

Ybarra can't take refuge in Reagan's shadow

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Sherri Ybarra is principal at West Elementary School at Mountain Home.

She's one of four relatively unknown candidates seeking the GOP nomination for state schools chief.

And she has a problem.

Ybarra didn't vote on the Luna Laws two years ago.

How can someone who wants to lead Idaho schools have cared so little about what could have happened to them?

Idaho Education News checked into the voting histories of Ybarra and her three GOP rivals - Melba School District Superintendent Andy Grover, William Thomas Middle School Principal Randy Jensen of American Falls and Cottonwood School District music teacher John Eynon.

The winner of that May 20 primary contest will face Democrat Jana Jones of Idaho Falls in November.

Eynon, Grover and Jensen voted in the general election.

Eynon and Grover also voted in the 2012 GOP primary election - the first requiring Idahoans to register as Republicans in order to vote in GOP races. Jensen boycotted the closed primary. Ybarra filed an unaffiliated absentee ballot, which means she did not vote in the GOP races.

How Jensen and Ybarra handled the closed primary election is an issue between them and the GOP electorate.

How Ybarra handled the general election, however, is an issue between her and the rest of us.

Idaho was going to back Mitt Romney for president, re-elect its two GOP members of Congress and keep 80 percent of the state Legislature in Republican hands.

The one question left very much in doubt on Election Day was the outcome of the referendum campaign on schools Superintendent Tom Luna's education overhaul package.

Idahoans had not overturned an act of their lawmakers since 1936.

They would decide whether Idaho would upend collective bargaining for teachers, impose a weak merit pay program and spend limited dollars on questionable technology initiatives.

They would determine whether to accelerate Idaho's education wars. And they would render judgment on Luna, who had campaigned for re-election as the schools' champion in 2010, only to turn around and foist an entirely different agenda on the public the following year.

The verdict:

No to collective bargaining overhaul by 57.3 percent.

No to merit pay by 58 percent.

No to the technology program by 66.7 percent.

Message received. Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter convened a task force representing all points of Idaho's education spectrum, which produced a blueprint toward reform. Chief among its planks was a \$350 million infusion of cash into school operations and teacher salaries.

And Luna called it quits.

Not since voters had approved Idaho's sales tax in 1966 had any ballot campaign had the potential to so dramatically alter the path of public education.

For a potential state schools chief to pass on that election has no equivalent. The closest analogy might be a school board member who boycotted his own district's bond election.

When pressed for an answer, Ybarra emailed Idaho Education News: "I am a Republican, with Republican values, since my childhood. The state superintendent of public instruction serves all students, all parents and all stakeholders, regardless of when a box is 'checked.' Ronald Reagan explained it best: 'Government's first duty is to protect the people, not run their lives.' "

When a candidate disqualifies herself, that's how she sounds. But hiding behind Reagan and the GOP label may not work this time. - M.T.