

Vote no three times on the Luna laws

Marty Trilhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Only once have Idaho voters repudiated any law passed by the Legislature and enacted by their governor and that was nearly 80 years ago.

Now is the time for Idahoans to take that step again.

On the Nov. 6 ballot are the three Luna laws - measures schools Superintendent Tom Luna steamrollered through a compliant Idaho Legislature in 2011 over the objections of teachers, administrators and many parents.

By waging political war on Idaho's teachers, the Luna laws would add to the burdens of a public school structure already buckling under the weight of budget cuts and a neglectful political elite.

Proposition 1 - Since the late 1960s, Idaho teachers have engaged in collective bargaining talks with their employers, represented by the Idaho Education Association.

Prop 1 eviscerates those rights.

It strives to eliminate the continuing contract that offers veteran teachers due process - but not tenure - before they can be fired. With that goes a large measure of academic freedom protecting an English teacher who fails the child of the school board chairman, the coach who benches the son of a prominent business owner or the history teacher who delves into an unpopular topic.

Also muted are the professional voices of teachers. Contract talks would be limited to salaries and benefits. But teaching is more than compensation, and professional teachers deserve a voice about the workplace environment, student-teacher ratios, transfer issues and policies.

Whatever ails Idaho's schools, intimidating and silencing the professionals in the classrooms is no remedy.

Vote no.

Proposition 2 - Idaho teaching salaries are already substantially lower than the nation. As a result, the Gem State is finding it more difficult to attract teachers in hard-to-fill slots - math, science, special education - while at the same time, there's been an exodus. Last year, 1,884 Idaho teachers quit the profession, up from 1,276 last year and 756 the year before that.

Rather than build up the salary base, Prop 2 actually pulls about \$27 million from it - both in terms of seniority pay and base pay due teachers - diverting it into a \$38 million merit pay program.

Who gets a share of this money?

Any teacher - whether she is dedicated or merely coasting along - who works in a school where the students perform well on the state's standardized tests. What does it mean if money is awarded based on how the school - not the teacher - performs?

For teachers working in wealthier schools or with a cohort of gifted students, the bonus is a virtual lock.

But such a system asks teachers who devote their careers to working with economically disadvantaged kids to risk forgoing these bonuses.

Additional bonuses are available at the discretion of administrators.

In any event, already low-paid Idaho teachers can't count on this income from one year to the next.

And where's the research to suggest that people who went into teaching in spite of low pay will work any harder for a bonus? If this is such a great idea, why aren't teachers clamoring for it?

Vote no.

Proposition 3 - The heart of the Luna package would equip every Idaho high school student with a laptop computer and require each student to complete two online classes to graduate.

Here's Prop 3's one guarantee: It will be expensive. Luna just announced the state will pay Hewlett-Packard \$181 million during the next eight years for the laptops.

Plus state dollars that otherwise would have paid for classroom instruction will instead pay for the online courses.

To what end? Nobody knows. This is Luna's laboratory. Idaho students are his guinea pigs.

For instance, state Rep. Shirley Ringo, D-Moscow - no fan of the Luna laws - checked in with Maine and found that state's laptop program is geared toward seventh- and eighth-graders, none of whom can take a device home without first paying a deposit.

As for the online requirement, no state has such ambitious plans. Even former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush, the self-described "evangelist for digital learning," says his state is limited to one online course requirement.

Meanwhile, there are lots of red flags.

The quality of online instruction will be hit or miss. Accountability to the taxpayers will be an issue. Student performance may suffer. Using the for-profit online provider K-12 as a model, Western Michigan University and the National Education Policy Center found online students testing half as well as public school students.

On math, K-12 students performed between 14 and 36 percentage points below students in brick-and-mortar schools.

And in terms of graduation, K-12 students lagged behind conventional schools students 49.1 percent to 79.4 percent.

About the only certainty is online instruction providers - freed from the need to maintain buildings and capable of cutting staff to the bone - stand to make a profit.

Unless, of course, you vote no. - M.T.