

Response (to Wayne Hoffman column) from Betsy Russell (7/16/12):

In Wayne's fervor to portray me personally as "relentlessly erroneous," he errs. Here's what I actually wrote: "Idaho's school spending per pupil ranks 50th in the nation for a second straight year, according to the latest figures from the U.S. Census, while Washington's is 32nd, down from last year's ranking of 31st. Washington education officials bemoaned the ranking as too low, but Idaho's said their lower ranking wasn't particularly concerning; the state beat only Utah on that measure."

The original version of my story is available online through a link from my June 27 blog post at my Eye on Boise blog, www.spokesman.com/boise. The article later went through editing and a shorter version was published in The Spokesman-Review, examining both states' rankings; it appeared under the headline, "Idaho education spending near last, Washington expenditures also in bottom half of states" and included the phrase "second-worst" in the lead, as did the even shorter version picked up by the Associated Press, which focused solely on Idaho. I know there was some concern that in saying that Idaho ranked 50th, people might think the state ranked last, when the rankings included the District of Columbia along with the 50 states, so a 50th ranking was second-to-last.

Regardless, it's clear that many, including the state of Washington and the former chief economist of the state of Idaho, view a low ranking for education spending as a negative, as my story reported; even Idaho's state Department of Education didn't proclaim that the lowest ranking is the best, instead noting that it views funding as "a factor in education but ... not the most important factor." My story makes no claim that per-pupil spending is the sole measure of education quality; it merely reports on the relative level of that spending.

Wayne leaves out the context for former state chief economist Mike Ferguson's quote, which was this: Ferguson found that the share of Idaho's personal income that goes to schools dropped 23 percent from 2000 to 2013. "The fact is that we've been essentially disinvesting in children," he said. Idaho has a very low personal income compared to other states, he noted, making the drop as a share of personal income particularly significant. "We've always been on the low end of the scale" in per-pupil spending, he said. "It's just that we're basically, in these relative terms, getting even worse compared to what we have been able to muster previously."

My story was fair, complete and accurate, and I stand by it.