

We're nearly No. 1

By Wayne Hoffman

In response to a report that Idaho's per student spending is 49th in the nation, the Coeur d'Alene Press ran an article with this headline: "At least we're not last." The story came from U.S. Census data, which noted that Idaho spent roughly \$7,100 a student in 2008-2009, putting more cash to education than Utah, which spent about \$6,350. It's the same story that gets told every year and sparks the usual round of kvetching from liberals about Idaho's commitment to public education. They're convinced that the only way to have success is to shove a bunch of money into something. Lots of money makes everything better, right?

Clearly, more money is not a predictor of better results. On the contrary, KIFI-TV in Idaho Falls interviewed Bonneville County School District 93 Superintendent Chuck Shackett, who pointed out that Shackett's district spends \$4,550 per student, and yet graduates more students than other districts in the nation -- about 95 percent. More on point was state Department of Education spokeswoman Melissa McGrath who told the station, "On the national assessment year after year ... Idaho students outperform students in other states. So we know it isn't the amount of money we spend on education; it's how that money is spent."

Some career educators don't understand McGrath's take. Back to the Coeur d'Alene Press, where Lakeland School District financial director Tom Taggart told the newspaper that while there isn't a correlation between spending and student achievement "you can't claim to be committed to student achievement when you don't provide the basic funding needed to operate. Without additional financial support for Idaho's schools, there will not be continued increases in student achievement. You can't 'reform' your way out of this."

But what constitutes basic funding? Remember four years ago when a certain education union tried to convince voters to raise the sales tax by 20 percent to dump -- and I do mean dump -- millions of dollars in our public schools? Voters rejected the measure, and yet our schools still managed to do just fine churning out great students with high test scores. Would more money have made those students perform 20 percent better? We know that's not the case.

For some reason, in public education, liberals view money as the sole indicator of how things are going. Applied to real life, it would be like going to an auto dealership and seeing two new cars, each the same -- same model, mileage, features and paint job. One costs \$10,000, while the other costs \$50,000. The liberal figures that the \$50,000 car is better because it costs more. He criticizes the \$10,000 car buyer, who is clearly less dedicated to the cause of driving, as evidenced by his spending choices. What's more, when the transmission fails on the more expensive car, the liberal driver still maintains that his more expensive car is better because, well, it cost more.

Idahoans should be thrilled they spend among the lowest and get among the top results in the nation. For that, don't view Idaho as 49th by any measure. Think of us as nearly No. 1 in getting the biggest bang for our buck.

Wayne Hoffman
Executive Director

Idaho Freedom Foundation