Loosen Measure 5's chains

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If Gov. Ted Kulongoski and the Legislature won't lead or follow on school funding, the least they can do is get the state out of the way. Lawmakers should refer to voters a plan to increase Measure 5's property-tax rate limit and allow local communities to help their schools.

This every-community-for-itself plan is no one's first choice as a school-funding solution. It wouldn't help many -- maybe not even most -- school districts in Oregon. But it would hang a life preserver out there for any district that wanted to reach for it.

On Thursday, Sen. Ryan Deckert, D-Beaverton, chairman of the Senate Revenue Committee, opened a hearing on a tentative proposal by Sen. Charlie Ringo, D-Beaverton, and other lawmakers to ask voters in a June 10 election to increase Measure 5's tax rate limit for schools from $5 to $7 per $1,000 of assessed property value.

The response was underwhelming. Lobbyists for teachers and school administrators said they were "neutral, at best" about the proposal. A few parents and school leaders from property-rich districts such as Portland, Hillsboro and Corvallis spoke with more enthusiasm. However, several senators attacked the idea as unfair to poor and rural communities that lack the tax base to easily take advantage of the higher property-tax limits.

These are legitimate concerns, as is the fear that this approach could help legislators get off the hook on their own responsibilities to pay for schools. But how likely is a better idea to emerge from this Legislature and help fund schools this fall, or even the next one? There's no sign that lawmakers, the governor or the voters of Oregon are prepared anytime soon to approve a statewide funding solution.

We share the frustration of Ozzie Rose, executive director of the Confederation of Oregon School Administrators, who told lawmakers, "You keep painting us into this corner. You keep claiming that this is all you can do in this building, that you can't solve our problem. The hell you can't."

Rose made a pitch for a $2 per $1,000 of assessed value statewide property tax that would raise about $400 million a year to share among all school districts. That's an appealing idea -- it would share a property-tax increase with every school district, and every student, in the state. Yet it's hard to imagine it getting a serious airing in the Republican-controlled House of Representatives.

Face it: The "solution" is not likely to come this year. In the meantime, it makes sense to loosen the Measure 5 cap and allow local taxpayers, where they are willing, to step up and help schools. Taxpayers in 16 school districts -- which together educate a majority of Oregon's schoolchildren -- already have approved the small local-option previously allowed by the Legislature. It's likely that most of them would utilize a more expanded option.

We also challenge the conventional wisdom that rural communities won't raise their property taxes to help schools. Before Measure 5, property owners in some rural areas were paying among the highest school tax rates in the state; they do care deeply for their schools. Lawmakers also are devising a plan that would give state matching funds to property-poor districts which approved local options.

The best argument for the local option is that it would help reconnect Oregon communities and their schools. Measure 5 took school finance away from communities and gave it to the state. A new local option would begin to restore those old ties broken by Measure 5.

We won't oversell the idea of raising the Measure 5 cap. It is not the ultimate answer to Oregon's underfunded schools. It is, though, the only serious proposal that allows taxpayers to put more money into local school districts as soon as this fall.

That's something.

Which is more than the Legislature and governor seem prepared to offer.

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