

## LAWMAKERS AND TEACHER'S UNION DIFFER OVER NEW HEALTH CARE MEASURE



A measure, authored by Democratic Senator Steve Hobbs of Lake Stevens to restructure and regulate health insurance for Washington's public school employees has not gone down well with the employees who feel that in the short term it will lead to high costs, whereas the lawmakers see health care savings in it. The Workers Union says that implementing the change would cost the state around \$12.4 million in the first year itself. The state health care authority says that even though some teachers would pay more in premiums, others low paid workers and teachers with families would pay less. It is proving to be one of the most obscure and conflict-ridden issues taken up by the Legislature this year and expectedly has hit a discordant note amongst the employees. "We are opposed to any changes in K-12 health care at this point," Rich Wood, spokesman for the Washington Education Association and its more than 80,000 members, said this week. In the prevailing system the employees, around 100,000 in number, had more than a 1,000 bargaining units in 295 school districts, to negotiate their health premiums with the health insurance providers. The new measure seeks to bring them under one consolidated platform, where a single state board with both union and management participation would henceforth do so. The proposed new system would fall under the aegis of the state's Health Care Authority, which oversees the Public Employees Benefits Board. More than 200,000 state employees and their dependants are covered by them Governor Chris Gregoire did not discuss the measure but accepted that it was part of the agenda in the current special session budget negotiations. Lead budget negotiator representative Gary Alexander also confirmed that "the consolidation idea is still alive." The new proposal is highly divisive. It has divided two of the state's most powerful unions. The teacher's union says the takeover would be inefficient and expensive, whilst the union supporting the school support staff, disagrees saying, that it would save money and expand coverage to more workers' dependents. Even the political parties are in dilemma, Democrats who are known to back teachers unions and Republicans who normally side with the insurance industry are both facing tough choices and are treading with care. Public School Employees of Washington spokesperson, Rick Chisa said, "We've talked to a lot of lawmakers who are supportive of this effort but unwilling to take a vote because of the implications of voting against a major political force in this state, which is the WEA." Meanwhile the WEA is mounting a fierce campaign, in an attempt to defeat the measure. It has pumped in \$176,000 and has run full-page newspaper ads, aired radio ads and organized rallies to put pressure on the lawmakers.