

Online educators love Luna, he returns affection

- *February 23rd, 2011*
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By Marty Trillhaase of the Tribune

Amid all the weekend revelations about Idaho schools Superintendent Tom Luna's effort to create a multimillion-dollar market for his friends in the online education industry is something hiding in plain sight:

Luna didn't just concoct eliminating 770 teaching jobs, crowding more kids into smaller classes and steering some of the savings toward providers of online courses. That's simply not credible given how long Luna has been in bed with the people running that industry.

All of which suggests Idaho's top educator is guilty of political fraud.

When did you hear Luna talk about this massive reorganization of your tax dollars away from teacher salaries and into the pockets of his friends in the online education industry?

Not during his re-election campaign. Then it was all sweetness and light. Test scores were rising. Luna the politician had morphed into Luna the educator, championing public school budgets against members of his own Republican Party who would slash them.

You've not seen duplicity like that since President Lyndon Johnson ran against the Vietnam War in 1964 - all the while planning to escalate it in 1965.

Here are some of the dots the Idaho Statesman's Dan Popkey unearthed Sunday:

- In 2002, Luna lost his bid to oust then-Superintendent Marilyn Howard, the only statewide Republican to lose at the polls. That meant a trip to political oblivion until he got rescued.

Among the people who picked Luna up, dusted him off and transported him to George W. Bush's Education Department was Bill Hansen, then-Education Secretary Rod Paige's right-hand man and the son of former U.S. Rep. George V. Hansen.

Bill Hansen now works in the private education business.

- The federal post gave Luna polish, credibility and a network of contacts on which to draw from when he made his second, this time successful, run for superintendent in 2006.

- In October 2009, two of those contacts - Paige and former Education Secretary William Bennett, founder of K12, the private online education provider - sponsored a D.C. fundraiser for Luna.

•K12 - which received \$12.8 million in Idaho tax dollars last year - funneled about \$44,000 to Luna's campaign. Luna got another \$5,500 from Apollo group of Phoenix, parent of the online University of Phoenix, and \$7,450 from executives of Scantron Corp., which is moving into online education. And nearly \$15,000 is tied to Joe Scott, grandson of Joe and Kathryn Albertson, who, as of two years ago, had 355,000 shares of K12, each valued at \$33.77.

Obviously Luna is chummy with the online education industry.

He knows the players.

He understands their ideas

They invested in his career and his campaigns.

And now he'd have you believe he had a post-election epiphany about the attributes of online education.

Because otherwise he'd have to explain why he didn't consult:

- Educators who have to implement his ideas.
- The children and parents who have to live with the results.
- Taxpayers who have to pay for it.
- The voters.

Never did Luna campaign on anything even remotely resembling this scheme to transfer Idaho tax dollars from Idaho teachers working in Idaho classrooms to online education outfits located out of state operating with a bottom line.

Not once did he subject his ideas to the give-and-take of a debate.

Nor did he trust the public enough to outline this philosophy and then seek a mandate to implement it.

The transformation of Luna the public servant into Luna the corporate lackey began long before his post-election epiphany.

He just postponed telling you about it. - M.T.