

Otter gets thumped at his own road show

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

You can almost imagine what went through Kent Stokes' mind while he attended Idaho Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter's latest Capital for a Day celebration at Kamiah last week.

As Otter pitched his education reforms, his budget plan and his overall theory of accountability, the Mountain View School District superintendent might have been contemplating how Otter, former state schools Superintendent Tom Luna and the GOP-led Legislature had siphoned off dollars needed in the classroom into a growing Boise-based bureaucracy. Now Idaho distributes its school dollars dripping in strings, red tape and top-down mandates.

Perhaps he was remembering that, under Otter, the state's political leadership spent much of its time engaged in open hostilities against educators - producing what the Office of Performance Evaluations deemed "a strong undercurrent of despair among teachers who seem to perceive a climate that disparages their efforts and belittles their contributions."

Maybe Stokes was reviewing how it's becoming tougher and tougher to run a rural school system. First, former Gov. Jim Risch eliminated a property tax levy system meant to help them. Then the Legislature began knocking the props out from under a funding formula that shored up rural schools. Finally, the state began withdrawing its support - the equivalent of \$700 million a year during the past two decades. No wonder Education Week says no state has a greater gap between its rich and poor - which often translates into urban and rural - schools.

Now rural districts - including his own - are running supplemental property tax levies to the limit of their meager tax bases and their voters' patience.

The list of largely rural districts resorting to a four-day week to save a dollar here or there has grown to 42.

It's just possible Stokes was reliving how Idaho's so-called conservatives have blown the Idaho Education Network contract. How they've imposed a data-collection network that has pulled counselors away from helping kids in order to satisfy Boise's insatiable appetite for minutiae. Or how the state's elites seem bound and determined to graft an untested tier licensing and career ladder program on people actually doing the work out in the field.

And as he heard Otter pitch his \$101.1 million school budget increase, Stokes could have been looking past the political salesmanship and asking how far short it falls of covering five years of enrollment growth and inflation.

All of which may explain how Stokes found himself on his feet, challenging Idaho's affable three-term governor on his facts:

- "Do you think our schools look like the schools in Boise?" he asked.

- The money Otter has proposed "simply won't do the job," he said - not if it means attracting qualified teachers to work for Idaho's wages or meet the state's education mandates.
- "Are we not smart enough in our own communities to evaluate?" Stokes asked. "Local control needs to be brought back to the district. I really don't think the people in Boise know what's best for the schools in Grangeville."

That didn't sit well with Otter.

He's not used to hearing school administrators take him on. They may grumble behind the scenes, but many are keeping their heads down.

And Otter's certainly not used to getting thumped at one of his Capital for a Day outings. He holds these venues in the small Idaho towns that share his conservative views and are more receptive to his sunny disposition.

Even worse, the audience seemed to like what Stokes was saying. As the Tribune's Kathy Hedberg noted, several of his comments drew applause.

It was enough to throw the governor off his game. When Stokes began to leave the podium, Otter challenged him to settle their dispute "like gentlemen." Then Otter indignantly cut off the discussion and moved on to something else.

So here's a guess: You won't be seeing Otter's road show in Idaho County anytime soon. - M.T.