

Once more, Idaho can thank God for Utah

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Nothing gets the Gem State in a funk like being dead last at something.

Being next to dead last?

Not so bad.

Last winter, the state's leadership cringed when it heard that Idaho's low-skill, low-wage economy had produced the 50th lowest per capita income in the nation.

Then it turned out that ranking was only 50th among the 50 states and the District of Columbia.

Mississippi was still 51st - although it's gaining ground and will eventually overtake Idaho.

What had been shock and awe among officialdom morphed into ho and hum.

Then in the spring, Idaho surrendered its title of minimum wage king. Now it was only second in the nation in the proportion of its people scraping by.

Tennessee was No. 1.

From Boise came the official proclamation: "Whew!"

Next came education funding.

For years, Idaho has dribbled along the bottom - with only Utah below it. Earlier this year, the Census released its state rankings - and for the first time, Idaho came in dead last.

Utah officials couldn't wait to crow.

Announced Utah state Auditor John Dougall: "In case you didn't hear, UT [Utah] no longer has the lowest per-pupil total spending for public ed."

Added Sen. Howard Stephenson, R-Draper: "Idaho now holds the once-coveted position that we held for so long that none of us were real proud of."

Turns out Idaho is 51st in terms of the revenues - federal, state and local - it puts behind each student for everything - buildings, maintenance and operation, supplies, infrastructure and employee pay.

But as Idaho Education News' Kevin Richert reported last week, when it comes to the closely watched per-pupil expenditures - what is actually spent on instruction - Idaho remains 50th and Utah is 51st.

And what was the reaction from Boise?

"Thank God for Utah."

While his Democratic opponent, A.J. Balukoff, had to back away from a campaign statement, Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter could tell the Boise Metro Chamber of Commerce with a straight face that "It's not how much money you spend, it's how you spend the money."

Unfortunately, being 51st in revenue means Idaho is dead last where it counts - in its commitment to education. Nothing new there. Otter's former chief economist Michael Ferguson documented how Idaho's political leadership cut the share of personal income devoted to public schools by 25 percent since 2000.

Ten years ago, Idaho's effort to support education was ranked 48th in the U.S. Revenues raised per pupil fell about 26 percent behind the national average.

Not only has Idaho slumped three slots, but what it generates for students is 40 percent below the national norm.

One possible explanation for why Idaho can still outspend Utah is that the Gem State is draining its savings accounts. Even so, it has slipped two slots from 48th in per pupil expenditures in 2002.

A decade ago, the state spent 23 percent below the national average on each of its students. That gap has grown to 37 percent today.

Idaho has lost so much ground that just matching Oklahoma's 49th-place ranking would require an instantaneous infusion of \$227.4 million, Richert estimated.

Don't look to Otter to make that kind of investment. He talks about \$350 million more - provided he's given five years to pull it off.

That's not enough to gain on other states that surely will spend as much if not more.

Not that Idaho's elected leadership seems to mind being stuck in the basement - as long as Utah is willing to keep them company. - M.T.