

Son of Luna is more clone than progeny

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- [\(3\) comments](#)

By Marty Trillhaase of the Tribune

Say what you will about Idaho schools Superintendent Tom Luna's first school reform package. He was up front with it.

Luna proposed to have the Legislature slash 770 teaching positions, increase class sizes by about 9 percent and use the \$514 million in savings during the next five years for his pet causes - merit pay for teachers, laptop computers for students and creating a market for his cronies in the online education industry.

The bill stalled in the Senate, while two other components of the Luna package - merit pay and undermining teachers' collective bargaining rights - cleared the Legislature and became law.

So now we have Son of Luna.

Poised for another showdown in the Senate, this latest version looks different.

No longer is there talk of cutting teaching jobs. It delays technology in the classroom until a task force of educators, tech experts and business people take a look. It assigns the State Board of Education with deciding the pace and scope of online instruction.

To say the changes are cosmetic is being generous, however. Son of Luna isn't just a sequel. It's a clone, albeit one that conceals its intent and assigns the fault to others.

Beginning next year, Son of Luna pulls \$20 million from the account Idaho uses to pay teacher salaries. That comes on top of the \$60 million legislators are preparing to cut from the public school budget.

But Son of Luna doesn't stop there. In the following year, its bite on the source used to cover public school payrolls ratchets up to \$61 million. Then it settles in a range between \$82.4 million and \$86.3 million each year.

So in six years, Idaho will have \$420 million less for teachers in order to free up cash for the things Luna would rather buy.

Luna's fingerprints won't be on the losses. Neither will the Legislature's.

There's no mandate on local school officials to cut teaching posts. It's up to them to figure out how to make this new math work.

For some schools that already satisfy requirements for technology, it means no change. But for most, it's going to compel them to make hard choices.

So what if your child winds up in a more crowded classroom?

Blame the school board and administrators who cut the staff to balance the books.

Don't like your new property tax hike? Don't blame Luna and the Legislature. They didn't pass supplemental levies to hire more teachers and pay them better.

That was your friends and neighbors who voted in a special election.

Of course, this widens the resource gap between poor - primarily rural and small - schools and wealthier urban districts. That flies in the face of Idaho's constitutional requirement for a "general, uniform and thorough system of public, free common schools."

Which explains Senate Majority Leader Bart Davis's opposition.

"This bill takes more money from salary-based apportionment for the purpose of buying technology. For me, that's a bridge too far," Davis told the Spokesman-Review's Betsy Russell.

Davis' defection means one more thing: It's likely this fundamental shift in Idaho public education will clear the state Senate by a slim margin in the final push toward adjournment. A good many legislators - Democrats and Republicans - still retain strong doubts about making this change.

What is so compelling about this measure that it can't wait another year and undergo some rigorous review in the interim?

And why would any senator who was willing to withhold his vote from a more transparent Luna reform package now embrace its disingenuous offspring? - M.T.