

# Commentary Chris Carlson Trust the teachers, not the politicians



Chris Carlson

## **Chris Carlson/Lewiston Tribune**

Forget about reading the pro and con statements in the Voter's Guide regarding the three referenda on the November ballot to repeal the Otter/Luna educational reforms. Ignore the million-dollar campaigns both sides will mount with slickly designed emotional appeals that will tug at your heart strings.

Answer one fundamental question: Who do you most trust your children's and grandchildren's future to, the teachers who are with them in the classroom 180 days a year, or a governor and a school superintendent hell-bent on rationalizing investing fewer dollars in education and who are dictating reforms from the top down?

This really does boil down to "who do you trust?"

What Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter and Superintendent Tom Luna don't get is that trust is at the heart of the people sanctioning government to provide services and to divine the greatest good for the greatest number.

Trust, like virtue, once lost can never be regained. From the get-go the governor and the SPI forfeited that trust by the dishonest and deceptive way they went about ramming their idea of reform down the public's throat.

Rather than put together a committee or a task force that represented all the key stakeholders, they said nary a word while campaigning for re-election in 2010. Eight weeks after the election, they sprang their "reforms" on a quiescent Legislature, knowing they would go along simply because it initially meant spending less on education than before.

That Otter and Luna now sit back and profess amazement that anyone would dare question their sincerity is disingenuous at best. They violated the public trust by not trusting the public and the impacted interest groups to recognize the need for some reasonable changes and to design consensus-based effective reforms.

They engaged in pure top-down dictates rather than ground-up consensus, yet they claim they are Republicans.

When talking about the state government's primary constitutionally mandated responsibility, the process of reform is critical and has to be inclusive.

Otter and Luna just don't get that.

As Election Day approaches they are now desperately trying to backfill, telling people they are restoring funding that was cut and will be giving teachers more base pay as well as the "new" merit pay, but fundamentally they are engaging in a shell game where they keep changing the base from which they make their phony calculations.

It's interesting too that supposedly anti-regulatory, anti-bureaucratic Republicans would write so much specificity into how and to whom school boards can determine and distribute the "new" merit pay. Read the long ballot title (Not the short) and look at the incredible array of personnel deemed eligible for additional merit pay.

Could the Coeur d'Alene District School Board give the Vikings fine football coach a taxpayer-supplied bonus (amount to be determined) if he wins a third straight 5A football championship? Melissa McGrath, Luna's communications director, says no, that bonuses have to go to a class of teachers, and extra-curricular instruction doesn't count.

A former longtime school board member, though, told this writer that he reads the law as allowing the board the discretion to do so as long as it is not just the head coach but all the football coaches. He says winning a third title reflects incredibly good teaching, and it does. But should the patrons of Eagle, Capital or Highland - whoever loses to Coeur d'Alene in the finals - be expected to indirectly contribute to the winning opponent's coach's bonus?

McGrath is probably correct, but again, if one touts the supposed autonomy of a local school board, is the SPI really going to step in and stop the board? It is doubtful.

These reforms were conceived in secret, not well vetted, and deserve to be tossed in the round file. Maybe then the governor and the SPI will get the message to start over and approach some needed changes in educational matters by including, not excluding, the people and the all the major interests.

They can start by listening to the many fine teachers across the state who overwhelmingly want to see these "reforms" repealed.

Listen to the teachers and posit your trust with them, not two politicians who by their conduct have forfeited the public trust.

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