

Funding schools in Oldham County

Quality public schools have long been considered an important part of public life in Oldham County, and its school board recently took action to try to keep them that way.

On Aug. 29, the board voted to seek the maximum property tax allowed under state law without having to put the matter before the voters.

Facing opposition from residents — but more importantly, some support — the board voted for an increase in the property tax, its main source of funding, of 6.3 percent. That will bring in a 4 percent increase in its overall revenue from property tax, something school officials say they need to maintain quality education and avoid cutting into contingency funds reserved for emergencies.

It is the first tax hike in the district in three years and one most board members said they could no longer avoid. It passed on a 4-1 vote.

"We are unwilling to sacrifice any quality in the classroom by holding the tax rate at the same rate that it has been," said board Chairwoman Joyce Fletcher, according to The Courier-Journal's Emily Hagedorn. "We now find ourselves in the position that this alternative has to be acted on in order to do what is best for kids."

That's a pleasant contrast from Jefferson County, where the board — in the face of opposition from a noisy, angry band of tax opponents — backed off a proposed higher increase and settled for less than half the revenue school officials say they need.

After rejecting a 3.1 percent property increase, the Jefferson County board last month settled for a 1.4 percent hike that will generate about \$8 million this year — less than the \$17 million school officials had hoped for with the higher rate.

The truth is that public schools are getting hammered by cuts from the federal "sequestration" that drags on in Washington as well as rounds of cuts in state funding from Kentucky lawmakers unwilling to find revenue for sufficient funding for basic state services such as education.

Some of the steepest cuts have affected programs for poor children, those in pre-school or students with special needs.

Jefferson County alone expects about \$3.5 million in sequestration cuts and about \$1.5 million in cuts to state funding for programs.

Oldham County said it has

cut about \$3 million from its budget and had to reduce or cut about 30 teaching positions.

Those cuts have consequences and the impact has trickled down to the local school boards where it's up to members to make the tough choice on whether to raise property tax rates in order to raise money to provide a quality education for public school students.

In the late 1970s, the Kentucky General Assembly, riding a wave of anti-tax sentiment, changed state law to limit school boards to annual tax increases that would generate no more than a 4 percent increase in total revenue. Anything above that must go to voters for a referendum.

The anti-tax mood lives on but the current state Board of Education members strongly urge local school districts to take advantage of the maximum increase each year, rather than relinquish funds available for local schools.

The Kentucky Association of School Boards said it appears that more local school districts are doing just that, probably pressured by the state and federal cuts to education. While the association doesn't advocate any particular tax rate, it does remind school districts that not generating sufficient revenue could force schools to cut into reserves just to pay the bills, said spokesman Brad Hughes.

The public has a right to know school systems are spending tax money wisely and are operating good schools.

But the public must realize good schools aren't just for the benefit of those whose children attend them — they are part of the fabric of the community.

They help get kids ready for college and careers. They provide better trained workers for business and industry. They produce the next generation of community leaders. They produce tomorrow's parents, business owners, teachers, doctors, clergy and the many other individuals who contribute to the community in so many ways.

And school systems remain a major employer in virtually every community in Kentucky.

The Oldham County Board of Education wisely chose to invest in their schools.

In future years, Jefferson County and other boards must consider the actual needs and not be intimidated by an anti-tax backlash.