

Can Idaho fix schools without preschools?

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

What ails Idaho's public education system isn't all that mysterious.

It's underfunded. Recent cuts have come on top of a systematic disinvestment that has drained away about 20 percent of Idaho's financial commitment to schools.

Student performance on standardized tests is average at best and often falls short of neighboring Washington.

Teacher salaries are not competitive.

Fueled in large part by a visible hostility toward teachers on the part of Idaho's elected leadership. Morale is depressed.

Too few of Idaho's high-school graduates continue on to college and too few of them complete their schooling.

The Gem State is among only eight states that do nothing in the way of funding early childhood education.

Propelled by the voters' rejection of state schools Superintendent Tom Luna's overhaul package a year ago, Idaho now seems poised toward tackling all of its problems.

Well, almost all of them.

Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter's task force yielded a road map toward ramping up spending, including an ambitious plan to improve teacher pay. Standards are being raised - in part to produce high-school graduates capable of doing college-level work.

But Idaho has turned a blind eye to pre-kindergarten programs.

It does this even though other states - most recently Mississippi - are passing Idaho. Nearly two-thirds of Idaho's 3- and 4-year-olds are not enrolled in preschool. Only four states - Alaska, Arizona, North Dakota and Nevada - perform worse.

Argue the skeptics: How can Idaho take this on at a time when it's trying to boost spending for K-12?

How can it not? The state already spends a fortune on remedial programs in the schools, not to mention the fallout from student failure - welfare dependency, teenage pregnancy and crime.

Placing a preschooler on a path toward success in school is the surest, most cost-effective school reform available. A Michigan study concluded every \$1 spent on pre-K returned \$16.14 - including \$12.90 in more tax revenues and fewer social costs for society, and \$3.24 in higher earnings for the individual.

It isn't always a matter of state dollars. Luna has refused to even apply for \$50 million in federal funding that would have simply improved the training of people already working in private early childhood learning programs.

Of course, anyone who pursues pre-K runs flat into a wall of resistance from Idaho conservatives who insist such a move would pull youngsters out of their homes.

Here's a news flash: That's not how most Idaho children live. At least 60 percent of them don't have a stay-at-home parent. Even in a two-parent home, both are likely working.

By neglecting early childhood education, Idaho ignores an obvious need. In Idaho, 55 percent of its children live in low-income homes. Only three states - Arkansas, Mississippi and New Mexico - have more child poverty. If you look at this group, as many as 78 percent are not getting the boost early childhood education could give them.

While Idaho's elected leadership pursues its reform agenda, freshman state Rep. Hy Kloc, D-Boise, offers a whisper in the wilderness.

Asks Kloc: Why not set up five pilot preschool programs across Idaho? Conduct the experiment for three years. All he needs is state authorization. Foundations and private corporations would provide grants to pay for it.

Kloc says Idaho needs its own data to prove pre-K's efficacy. Just as likely, early childhood education needs a beachhead in a heretofore politically hostile environment.

A generation ago, Idaho waited until it was a national outlier to impose even modest standards for daycare centers. Now it risks again becoming the last in the nation to do something about preschool.

Kloc's plan is not revolutionary. It is simply a matter of catching up. - M.T.