

Coming in next to last is old news to Luna

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If you discovered the United States was spending less per capita on defense than 49 other nations, you wouldn't be doing cartwheels.

If you watched your company earning less money than virtually all its competitors, you'd lose some sleep at night.

What if you saw Idaho ranked 50th out of 51 states and the District of Columbia in terms of the dollars it puts behind each of its school children?

You'd yawn.

Old story. Irrelevant data, you'd say.

Don't worry about it. Shrug it off.

That's what the man Idahoans elected to safeguard and promote their public schools says and does.

"If the amount of money you spend per child equals a high-quality education system, then Washington, D.C., would have the best schools in the country by far because they spend more than anybody else, and none of us would send our children to a public school in Washington, D.C.," said Tom Luna, Idaho's superintendent of public instruction.

Says Luna: Don't look at one statistic in a vacuum. Look at results. Look at standardized test scores. Consider that Idaho, without the blight of urban poverty, with more of its children living in stable, two-parent homes and with a lower cost of living can get a bigger bang for the buck.

All of which is true.

But wouldn't someone who is supposed to be Idaho's lead advocate for public education point out a few other facts?

Such as Idaho's 50th-place ranking - putting it only above the state of Utah - means it is falling behind other Western states that also share many of the Gem State's attributes. Wyoming comes in third, although it's hard to compete with the money that state's oil and gas wells are throwing off to public schools. But why is Idaho so far below Washington (28th), Montana (29th), Oregon (32nd) and Nevada (42nd) ?

Or how about pointing out the decline in Idaho's commitment? Two decades ago, Idaho's per capita spending was ranked 47th. Since then, Alabama, Tennessee and Mississippi all have eclipsed Idaho.

That's no accident. During the 1980s and 1990s, Idahoans were devoting 4.44 percent of their personal income to public education. As former Chief Economist Mike Ferguson disclosed, that's down to 3.4 percent. Rather than maintain its investment in schools, Idaho is handing out tax cuts - often to those who need it the least.

You'd think someone who is supposed to be the chief cheerleader for Idaho schools would remind Idahoans that they must recruit teachers from a national market. If just about every state is spending more to attract and retain the best teachers, where does that leave us?

Don't forget Idaho already has seen a spike in the number of Idaho teachers leaving the profession - up to 1,300 in 2011 from about 700 the year before - in the wake of Luna's overhaul that curbed collective bargaining and tenure rights while spending money needed for classroom teachers for online instruction.

As Luna notes, Idaho's test scores aren't bad. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, Idaho's fourth-graders tested at the national average for math - but slipped slightly since 2005. Eighth-graders tested above the national average but haven't made progress since 2009.

Idaho's fourth-graders scored slightly above the national average for reading, but the overall tally barely changed in 10 years. For the eighth-graders, reading scores are above average, but also improved little over time.

Since when did flat scores justify spending less money?

Someone responsible for the well-being of Idaho's schools also might point out the state is ranked 48th in the percentage of its young people enrolled in higher education. Ninth-graders in 40 states stand a better chance of attending college. And 45 states have a higher proportion of workers with degrees than does the Gem State.

But Idaho schools don't have an advocate in Luna's office.

They have a politician who has a politician's agenda. - M.T.