

A DIFFICULT CHOICE

I have been a Republican all my life. I served 16 years as Idaho's elected State Superintendent of Public Instruction. Reluctantly, I find I cannot support the Republican candidate for governor this time around.

Butch Otter is a likeable guy and has been a political friend for a long time. He believes in limited government. So do I.

Yet, limited government should not mean limiting the potential of our children and their future. Now more than ever, Idaho's public schools and higher education institutions need a governor who will advocate for good education – and not one who approves budget cuts and calls that “flexibility” (Idaho Statesman, Sunday, Oct. 3, 2010).

Our governor likes to say that Idaho's constitution “compels” a balanced budget – and he is absolutely correct. We can't spend money we don't have. Our national deficit should be of concern to all, and the framers of Idaho's constitution were wise to prohibit spending beyond our means.

However, another section of the constitution is equally important and compelling... Article IX, Section 2, makes it the state's duty to “establish and maintain a general, uniform, and thorough system of public, free common schools.” Even in the depths of the Great Depression, Idaho's public schools were protected from loss.

So it came as a disappointing surprise this year when Governor Otter recommended a large cut in public school support.

The terms “uniform” and “thorough” are somewhat nebulous, although when I was a local superintendent I helped bring a lawsuit (“Thompson versus Engelking”) that helped clarify their meaning. Even without judicial clarity most of us can sense when the public education system is awry.

Look at what we have today: districts going to four day school weeks; reduced instruction time; larger classes; out-of-date or too few textbooks; and so on.

All of this comes at a time when our schools should be improving. If we want a bright future for Idaho, we should focus on investing in the only resource that will insure that future: our children.

To do that takes commitment and leadership which begins with a governor who truly believes in education at all levels and who will be a strong and effective advocate for our schools and colleges. We cannot afford another four years like the past four.

Electing Keith Allred as governor gives Idaho a chance to change direction. We can take advantage of a fresh start by developing a strong consensus about the quality of education our young people deserve and by examining every alternative that will help us address the state’s pressing problems.

I will be voting for Keith Allred for governor. I encourage all those who care about education, and who understand education’s role in securing a bright and prosperous future for Idaho, to do the same.

(Jerry L. Evans, former Idaho State Superintendent of Public Instruction from 1979 to 1995, is a Republican.)