

An imaginary crisis and a needless assault

Jim Fisher

Sunday, February 15, 2009

House Education Chairman Bob Nonini said Thursday his legislation permanently weakening collective bargaining between Idaho's teachers and school districts needed to be passed quickly, and it wasn't hard to see why. As Nonini, R-Coeur d'Alene, was launching his sneak attack, the federal government was preparing to send the state enough money to remove the urgency for it or any other assault on schools and their teachers.

The disconnect between what was happening in the state and federal capitals should have been more than enough to cause legislators to take another look at House Majority Leader Mike Moyle's suggestion that legislators recess until the effects of Congress' economic stimulus bill are known.

Moyle, R-Star, fell out of formation long enough to make what could be the wisest proposal of the current legislative session. It isn't just schools that stand to gain from the stimulus bill President Obama was waiting to sign as this was written. Money for road and bridge work is also a big part of the package to create new jobs and save existing ones.

Sure, most Republicans don't like the government going into debt to fight the recession - not as they did like going into debt to wage war in Iraq or cut taxes. But as U.S. Sen. Jim Risch conceded Thursday, Idaho is not about to refuse the money contained in the bill Risch opposed.

What kind of money are we talking about? Friday morning, members of the Legislature's budget committee agreed to cut 5 percent in personnel costs in schools and other budget recipients. That would add more than \$47 million to the \$62 million state school Superintendent Tom Luna already recommended cutting from public schools, reaching a total loss of nearly \$110 million.

Meanwhile, however, state-by-state breakdowns of the stimulus compromise between the U.S. House and Senate showed Idaho receiving about \$245 million in school stabilization money over the next two years.

Of course none of that money is in hand yet, but that's the point. And shortly before this went to press Friday afternoon, Nonini said he had got it. He said he would delay hearings on his bill to see what the state could expect from the stimulus bill.

That was prudent, in more ways than one. It wasn't just teachers and Democrats who were infuriated with the surprise call to do away with multi-year contracts between school districts and teachers, including the master contracts containing provisions that are not negotiated from year to year. Some school superintendents said the change could make it harder to attract and retain good teachers. And at least one Republican legislator, Sen. Shawn Keough of Sandpoint, said the bill "doesn't do us any good."

"It looks as though a sledgehammer was used when a scalpel was needed," Keough said.

Moreover, if the state is going to make such a major change in the way it deals with the biggest recipient of tax dollars, it should do so on the merits, not because of some perceived financial threat. And if the change is intended to be permanent, as this was, that is all the more reason for a time-out.

Don't just do something, in other words. Stand there. - J.F.