

Lapwai becomes the face of Idaho's have-nots

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Of Idaho's 115 school districts, 94 have resorted to voluntary property tax levies. Called supplementals, they are anything but. These dollars pay the basics that state lawmakers no longer feel obligated to provide.

Even with the extra money those patrons provide, schools have been unable to avoid teacher furloughs, crowded classrooms and four-day weeks.

A handful of Idaho school systems are so wealthy they don't need the extra help.

But that leaves the rest in financial distress, and a couple dozen in real dire straights.

Either the voters can't afford to pay more.

Or they don't care.

Lapwai is unlucky enough to suffer from both maladies.

In May, Lapwai patrons turned down a \$499,000 supplemental levy by nearly 58 percent. The district halved its request, but last month's defeat was even greater - 59.4 percent.

No other Idaho school district went to its patrons twice this year and got denied both times.

So Lapwai students will have to endure more crowded classrooms. Four and a half teaching positions are gone. So are three classroom aides.

They can forget music.

If they want to take a foreign language, it will mean working with the Idaho Digital Learning Academy.

Likewise for PE. A teacher at the other end of a computer will coach students through their routines. Maybe IDLA can round up some old Jack LaLanne, Jane Fonda and Robert ("Go, you chicken fat, go!") Preston tapes.

That could be just the beginning. Lapwai has about \$150,000 in the bank. One or two emergencies could wipe it out.

Welcome to the world of Idaho's educational have-nots.

For that, you can thank Jim Risch. Before he was elected to the U.S. Senate, Risch served as Idaho's interim governor in 2006. He insisted on eliminating the equalized property tax levy that

supported school operations. Later, when lawmakers cut state support, patrons returned to the property tax. But Risch's meddling penalized Idaho's poorest school districts.

For instance, McCall's tax base is robust enough to put \$2.8 million behind each of its students. In eastern Idaho, Snake River's tax base yields just \$172,403 per student.

Just to keep up with McCall, Snake River's property owners must pay 17 times as much.

Lapwai's tax base pencils out to \$289,000 per student - 84th lowest among Idaho's 115 school districts and about one-third below the state average.

Just to generate a modest \$250,000, Lapwai's levy would have stung the owner of a \$400,000 residence with a \$545 tax bill.

Try selling that kind of a tax bite to someone who - to put it mildly - believes a school district that serves children of the Nez Perce Tribe is someone else's problem.

All of which explains why even Snake River voters passed a \$900,000 supplemental levy and Lapwai never will.

But Idaho's Constitution doesn't say the Legislature must "establish and maintain a general, uniform and thorough system of public, free common schools" except among Lapwai and its sister have-not schools.

The constitution doesn't say all taxes "shall be uniform" except when it comes to educating children on Indian reservations or in the poorest, most rural corners of the state.

Obviously Idaho's Supreme Court needs to remind lawmakers what's in that document. If the court needs any motivation, let the justices take a trip to Lapwai. - M.T.