

# Otter's focus on education a relief

**Meredith Metsker, Moscow-Pullman Daily News Editorial Board**

During his State of the State address on Monday, Idaho Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter uttered the words we have long been waiting to hear: Education will be a priority.

Otter said he planned to begin a five-year journey to lift the quality of Idaho's schools by increasing education funding by 2.9 percent, or \$37.4 million, in fiscal year 2015. While more money being pumped into our education system is a relief, the amount is still \$60 million short of spending levels five years ago.

Since the economic downturn beginning in 2008, schools across the state have struggled. With substantial decreases in funding since then, programs - especially music, theater and other arts classes - have been cut, teachers laid off or given pay cuts, utilities and infrastructure neglected. As a result, children, who are more than deserving of a quality education, have suffered.

And it's not just K-12 that's had issues with decreased funding. Idaho's public universities have also had to tighten their belts, and for a small town like Moscow where half of the economy depends on the University of Idaho, that's had a negative ripple effect.

One downside to Otter's plan is there was no mention of pay raises for Idaho's teachers, or any of Idaho's state employees for that matter. There will be \$21 million of one-time bonuses for teachers in FY 2015, but they won't be repeated or replaced the following year. State schools Superintendent Tom Luna criticized that, calling it a cut in teachers' pay.

Otter also said he set aside another \$30 million in his budget proposal for some kind of tax relief, on the condition that his education funding proposals come first. His proposal also included directing more than \$70 million into rainy-day reserves, a curiously large number considering his top priority is supposedly education.

So it is with tentative anticipation that we accept Otter's plans. We hope, for the sake of our children and all those in our state who want to pursue higher education or professional certification, that Otter keeps his word and continues increasing funding beyond FY 2015.

Our future depends on it.