

# Idaho's education advocates have abdicated

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

If the Idaho State Board of Education was doing its job, it would be an advocate for education.

All education.

That means education in the public schools, from kindergarten to high school.

And it means education beyond high school - from community colleges to graduate programs.

Championing education would obligate state board members to unambiguously spell out what it costs to provide programs - and when the state is falling short.

It is not the State Board's duty to tell governors and legislators where to find the money, but neither is the board required to remain silent while those politicians pull \$350 million out of the education budgets to pay for tax cuts.

When the share of Idaho's personal income supporting public schools drops 20 percent in a decade, shouldn't someone on the State Board of Education say something?

Likewise, when the slice of Idaho's general fund devoted to higher education shrinks by half - forcing students who once paid 7 percent of the cost of their instruction to now pay 47 percent - who will speak up if not the State Board?

That is not what Idaho's State Board has been doing.

Instead, it has served as an apologist for the Republican leaders who have starved the beast of government in a state where two-thirds of that government involves the education of its young people.

Any and all doubts were lifted last week in Lewiston.

Meeting at Lewis-Clark State College, State Board members got the word on state Superintendent Tom Luna's plan to seek a 5.9 percent, \$77 million boost in public school funding. That's a down payment on the education task force's pledge to restore public school budget cuts and begin boosting teacher pay - a package that will cost about \$350 million.

Education advocates would applaud such a move as long overdue.

Only an apologist would see it as State Board member Bill Goesling of Moscow did.

"We've got to serve higher education," Goesling said. "They're the ones that drive the economy."

Hear, hear, chimed in board member Milford Terrell of Boise.

"These numbers are staggering," Terrell said. "I do believe in the kids and that the kids should have the best education. However, is this the best use of the money?"

An apologist would see it as a zero sum game. Robbing Peter to pay Paul. If public schools gain, then higher education loses.

That's because an apologist would never dare challenge the fundamental premise that got us here: Idaho has shortchanged both its public schools and institutions of higher learning. To repair the damage, it needs to raise some taxes. Certainly the last thing the state should do is lower them further.

Of course that would put the board in conflict with Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter and the GOP Legislature. Otter's appointees on the board don't want to challenge him.

But if the State Board is going to act as an extension of Otter's staff, why do we need a State Board? Otter already has a staff that's pretty good at apologizing for him. - M.T.