

School salaries ignite a fuse

The Shelby County Commission offered a lesson last week on why education funding should be the topic for a major discussion

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Cue the applause for the Shelby County Commission for an effort launched by some members last week to rein in pay raises for top administrators at Shelby County Schools.

The \$56,000 hike for Superintendent of Schools Bobby Webb may be a contractual obligation. It may be close to the industry standard for a district with more than 47,000 students.

But it's also a jarring note for taxpayers wondering how their services are going to be affected by upcoming cuts in the county work force.

Generous raises for a deputy superintendent, assistant superintendents, a chief financial officer, chief information officer, chief of operations, directors, supervisors, principals and assistant principals may have been earned with hard work.

But they may seem out of place to school patrons whose jobs in private industry are producing few pay increases this year in an economy that is sliding into recession with no end in sight to hikes in the cost of living.

These issues were on the minds of commissioners such as Steve Mulroy, Wyatt Bunker and Mike Ritz, determined to send a message to Shelby County Schools that the timing for big pay increases at SCS was terrible.

The problem is that the commission may be limited to sending a message about all this and unable to do more. By state law the commission bears a large share of the funding responsibility for public education. But it has no line-item authority over school budgets, which must be finalized by Oct. 1 for districts to qualify for state education funds.

The commission's short-term predicament provides an argument for one of the long-term solutions described in today's Viewpoint cover article on school funding alternatives -- the formation of special school districts for Memphis and/or Shelby County schools.

Advocates for special school districts, which require legislative approval, focus on two primary aspects -- the freezing of school boundaries and the authority of governing boards to set tax rates.

In theory, moving the taxing authority from county government to the school government would give voters a more direct political connection to the people they elect to oversee their schools. School boards, the argument goes, could be held directly accountable for the tax rates they set and the performance of the schools they govern.

Suburban leaders have lobbied unsuccessfully for years for the designation of Shelby County Schools as a special school district. They have repeatedly run into opposition from urban legislators and city school supporters who fear that the financial viability of city schools would suffer with a permanent separation from the county school system and the resulting loss of county funds.

The community needs to focus on that and other school funding issues, with an aim toward effecting changes in the system that would benefit both city and county school districts, County Commissioner Mike Carpenter argues in a guest column published in today's Viewpoint section, and he has a point.

Whether special school district designation is appropriate or not is a question that has not been answered to the satisfaction of people inside and outside public education.

Last week's dustup over administrative salaries at Shelby County Schools is only one of many indications, however, that the time is ripe for a serious examination of school funding.