

Sliding down

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

JEERS ... to Idaho Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter. The governor has presided over a massive disinvestment in public education. The state now is ranked last in the amount of money it commits to each student.

Otter has the chance to do something about it. Idaho could collect \$15 million in U.S. Department of Education preschool development grants.

But so far, he has taken no action.

Only 56 percent of Idaho's kindergartners show up prepared to learn. That taxes Idaho's already inadequate education budget with remedial programs. Even so, some kids never catch up - so they drop out of school, end up in dead-end jobs, dependent upon social welfare and involved in crime.

That's why \$1 invested in quality preschool programs can net society anywhere from \$7 to \$13.

Idaho state school Superintendent Tom Luna already turned down \$50 million in Race to the Top preschool grants three years ago.

The number of states spending nothing on preschool is down to eight. Among the 32 states that applied for this latest round of grants are Idaho's neighbors - Montana, Nevada, Oregon, Utah and Washington.

Does Otter plan to lead Idaho to last place on another educational scorecard?

JEERS ... to Idaho Treasurer Ron Crane. Here's the question he's been dodging: How much more of the taxpayers' money has he lost on lousy investments?

Earlier this year, the nonpartisan Idaho Legislative Audits Division looked over Crane's books to discover he had made a conscious decision in 2008 and 2009 to pay face value for downgraded mortgage-backed securities, costing a pool of money he managed for the state at least \$10.2 million and possibly another \$17.4 million.

In response, the Legislature passed laws making it certain Crane never makes that kind of decision again.

What about the years in between?

Auditors directed him to look through his records and see if any other such losses occurred.

He's been stonewalling ever since.

"...[N]o additional evidence supporting a full review of all potentially inappropriate reallocations was provided," auditors reported in late June.

After Crane's Democratic opponent, Twin Falls CPA Deborah Silver, called on the treasurer to comply with the auditors' instruction, Crane's office issued another assurance. They looked. There were no other instances. But any documentation they have already went to the auditors.

That's laughable.

Any review would have generated the records auditors have requested.

Make that any responsible review conducted by any professional office with nothing to hide.

CHEERS ... to Congressman Raul Labrador, R-Idaho. Joining forces with Georgia Democratic Congressman Hank Johnson, Labrador is behind a bill to keep military hardware out of the hands of local police.

It's a response to the unsettling images of Ferguson, Mo., police confronting people protesting the Michael Brown shooting with equipment, such as assault weapons, drones and Mine-Resistant, Ambush-Protected vehicles known as MRAPs.

It's happening all over the country, including communities in Idaho, thanks in part to the Pentagon's 1033 program, which "provides or transfers surplus Department of Defense military equipment to state and local civilian law enforcement agencies without charge."

All of which is proving to be counter-productive.

"The (Ferguson) Police responded like a military unit defending Fallujah," Ada County Sheriff Gary Raney wrote recently in the Idaho Statesman. "We learn in law enforcement that using force against a person or group often causes them to respond with more force."

So Labrador and Johnson would take three steps:

- No longer would law enforcement receive armored vehicles or weaponized drones, for instance.
- Gone would be a Pentagon mandate pressuring law enforcement to use this equipment within a year of receiving it, whether it's needed or not.
- Police would be banned from transferring military surplus to someone else.

But the Pentagon is a small part of a 30-year story that includes boot camp-style police academies and the military-industrial complex expanding into the commercial markets where police acquire most of their hardware.

Fueling all of this is money flowing into law enforcement coffers from federal grants and asset forfeitures linked to drug busts.

Pulling the plug on the militarization of police requires a hard look at all of that as well.

JEERS ... to Mike Gwartney, former Idaho Department of Administration director - and Otter BFF. Five years ago, he so screwed up the \$60 million Idaho Education Network contract by changing the specs, steering it toward one bidder and triggering a lawsuit from the losing side - that you are still paying the bills.

In March of 2013, the Federal Communication Commission - which covers 75 percent of the Idaho broadband project's costs - shut off funding. Ever since, Gwartney's successor, Teresa Luna, has issued one assurance after another that the FCC would relent.

But the bills are piling up. It could get as high as \$21 million by next year.

Meanwhile, the FCC Office of the Inspector General just subpoenaed the state for documents related to the IEN.

CHEERS ... to Pramila Jayapal. The Seattle Democratic Senate hopeful made a cogent point in a recent online column: Washington's schools are underfunded because the state taxes sales but not incomes.

"That means that in 1990, Washingtonians paid about 7 percent of their income in taxes while in 2011, we paid about 5 percent of our income in taxes," Jayapal wrote. "Here's the kicker: If we were paying that same 7 percent of income in taxes, we'd have about \$15 billion in additional revenue for the current biennium. Our problems in finding funding for education, transportation and health care would be solved." - M.T.