

State board's pay plan flopped; where's Plan B?

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Idaho's State Board of Education took its proposed teacher certification and pay proposals on the road this month.

But it didn't make the sale.

Lewiston's hearing was a case in point, although the same pattern played out wherever the state board set up its podium - including Pocatello and Meridian.

In a seemingly endless stream, teachers not only told the board they didn't like the plan.

They also spelled out why.

In detail.

- They don't trust the Legislature to deliver the money. This isn't the first time teachers have been offered a new pay grid coupled with more dollars. They remember the 1984 career-ladder program, which offered to compensate educators for taking on additional responsibilities - only to see it atrophy when lawmakers failed to keep their commitments.
- Tiered licensing allows local administrators the ability to damage a teacher's ability to seek work elsewhere by placing an asterisk on his professional standing: They can stop a provisionally licensed teacher from advancing to a full professional rank. They can place a professionally licensed teacher on contingent status. Or they could downgrade a teacher from master to professional grade, depriving him of income and leaving a stain on his resume.
- Evaluating teachers on the basis of student growth - especially when relying on standardized testing - penalizes educators who work primarily with at-risk children. That includes kids being raised in poverty and special-needs students. Message to teachers interested in advancement: Seek out students capable of performing - and cultivate administrators who make the classroom assignments.
- Left out in the cold are teachers and support staff who can't be so readily pigeon-holed by a test result - those who work in special education, PE, libraries, music and drama programs.

State board members seem surprised by this. Tiered licensing and compensation is the byproduct of the education task force Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter brought together last year. Teachers, through the Idaho Education Association and a few Democratic lawmakers, had a seat at the table and even wrangled some concessions as the proposed rule was being negotiated.

While educators may not like it, they operate in a political environment dominated by Republican lawmakers who are convinced the public school system makes it impossible to drum lousy teachers out of the profession.

Without some method of accountability, these politicians are going to resist forking over \$250 million toward better teacher pay.

Just the same, this is well trod-ground.

Nearly three years ago, Otter and outgoing state schools Superintendent Tom Luna launched their massive school overhaul package - an assault on collective bargaining rights, the imposition of merit pay and the diversion of classroom dollars into online learning - against the vigorous opposition of Idaho's teachers.

In the ensuing education wars, voters sided with the teachers over the politicians - repealing the Luna Laws by margins as much as two-thirds and effectively ending Luna's political career.

Whatever truce the task force was meant to forge, this latest compensation plan clearly is putting it at risk. At minimum, it threatens to depress already abysmal morale in Idaho's steadily depleted teaching ranks. At worst, it could lead to more political upheaval and policy paralysis.

Later next month, state board members will pore over their findings and review what proposals to forward to lawmakers in 2015. If they're listening, the message from Idaho's teachers is unmistakable: Come up with a Plan B. - M.T.