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Make passing school bond measures easier



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More school districts in Washington could pass bond measures for much-needed buildings and facilities if the Legislature lowers the approval threshold for bond measures from 60 percent to a simple majority.

By [Seattle Times Staff](#)
The Seattle Times

WITH student rolls swelling, Washington school districts need more space to educate them — now. But, a minority of voters too often kill the bond measures needed for new schools and other building costs.

In Highline Public Schools, about 59.3 percent of the district’s voters approved the November bond proposal to rebuild and improve schools. Not good enough. The measure failed because it fell short of the 60 percent majority required by law. A second try in February also failed. Within the last year, Lake Washington, Everett and Lakewood school districts also saw their proposals fail to meet that high threshold.



The Legislature should consider ways to make it easier to pass school-bond measures, which pay for capital costs such as repairs, maintenance and construction of schools. One proposal, HB 1941 would lower the approval threshold to a simple majority in general elections and keep the 60 percent level for special elections.

Too many schools are overcrowded, which is why the bond measure standards need to be re-examined. Washington student enrollment grew by 10.5 percent in nine years to 1.06 million in the 2013-'14 school year, according to the state’s Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction.

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The state’s student rolls are projected to grow by another 13 percent, or about 131,000 more students between 2014 and 2022, according to the U.S. Department of Education. That projected growth rate is more than double the national average of 6 percent.

About 30 to 35 school-bond measures are proposed each year in Washington, but fewer than one-third pass, said state Rep. Mia Gregerson, D-SeaTac, a sponsor of HB 1941. The majority of the failed measures brought in more than 50 percent approval.

The Highline situation is a case in point. Its recent bond proposal asked for \$376 million for projects, such as replacing two 90-year-old buildings and constructing two middle schools. The district added 1,500 students in the last five years — an 8 percent bump — and expects up to 4,000 more students in the next decade.

Highline puts classrooms in 88 portable buildings taking up most of the available land at its schools. It recently ordered seven more for \$2.7 million — a short-term solution that wastes millions in the long run.

The situation is so dire at Highline that officials say they might have to have some students attend school in shifts in the coming years.

That wouldn't have been the case if the November bond measure had passed. Time to change the standard.

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