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Espresso as boost for you — and kids

By Linda Shaw

Seattle Times staff reporter

A group of parents, child-care directors and teachers want to add a 10-cent tax on your latte in the name of improving early childhood education.

The Early Learning and Care Committee today plans to file an initiative that asks Seattle voters to approve the tax on espresso drinks. Drip coffee would not be included.

They expect the tax could raise \$7 million to \$10 million a year to pump more money into child-care-teacher wages, help low-income families afford quality care, and increase the amount of high-quality child care in Seattle.

With only about a month to collect 17,228 valid signatures, the group needs to work fast. They hope the novelty of the idea and strong public support will carry them onto this November's ballot.

In a poll earlier this year, 74 percent of Seattle voters said they'd support such a tax.

The group decided on espresso after looking hard at what could legally be taxed. The list wasn't long. They wanted to tax something purchased by people up and down the economic ladder, that wouldn't cost any one person a lot of money and wasn't a necessity.

"Even in Seattle, I think we can argue that espresso drinks are a discretionary expense," said Michael Kasprzak, campaign treasurer and director of Interlake Childcare Center near Woodland Park.

At most, a person who drinks three lattes every day of the year would pay an additional \$110 a year. Those who consume one drink each workday would pay an extra \$26.

The 10-cent tax would be less than the 25-cent charge Starbucks recently introduced for those who want to avoid the line, and order and pay for lattes by cellphone.

If the measure succeeds, espresso drinkers will be "ensuring the future of their children, their future children, and the future leadership of our city," said Lisa Moy, the campaign's manager.

"I think a few people will drink even more," Kasprzak said. "I think most people will scarcely notice it."

The idea is to provide a new, stable source of funding for a field the campaign committee says provides an important public good, but doesn't receive much public support. Research, they say, continues to show how vital the early years are to a child's future success in school and life.

"When you look at the results of the WASL test, there's obvious indications that kids need to be better prepared to learn," said John Burbank, executive director of the Economic Opportunity Institute, which paid for the poll, and did the research behind the initiative.

The Washington Assessment of Student Learning, or WASL, is the state test given in grades four, seven and 10.



The campaign committee decided to start small, to see if such an approach would work in Seattle.

Technically, the tax would be on businesses, for the privilege of serving espresso drinks in the city. Businesses with less than \$50,000 in gross annual revenues would be exempt.

The committee informed Starbucks and Tully's Coffee about its plans and asked them to look at it as an opportunity to support the community and give consumers one more reason to order those double tall.

Starbucks said it was aware of the initiative. It didn't comment on it, but, in a statement, said the company is an ardent supporter of early learning and childhood development and contributes millions of dollars in support of them.

Kasprzak said the first reaction he gets when he tells people about the initiative is amusement. Then disbelief that it's possible. Then surprise that, in this coffee-soaked city, no one has tried to tax espresso before.

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