

Up, up and up

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

JEERS ... to Idaho's higher education community. In a year when lawmakers handed the state's college and universities a 6.2 percent budget increase, Idaho's institutions of higher learning are going for another round of tuition increases.

University of Idaho President Chuck Staben is seeking a 4.7 percent boost, up to \$6,832.

Lewis-Clark State College President Tony Fernandez wants 2 percent more, up to \$5,900.

Boise State University President Robert Kustra is proposing a 6.1 percent rise, up to \$6,676.

And Idaho State University President Arthur Vailas is asking for a 3.5 percent boost, up to \$6,566.

The State Board of Education will decide when it meets at the UI next month.

This caps a decade in which tuition has doubled - while Idaho incomes have stagnated.

Idaho charges less tuition than surrounding states. But that's small comfort to Idaho families who are asking themselves how they can afford to send a son or daughter to college - even with the scholarships these schools provide.

"What you have to be asking is not what the dollar cost is, but what's affordable to your citizens given their disposable incomes," BSU adjunct professor in economics Brian Greber told The Idaho Statesman's Patrick Davis.

Administrators told Davis these tuition spikes are required to replace dollars lost where fewer students showed up. For example, the UI's enrollment is down 5 percent.

What business would price itself out of the market - and then raise its prices further?

JEERS ... to Idaho House Speaker Scott Bedke, R-Oakley. Because Idaho schools get a bigger bang for the buck, Bedke says it doesn't matter that the Gem State spends so little money on each pupil.

"Instead of focusing on our purported 50th-place ranking (in spending), we should be pleased with the results we are achieving," Bedke wrote in Idaho Education News.

Of course, Idaho benefits from having more of its children raised in stable, two-parent homes. The state has a remarkably low number of its children living in neighborhoods so impoverished that opportunities are choked off.

For the sake of argument, imagine how much better off those kids would be if Bedke and Idaho's GOP-dominated Legislature had not cut taxes more than \$450 million in the last decade or so, reducing the share of Idaho's personal income devoted to public schools by 25 percent.

Some schools are getting by. Others are taxing homeowners to the hilt and still operating on four-day weeks.

Even this year's 5.1 percent, \$66 million budget increase does not restore all the cuts schools suffered since the Great Recession - and lawmakers didn't do all they could. They voted to hold back almost \$36 million in reserves.

JEERS ... to former Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney. Remember the fellow who tripped all over his "47 percent ... who are dependent upon government, who believe they are victims" remark? How about his attempt to appeal to the NASCAR fans with this quip: "I have some great friends who are NASCAR team owners"?

Well, he hasn't lost the knack.

At a GOP campaign appearance in Idaho Falls last week, Romney said Idahoans are swimming in prosperity thanks to their conservative leadership.

"There are more jobs in Idaho and you see rising incomes," he said. "If it ain't broke, don't fix it."

Not broke?

Idaho's per capita income is ranked 50th out of 50 states and the District of Columbia. The only reason it's now No. 2 in minimum-wage jobs is because Tennessee had an even worse year.

Since Otter became governor, the gap between what Idahoans earn and the national average has expanded. Economically mobile young people are leaving the state, not moving in.

Is Romney misinformed or willfully ignorant?

CHEERS ... to Erik Smith, the intrepid force behind the Washington State Wire news service. Nowhere will you find a more energetic, enthusiastic student of the Evergreen State's Legislature and Olympia politics.

Smith seemed to revel in digging up the nuanced details of policy and politics. Nobody was better at explaining the players and the machinery.

Smith is moving on to join the Seattle Times editorial board.

"Of course, I'll miss it," Smith wrote in a farewell column last week. "The whole thing, even the boring parts. And I guess this is something people don't often say about the Washington Legislature, or any legislative body. But those of us who hang around year after year know it somewhere deep. This is what keeps all of us coming back - the place is really a hoot."

CHEERS ... to Idaho's education coalition. Idaho Education Association President Penni Cyr, Idaho Association of School Administrators Executive Director Rob Winslow and Idaho School Boards Association Executive Director Karen Echeverria worked from the same playbook during the recent legislative session. Whether the issue was teacher compensation, Common Core standards or even the contentious labor relations issues - the groups found common ground.

The harmony translated into more resources in the classrooms - and it marks a decided improvement over the education wars of the previous seven years.

JEERS ... to Idaho GOP gubernatorial hopeful Russ Fulcher. The Meridian Republican wants Idaho to follow Indiana's lead and drop Common Core. As governor of Idaho, I will push for legislation that allows Idaho to opt out of this top-down, one-size-fits-all federal program," Fulcher said.

He's having a John Kerry moment. Three years ago as a state senator, Fulcher endorsed those standards. Now he's changed his mind - just in time to appeal to his party's conservative base in Idaho's closed GOP primary.

How convenient. - M.T.