

The bell has rung on Mr. Luna's classroom

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Reaction to Idaho school Superintendent Tom Luna's announcement that he was not seeking another term fell into three broad camps Monday:

- That collective sigh of relief you heard came from Idaho's Republican Party.
- Maybe the rumors of teachers and administrators high-fiving and fist-bumping each other were exaggerated. Maybe they weren't.
- Faced with Luna's explanation for his imminent departure from public office, not a few ordinary citizens asked themselves and others: What's the real story here?

If there was one place where Tea Party and establishment wings of the GOP found common ground, it was the assessment of Luna's political woes. Waging a re-election campaign would come only two years after voters repealed his school overhaul package by overwhelming margins. No state leader had been so thoroughly repudiated since 1936, when Idahoans overturned Gov. C. Ben Ross' sales tax through a referendum.

It wasn't just Luna's attempt to undermine teachers' employment rights, revolutionize their compensation package and replace humans with online instruction and laptop computers that got voters peeved.

It was the way Luna waited until he was safely re-elected in 2010 before blind-siding parents, students, teachers and just about everyone else with this package in 2011.

So Luna became politically toxic. Members of his own party treated him as a pariah. He had raised hardly any money for a campaign. If a primary challenger didn't defeat him, Republicans worried Democrats would.

That's not to say Luna's odds were awful. He had the luck of drawing two politically untested challengers - Cottonwood teacher John Eynon and American Falls principal Randy Jensen - in the May 20 primary. If they each divided the anti-Luna vote in a closed GOP primary, Luna's plurality would be sufficient for renomination.

He'd face a rematch in the fall with Idaho Falls Democrat Jana Jones - former Superintendent Marilyn Howard's deputy who narrowly lost to Luna in 2006. Whatever his liabilities, Luna would go into that race as the GOP candidate in a year when antipathy toward President Obama and the Democratic Party could reach critical mass. Besides, with an electorate suffering from attention-deficit disorder, the 2012 verdict against the "Luna Laws" was fading into a distant memory.

Which brings us to the high fives and fist bumps. Even had Luna prevailed with voters, the chances of him reconciling with Idaho's education community were virtually nil. Teachers

weren't going to forget his depiction of them as union goons. And they continue to bristle under the yoke of burdensome mandates still coming down from his State Department of Education.

Another Luna term merely would add four more years to the polarization and paralysis that has marked his leadership of public education. Perhaps it's as simple as that: Luna saw the futility of remaining at his post.

But in the 12 years Luna has been on the state scene, he has been a source of perennial rebranding and image-making. In 2002, he ran against Howard as a critic of public education and lost. Four years later, he softened his message and won. His 2010 re-election campaign praised the state's schools. Then he unloaded the Luna Laws in 2011 as the antidote to the failures he'd discovered in public education. His fellow Republicans on the state Land Board and the legislative budget committee watched him turn the tables on them.

His timing and body language suggested he was going to make the run. He had remained a nominal candidate right up to the end of January - with seven weeks to go before the candidate filing deadline. He had been pivoting back to the center - pursuing more compensation for teachers and a sales tax on Internet purchases to raise more resources for schools.

So why did he drop out?

Had the polling results proved dismal?

Had he waited until the last minute to withdraw in order to position his hand-picked successor in the campaign?

Had Luna lined up a cushy job with one of the for-profit purveyors of high-tech or online instruction with whom he associated during his tenure - and before?

With Luna, the second shoe doesn't always drop.

But often, it does. - M.T.