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Education and the 1975 North Dakota Legislative Session

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Education bills received more attention in the 1975 legislative session than they have in most. Unfortunately for many educators, it was a disappointing session.

In elementary and secondary education much was proposed but little was done. Of some 36 education bills introduced, 18 of them--one half--were passed. Of that number, only 2 were passed without amendments. One-quarter of those passed were related to vocational education. This is no doubt a reflection of the growing national trend toward vocational education. At a time when national unemployment is approaching 10%, unemployment in education and the humanities is over 25%. As a consequence, larger numbers of students are enrolling in voc-ed programs. It is encouraging to see the field expanding in North Dakota. Also passed, after a great bi-partisan effort, was the foundation aid program which establishes payments at a per pupil level of \$640.00 for the first year of the 1975 biennium and \$690.00 for the second.

Unfortunately, that is about the extent of the "good news" concerning elementary and secondary education legislation. The education bills seemed to follow the trend of most "humanitarian" legislation in the 44th session, i.e., endorsement but no funds to be provided. It is generally conceded that education is a "good cause" but the legislature, intent on retaining a large surplus in the state treasury in preparation for another "great depression," is reluctant to spend money for anything.

Such was the fate of public kindergarten and educational television. After much effort and bitter debate, we are left with some enabling legislation, but no funding. Again the cry was "we have to cut state spending somewhere." The "somewhere" always seemed to be where the needs of people were involved.

The fate of legislation concerning teachers as professionals--arbitration, retirement, and teachers' organizations--was dismal. Most legislation related to the foregoing failed. Among bills which were killed was an appropriation for the teachers' retirement fund and a bill to provide for binding arbitration to resolve impasses in professional negotiations. The arbitration bill was vehemently opposed by the North Dakota School Boards Association.

Also not to the School Boards Association's liking was a bill (which also failed) to provide that all meetings of school boards be open to the public (with certain exceptions). The issues behind that legislation becomes apparent each spring as contract renewal time arises. One often hears, this time of year, of the non-renewal of teacher contracts following closed school board sessions.

A bill to reduce the vote required in school bond elections from 60 to 55 percent also failed. I'm sure this was a great disappointment to many school districts that have had difficulty passing mill levies.

Another interesting bill would have provided for free textbooks and would have prohibited mandatory activity fees. The bill, which failed, becomes especially interesting in the light of discussions of the possibility of considering, in the next session, a similar bill which would apply to colleges and universities. No doubt that will be a very controversial bill--if proposed.

There were several important issues in higher education in this session. One of these was the \$17.7 million building fund which passed in the last days of the session. The bill calls for the following expenditures and buildings during the first year of the next biennium: completion of a health and science building at Minot State College, \$220,000; a physical education center at the State School of Science at Wahpeton, \$3 million; multi-purpose room at the State School for the Blind, \$240,000; completion of a veterinary science building at the Main Experiment Station at North Dakota State University, \$375,000; a meat handling facility at the Main Experiment Station, \$150,000; a film storage unit at the Division of Independent

Study, NDSU, \$48,000.

The building list for second year of the biennium under the bill is: an agricultural science building at the Main Experiment Station, \$3.2 million; and an administration building at the Grafton State School, \$1.2 million.

For the 1977-79 biennium, the list shows: a library addition at NDSU, \$1.2 million; office facilities and a classroom laboratory at the University of North Dakota, \$3 million; a physical education building at the Minot State College, \$3 million; a multi-purpose arena at Dickinson State College, \$250,000.

Unfortunately, buildings fared better than did students and faculty. Thus the colleges and universities may be faced with the problem of trying to find students to fill the brand new buildings. A tuition increase, also passed by the legislature, is certainly not the way to encourage enrollment. An average tuition increase of \$60.00 would result in increases ranging from nearly \$40.00 for students at state colleges to over \$250.00 for medical students.

With two-thirds of the state's college students receiving some sort of financial aid, this is bound to put many students in poor financial straits. Their situation becomes especially grim when one considers the recent board and room hike by the Board of Higher Education. The increase of from \$75.00 to \$100.00 coupled with the tuition rise will result in a \$150 average cost increase next year. And in the same session of the legislature, the lawmakers turned down legislation, in the form of the youth employment bill, that might have assisted students in earning the money to meet the cost increases.

The college and university faculty were not favored either. In cutting a \$200,000 appropriation for sabbaticals, the legislature neglected an important part of the educational process. With students becoming more knowledgeable today in an increasingly fast-paced society, it is more important than ever for faculty to continue their education also.

All in all, what was accomplished this session for education was the bare minimum. Thus the legislators could defeat some measures which were very

important to educators across the state and could still claim to be "education supporters." Their voting records, however, stand as evidence of their educational attitude.