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Why did lawmakers spare charter schools?

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Moscow schools won't fill vacant teaching positions.

Lewiston students won't get new textbooks.

Potlatch laid off a teacher.

Orofino's school district is declaring a financial emergency, a prerequisite to renegotiating and possibly cutting teachers' pay.

Cottonwood may close one of its three buildings.

Similar stories are emerging throughout Idaho as local schools come to terms with a tough economy and state funding cuts.

Even as the state school budget pie shrinks, more slices are handed to Idaho's charter schools. How come?

Look no further than Idaho's lawmakers. Faced with shrinking tax revenues, the Republican-dominated Legislature balanced the books by cutting funding for teacher and support staff pay by almost 3 percent. Support for administrator salaries dropped 5 percent. Teachers will go without longevity pay increases. There's less money for new textbooks and teachers will get less money to cover their out-of-pocket expenses.

Salaries might be frozen or cut. Class sizes could expand. Given the gash in Idaho's tax revenues, it's probably unavoidable. Given the continued decline in those tax dollars, it's probably going to get worse.

So why does Idaho continue to add six charter schools a year? Each represents a new layer of administration. Each drains an average of \$1.3 million in state dollars from its host district. Sure, the

traditional school system has fewer children to educate, but its costs don't decline. You still need to hire a teacher whether her classroom has 24 or 23 students.

Not surprisingly, some districts have found themselves raising supplemental property tax levies simply to maintain their programs after a charter school got launched in their back yards.

And if the new charter school siphons more than 1 percent of the students from a small district, that school system doesn't suffer immediately. For another year, it receives almost its entire allocation, which means the Idaho's traditional school network - the system responsible for educating about 95 percent of the kids - is just a little poorer.

As long as Idaho was poised to cut everywhere else, acting Sen. Richard Sagness, D-Pocatello, suggested a three-year moratorium on new charter schools.

The author of that bill spent 20 years at Idaho State University's College of Education, including 10 years as dean, before retiring. At minimum, Sagness could have compelled legislators to contemplate their choices.

But the Senate Education Committee wouldn't give him a forum. Sagness' charter school moratorium died in Committee Chairman John W. Goedde's desk drawer.

The GOP often feuds with teachers and the Idaho Education Association. The cuts were deepest in the public schools.

Republicans champion charter schools and the idea of choice in education. No moratorium on new charter schools was even considered.

So let the GOP explain. Why are these cuts so one-sided? Why is the sacrifice not shared? - M.T.