

The size of the pie isn't changing, just the slices

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This much is becoming clear about Idaho's attempt to modernize the way it allocates dollars to public schools: This is going to be an exercise in reallocating scarcity.

Nowhere is that more apparent than in north central Idaho, where some school officials - including those from Lewiston - already have urged their legislative delegations to take a closer look at the plan.

Lawmakers, notably Rep. Wendy Horman, R-Idaho Falls, have every good intention. Idaho's been using the same funding formula for 25 years. Education has evolved since then and the system ought to reflect those changes.

But in those 25 years, spending on Idaho schools - which was never that robust to begin with - has suffered.

Interim Gov. Jim Risch's 2006 tax shift introduced more financial instability and a widening gap between rich and poor communities.

By steadily cutting taxes, Idaho leaders have trimmed public education's share of the state's personal wealth by about 25 percent.

And despite a recent string of generous budget increases, public schools have yet to recover from the cuts imposed during the Great Recession.

Even if lawmakers propose to pump about \$95 million into the system to soften the hit, one funding formula draft would still leave 36 school districts short - including Lewiston, Moscow and Orofino.

Unless you invest a lot more money - and by Lewiston School Board member Brad Cuddy's estimate, you might need at least another \$100 million to \$150 million - any change is going to leave a good many schools behind.

But Cuddy and others fear that is an apples-to-oranges comparison. They think Boise School District Chief Financial Officer Nancy Landon painted a more accurate picture by applying the new formula to the current budget year.

For example, her analysis as depicted in a spreadsheet released on Nov. 21 outlines how the system would have affected this fiscal cycle's numbers:

- Orofino - Down \$1.5 million, or nearly 17 percent.
- Lewiston - Down \$1.4 million, or 5.6 percent.
- Moscow - Down \$640,000, or nearly 5 percent.
- Nezperce - Down \$168,000, or 9.5 percent.
- Genesee - Down \$137,000, or 5.4 percent.
- Highland - Down \$73,600, or nearly 4 percent.
- Culdesac - Down nearly \$62,000, or 4.4 percent.
- Salmon River - Down nearly \$60,000, or 4.1 percent.
- Kendrick - Down \$75,700 or nearly 3.7 percent.
- Cottonwood - Down \$86,000 or nearly 3 percent.
- Mountain View - Down almost \$111,000 or 1.3 percent.
- Troy - Down \$20,300 or almost 1 percent.
- Potlatch - Down \$5,600 or almost 0.2 percent.
- Lapwai - Up \$378,000 or 11.1 percent.
- Kamiah - Up almost \$182,000, or 6.1 percent.
- Whitepine - Up almost \$29,000 or 1.3 percent.

It's early yet, and whether an individual school district wins or loses can depend on whether the formula is adjusted to reflect the relative wealth of a community, the size of its schools and whether to adjust spending on special needs, at-risk, and gifted and talented students.

Just the same, most of the communities in this region already pay a great deal of local taxes to compensate for inadequate state support.

Lewiston's supplemental levy comes in at about \$13 million. Moscow's patrons just agreed to pay almost \$11.5 million. Orofino residents are providing almost \$2.7 million.

Are they expected to pay even more - or offer their students something less?

Changing a school funding formula inevitably creates winners and losers across the state. But as lawmakers get down to chewing through a series of revised drafts, one question remains: Why is virtually every school in north central Idaho expected to take less so that others can get more?

If this region was benefiting from an heretofore unknown windfall from the state, why didn't somebody let us in on it? - M.T.