

Idaho parents raid their kids' piggy bank

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Throwing money at Idaho's public schools won't fix them.

There's no satisfying teachers in Idaho, no matter how many tax dollars they get.

Idaho is a poor state, but it is doing everything it can for its school children.

You've been hearing that song from Idaho politicians for years. State Senate Education Committee Chairman John Goedde, R-Coeur d'Alene, was the just the latest: "But I will also affirm a statement I've heard many, many times, that throwing money at the public schools does not result in better education."

But Idaho is not throwing money at its public schools.

Rather, it has been withdrawing its investment in education.

Actively.

Aggressively.

And for a long time.

Hiding in plain sight of Republican Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter, Goedde and his fellow lawmakers, State Board of Education members and GOP schools Superintendent Tom Luna, that fact came to light last week when the state's former chief economist, Mike Ferguson, released his findings. Ferguson is now director of the Idaho Center for Fiscal Policy.

Here's what he reported:

- The state pie is growing more slowly. From 1980 to 1999, Idahoans increased spending on state programs on average 7.4 percent each year. Since 2000, the growth has dropped to 4.9 percent.
- The slice of that pie devoted to public schools has become smaller still. On average, lawmakers increased school funding 7.5 percent each year between 1980 and 1999 - so education kept pace. Since then, spending on schools increased only an average 3.3 percent. Hence, public education's share has dropped from about 34 percent of state spending in 2000 to 26 percent today.
- Idahoans are spending less money on schools and more on themselves. Never robust to begin with, the state budget has been squeezed by rising Medicaid costs. At the same time, GOP governors and lawmakers decided time after time to cut taxes. To pay for it all, the share of Idaho personal income devoted to schools

dropped nearly a quarter - from 4.44 percent in the last two decades of 20th century to 3.4 percent of personal income today.

Had it remained unchanged, Idaho would be spending \$400 million above the \$1.8 billion it now allocates to schools.

- This ship is not changing course. Idaho is obligated to provide another \$250 million in tax cuts when the economy recovers - to say nothing of the desire among some GOP leaders to continue nibbling away at corporate and individual income tax rates. In shepherding this year's \$36 million income tax cut for wealthier families and corporations, House Majority Leader Mike Moyle, R-Star, hinted at more to come:

"While I don't think it's enough, I think it's a step in the right direction, and it's probably the best economic development bill we've seen all year."

Fast-forward the trend another 15 years and schools may be down to 2.6 percent of the state's personal income.

But Idaho's Constitution doesn't say lawmakers are obligated to provide a bare-bones education for the state's children.

It doesn't suggest public schools are entitled to whatever's left after the political leadership hands out tax goodies to upper-income families and corporations - or even entitlements to some of Idaho's more vulnerable citizens.

It doesn't say parents should step in and pay the school bills when the state's leaders refuse.

Nor does Idaho's Constitution contend it's OK for Idaho politicians to scrimp on public school budgets just as long as Idaho doesn't fall behind what Mississippi and the Deep South are doing.

It says: "... It shall be the duty of the legislature of Idaho, to establish and maintain a general, uniform and thorough system of public, free common schools."

Seen from Ferguson's lens, Idaho's leadership is falling short of meeting that test.

Ask Moyle and the legislative majority he leads, however, and you'll hear this is only the start. - M.T.