

Yakima Valley school districts agree: It's tough to get a bond passed

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Impact of new facilities on academics

■ Research suggests that while new facilities may improve teacher and student morale and offer additional benefits, it's uncertain if they improve academic performance. For instance, a 2015 report from the National Bureau of Economic Research found little evidence that school capital campaigns improved student achievement. While the study suggests there is a tick upwards in performance years down the road, it also states that improvement is statistically insignificant

Getting bonds passed

The bond passage rate is on the climb in Washington state, says Seattle-based school bonds expert Jon Gores. This year, 53 percent of school bonds have passed statewide. Last year, 51 percent of bonds passed in Washington, and in 2014 only one-third of bonds were approved.

Just this February, 28 ballot measures involving school construction bonds were proposed – 17 passed. Bonds require a supermajority percentage to pass, or 60 percent plus one vote. Gores said school construction in the state would be better off if it were a simple majority much like levies, which would make passage easier.

That change would be lengthy, likely requiring a constitutional amendment. When levy passing rates dropped to a simple majority in 2008 thanks to a successful ballot initiative, Gores said it was a culmination of about two decades of efforts to make it happen. Recently, legislation sponsored by Rep. Mia Gregerson, D-SeaTac, that could have changed the passing rate for bond issues to only a simple majority stalled in the 2016 session.

“What’s unfortunate is that I can have a school district have a 57.6 percent (approval) and fail,” Gores said. “What that means is 43 percent control the election. A minority won’t let it go through.”