

# Jim Fisher Only liberals support schools?

*Jim Fisher/Lewiston Tribune*

As a liberal with a long paper trail, I have never entertained the idea that I could be a political candidate in the state that has been my home for nearly 40 years. Idaho has moved too far to the right for that.

But it also has never occurred to me that any candidate would be assailed as being too liberal for public office simply because he supported local school levies.

Yet, that is the situation in which A.J. Balukoff, this year's Democratic candidate for governor, now finds himself.

"A.J. - You're a Liberal," charges the state's big business lobby in a website attacking the Boise businessman's candidacy. That accusation is repeated several times by the Idaho Association of Commerce and Industry's political arm, the Idaho Prosperity Fund, but the first time it is used it refers to Balukoff's support for local school levies and school construction bonds.

"A.J. Balukoff has voted to support EVERY bond measure or tax levy since 1997 while serving on the school board, resulting in thousands of dollars of increased property taxes and fees for Idaho taxpayers," the site reads.

What's this: a member of a local school board supporting better-financed schools? Oh, the disgrace.

I don't have to wonder how my father would respond to this. A certified public accountant and lifelong Republican, he and my mother took me and my siblings to the polls to demonstrate their engagement in the democratic process, and their support for local school levies. Both were duties of good citizens, he said.

And in those days, he was hardly alone. Even in a state - Washington - where legislators did not look on school spending as money shot to hell, most voters recognized the need for local support to supplement state appropriations.

And those voters included leaders of the state's business community.

Today in Idaho, leaders of such businesses as U.S. Bank, Clearwater Paper, Potlatch, Century Link and Hewlett Packard help finance a political attack based on that school support.

To get an idea of how much things have changed, consider two developments in the mid-1980s.

First, Ray Smelek, the man who brought Hewlett Packard to Boise, more than once urged Idaho legislators to increase the money they sent to the state's education system, even warning that he would be reluctant to recommend HP's expansion of its Idaho presence if they did not.

Second, IACI itself created - at the urging of Boise Cascade General Counsel, and Kooskia native, John Clute - a business-led task force to propose improvements to the higher education system. The Idaho Task Force on Higher Education returned with a recommendation for a more comprehensive, two-tiered system of community colleges feeding students into the existing four-year schools.

Neither proposal got the attention - or the support - it deserved. But neither did legislators and governors at the time choose to actually reduce appropriations to public schools, at either the K-12 or the post-secondary level.

A few years ago, they did.

When the burst home mortgage balloon laid the nation's economy low, most states were driven to serious spending cuts. Idaho was no exception. But as conditions improved, and lost revenues began reappearing, many states worked to replace at least the money taken from schools during harder times.

Idaho was an exception. As new money started rolling in, Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter, Balukoff's opponent, and GOP legislators chose to cut taxes instead of tending to a damaged education system.

Today, the damage remains, leading most communities in the state to vote to increase local school support through higher property taxes rather than to force their students to continue paying the price for economic folly.

Boise is only one of those communities, and Balukoff is only one of those voters. But his service on his local school board - a job for unsung heroes if there ever was one - and his support for local levies now has earned him an unwarranted and uncivil assault from his fellow business leaders.

That makes me wonder about the quality of those leaders themselves. Surely many of them have also voted for school levies in a state sinking to the bottom in most indicators of economic health. Have they decided, like the U.S. Chamber of Commerce under Thomas Donohue, that ethics now takes a back seat to effectiveness in destroying political targets?

IACI's other criticisms of Balukoff's candidacy - including suggested state adjustments to Obamacare that are scandalously close to IACI's own proposals - are also suspect. But it is the attempt to discredit him for backing school levies that leads to one conclusion:

IACI members -You're Dirty Fighters.

And You're Poor Citizens.

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