

# Balukoff can't debate education on the margins

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Boise businessman A.J. Balukoff can serve as the latest Democratic sacrificial lamb for Idaho governor.

All he needs to do is debate education policy along the parameters established by the state's majority party - teacher pay, taxes and accountability. Arguing on the margins is how Democrats have ceded the governor's office for the past five elections.

If, on the other hand, Balukoff truly intends to make his campaign t a referendum on education, he must change the conversation.

Begin by putting people ahead of programs. For the past two decades, the state has been awash with the latest acronym or slogan - No Child Left Behind, the Idaho Standards Achievement Tests, state schools Superintendent Tom Luna's overhaul package and Common Core.

Obscured in the process is the primary engine of education - the relationship between teacher and pupil. Idaho needs to recruit its best and brightest high school grads into the teaching profession. Its teacher training must become more rigorous. And the state has to find a way to retain newly minted classroom teachers on the job.

Drop the over-reliance on standardized testing. It has narrowed curriculum to a sliver of subjects - to the detriment of civics, history, music and art.

Focus on what really ails education - Idaho's abundance of child poverty. Look at standardized test results and you'll recognize how poverty interferes with a child's progress. Low-income schools produce lower scores. About 55 percent of Idaho's children live in dire economic circumstances.

The picture is not entirely grim. Far more Idaho children are reared in two-parent homes than in other states. And far fewer Idaho kids are mired in the desperately blighted neighborhoods where prospects are blotted out.

Idaho can build on those strengths by launching early childhood education.

In the 1970s, Democrat Cecil Andrus successfully campaigned for governor on the pledge to provide kindergartens in the public schools. Helping preschoolers arrive fully prepared to learn is the next logical step - and the dividends are huge. Pay a little now toward enabling a child to succeed in school and save much greater sums later that won't be needed for social programs and prisons.

Stop asking the think tanks, corporations and politicians for their top-down reform mandates. End the punitive approach that threatens to brand schools and teachers as failures based on a test score.

Instead, turn toward the people in the classrooms. Ask them what works. Seek out their advice. Collaborate with parents. Comb through the research. Make education reform a bottom-up process.

Once innovations emerge, move deliberately. Don't work out the bugs statewide. Why not test reforms in a series of pilot schools first?

Make a commitment toward education that looks beyond the next election or even the next term of office.

Above all else, change the paradigm. Idaho schools need improvement, but its schools are not in crisis. This state has all the resources required - strong families, vibrant communities and public support for public schools.

Those are genuine opportunities. They're just waiting for a visionary to harness them. - M.T.