

A last-place finish 20 years in the making

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Idaho finally made it.

We are now ranked dead last in the nation for the amount of money we devote toward the education of each of our children.

It only took two decades of Republican leadership to get us here.

Don't get the wrong impression. Even as Cecil D. Andrus was wrapping up 24 years of Democratic governors in 1994, Idaho traditionally occupied the cellar with states such as Arkansas, Alabama, Mississippi, North Dakota, South Dakota, Tennessee and Utah.

But we usually ranked a good half-dozen notches above last place.

In the era launched by Republican Gov. Phil Batt and continuing with his successors - Dirk Kempthorne, Jim Risch and C.L. (Butch) Otter) - Idaho's ranking began to slip behind those Southern states.

We finally plateaued at 50th - out of the 50 states and the District of Columbia - just ahead of Utah.

Until now.

The latest Census for 2012 shows that Utah bumped up its per pupil expenditure by \$23 to \$7,607.

Not much, but enough - considering Idaho sliced \$458 from its per-pupil spending, bringing the total down to \$7,405 and allowing the Beehive State to limp ahead.

How did it happen?

Here's what the latest batch of statistics show:

- In 2011-2012, no state slashed spending more deeply than Idaho. Ben Casselman, a writer at FiveThirtyEight.com, reported the amount of money behind each Idaho student - after adjusting for inflation - dropped 12.3 percent.

Runnerup New Mexico cut spending 11.9 percent and North Carolina came third with a 10.8 percent reduction.

- For that same period, Oregon cut per pupil spending 9.7 percent; Utah cut 8.9 percent; Nevada, 8.8 percent; Washington, 5.7 percent, and Montana, 2.7 percent. Rich in natural

gas and other resources, Wyoming was among the handful of states that increased per pupil spending that year.

- Five years after the Great Recession, Idaho has yet to fill in the holes in its budget. The Legislature's budget committee reports the state's general fund - the primary source of money for public schools, higher education, health care and general government - is still \$23.2 million, or about 0.8 percent, behind where it was in 2009. Spending for public education is down 3.1 percent. And that's before you factor in rising enrollments and inflation.

A bad economy explains only part of the picture.

Beginning with Batt, Republican governors and GOP lawmakers began cutting away at taxes.

Gone is the equalized property tax levy that supported school maintenance and operations.

Gone is the personal property tax on farm machinery and much of the same tax imposed on business equipment.

Everyone - regardless of need - is in line for a grocery tax credit that, when fully implemented in 2015, will reduce revenue by more than \$130 million.

Incomes taxes on upper-income families and corporations were slashed.

And each year a new sales and income tax cleared the Legislature. The latest involves software purchased over the Internet.

The cumulative effect - as Idaho's former chief economist Mike Ferguson documented - has been a near 25 percent collapse in the share of Idaho's personal income devoted to public education since the turn of the century. Had our revenues been protected, spending for schools would be about \$500 million higher each year.

Meanwhile, other states have stepped up.

On the eve of the Great Recession, Idaho's commitment to education - as measured by the share of its personal income devoted to schools - ranked it 40th. That put Idaho ahead of some wealthier states including Washington and Colorado.

Today, Idaho has slipped to 46th.

All of which leads toward two inescapable conclusions:

This talk that tax cuts would spur economic growth and create even more money for public schools was just talk. If the politically influential people of this state were going to collect their tax cuts, schools would have to take less.

And this idea that Idaho had to endure four-day school weeks, higher fees for everything from athletics to lab classes, ever-rising local supplemental property tax levies and more crowded classrooms was a scam.

These hardships were not forced upon Idaho's elected leaders.

This was a matter of choice.

Theirs. - M.T.