

Voters across state reject most new school levies

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By Catherine Candisky

Ohio voters approved about a third of the school levies on Tuesday's special-election ballot, and conservatives and liberals pointed to the fairly typical August election results to make political points about financing public education.

As usual, levies to renew existing taxes fared much better than those seeking new or additional funding. Three of four renewal issues passed, while only three of the 15 new levies were approved.

Conservatives questioned the need for additional tax revenue for schools, while liberals argued that districts are struggling after years of cuts in state aid.

"We're paying \$700 million more this biennium on school funding," said Greg R. Lawson, a policy analyst for the conservative Buckeye Institute, referring to state aid over two years.

"It's a bit of crocodile tears and gimme, gimme, gimme. There's never an end."

In contrast, left-leaning groups such as Innovation Ohio say school districts are receiving \$514 million less from the state this year than they received in the 2010-2011 school year, mostly because of the loss of tangible personal-property taxes and federal stimulus funds that plugged holes in a previous state budget. As a result, cash-strapped districts are slashing spending.

"These cuts are happening all over the state ... pay-to-play (sports fees), bus transportation, eliminating non-core subjects like elementary-school art, gifted education, all-day kindergarten," said Terra Goodnight, Innovation Ohio's policy director. "Once you get rid of these things, what's left?"

Whether voters questioned the need for the money or just don't have the money to give, Tuesday's election results were dismal for most school districts. The six tax issues for schools that voters approved are in: Brown Local in Carroll County; Brown Local in Medina County; Greenville in Darke County; Lebanon City in Warren County; Orrville in Wayne County; and West Liberty-Salem Local in Logan County.

While the number of levies on the ballot was smaller than in past August elections, the 32 percent passage rate was typical for a special election, according to statistics compiled by the Ohio School Boards Association.

Educators say that school districts, faced with funding challenges, declines in revenue and a difficult economy, are forced to turn to local voters for support.

“In many Ohio communities, local taxpayers already provide the majority of the funding for their schools — and now they will have to pay more for new levies,” said Richard Lewis, executive director of the Ohio School Boards Association.

For many property-tax payers, school tax issues approved on Tuesday will be the last to qualify for Ohio’s 10 percent and 2.5 percent rollbacks. The state budget approved by lawmakers this summer eliminated the rollback for new and replacement levies beginning in November.

Lawson acknowledged that local taxpayers will pay more to support their schools without the rollback, but he said the bigger issue for voters is: How much money does their district need? They should look at salaries and student-achievement rankings to decide whether they like what they are paying for.

For him and other conservatives, teacher contracts with salary increases and generous benefits are the culprit.

“Collective bargaining is a problem and drives a lot of budgetary red ink. We haven’t addressed it, and there are two ways to do it: You can reform it, or you can pay it,” Lawson said.

Innovation Ohio spokesman Dale Butland fired back.

“This idea that all of our problems are due to greedy teachers is just a crock. In district after district, teachers have taken pay cuts, teacher have increased their contributions to health plans,” he said. “At some point, people need to recognize that we are short-changing our kids and our educational system.”

Original Article:

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