpartisan group Parent Leaders for Education had few specifics about where funding to implement the ideas will come from when the Legislature convenes next February.

Those participating included Sen. Greg Brower, R-Reno, and former Sen. Sheila Leslie, a Democrat challenging Brower for the new District 15 seat. Sen. Ben Kieckhefer, R-Reno, who is not up for re-election, also participated, as did Assemblyman Pat Hickey, R-Reno, who is running unopposed for another term in District 25.

The panel was rounded out with two Assembly Democrats running for new terms and their Republican opponents. David Bobzien faces Heidi Waterman in District 24 and Teresa Benitez-Thompson faces Tom Taber in District 27.

Several of the participants identified the need to find revenue to repair and renovate the Washoe County School District's older schools as the top priority for the delegation next year.

Kieckhefer said those studying the issue are seeking about \$15 million to \$20 million annually in revenue that could be used to make repairs to more than half of the district's schools that are more than 30 years old and are in need of major repairs.

Brower said Washoe County lawmakers are working toward a solution to repair the county's schools and sell the proposal to Southern Nevada lawmakers who will ultimately have to support any funding option.

"It will be the best investment I think we can make in our schools in Washoe County for decades to come," he said.

Leslie issued a note of caution to those attending the forum, saying past experience has shown that even bipartisan priorities, such as finding revenue to repair older schools, can be derailed in a legislative session.

"And I don't want to sound like a cynic, but I've been through it several times," Leslie said. "And so I think meetings like this where you put people on the spot, and I'm willing to be put on the spot and tell you that I will vote for just about any revenue source I can think of right now, to improve our schools. But you need to put the pressure on all of us to make sure that we find a solution and we don't get to the end of the session and say oops, sorry, can't do that."

Brower said he agrees with Gov. Brian Sandoval, who announced earlier this year that he will propose to extend a package of taxes now set to sunset on June 30, 2013, into the next two-year budget to ensure that there are no further budget reductions for public schools or higher education.

But Leslie said the Legislature needs to do more than maintain the status quo and instead find a way to restore the \$123 million cut from Washoe County schools over the past five years. Nevada ranks poorly in many national rankings, including ranking 50th in the number of children who attend

preschool, she said.

“So obviously we can’t cut any more but what we really need to do is find a way to put that money back,” she said.

Hickey said he does not believe that raising taxes to find more revenue for education is likely to see any serious consideration at the next session. An option he favors is to look at shifting money that now goes to corrections and health and human services to public education.

Spending more on public education now so that money doesn’t have to be spent later on prisons is a better investment in the long term, Hickey said. Even so, several neighboring states, including Utah and Arizona, spend less per pupil but perform better than Nevada, he said.

“It’s wiser to educate than incarcerate,” Hickey said. “So we do need to spend more, we do need to spend wisely, but money is not the entire answer.”

Bobzien, who served as chairman of the Assembly Education Committee in 2011, said a number of major reforms were passed in a bipartisan show of support. But those reforms won’t turn Nevada’s schools around over the long term without adequate financial support, he said.

Waterman said the findings of the Sage Commission, established by former Gov. Jim Gibbons to find ways to make state government more efficient, need to be considered by lawmakers. Eliminating duplicative programs could help find money for public education, she said.

Benitez-Thompson said specific policy proposals are fine, but lawmakers need to look at the overall funding challenges facing public education. Ending social promotion from the third to the fourth grade is fine, but there are costs involved when children are held back, she said. Those children will need additional assistance so they can succeed, Benitez-

Thompson said.

Taber said teachers need to be given more control over their classrooms to help their students achieve. Funding also needs to be allocated with a business-oriented approach to ensure it is spent wisely, he said.

“Business sense is important,” Taber said.