

# That's an awfully low bar Idaho is setting

**Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune**

Let's hope the ambitions Idaho's lawmakers have set for public school spending are more than what Senate President Pro Tem Brent Hill, R-Rexburg, is suggesting.

Writing earlier this week in the Idaho Falls Post Register, Hill said he expected to return Idaho education spending to its pre-recession levels.

"There is a good chance that the Legislature will completely restore the funding for public schools and approve the largest public education budget in Idaho's history," Hill said.

That's setting the bar awfully low.

In 2009, Idaho devoted \$1.4 billion to schools.

By the time they upped spending \$35 million last year, lawmakers remained about \$48 million short. And if you're counting where the dollars matter most - at the local school operations budget - the price is \$78 million.

Don't be so quick with the legislative attaboys. Either of those numbers means ignoring more than six years of inflation and enrollment increases. When the Center for Budget and Public Policy looked over Idaho's books, it found few states had cut schools as deeply.

Part of it was bad luck. The state's economy tumbled further and faster than just about anywhere else. But part of it was deliberate. Idaho was among a handful of states that diverted new dollars generated by an economic rebound into tax cuts to special interests rather than first repairing the damage done to its schools.

The result: CBPP says Idaho is about \$162 million behind where it stood on the eve of the recession.

None of this suggests Idaho's school budgets were robust even then. The Gem state was struggling to pay competitive salaries to its educators. It also risked slipping behind Utah in the amount of resources it committed to each child's education - something that finally happened last year.

Idaho has been losing ground at least since the turn of the century. As 2000 loomed, the state was spending about 4.4 percent of its personal income on public education. After reviewing the latest data, former Idaho Chief Economist Mike Ferguson believes that level of support has slipped to 3.2 percent.

In other words, Republicans would have to find more than \$700 million to rebuild school funding to the levels they inherited from the last Democratic governor, Cecil D. Andrus. The pain is not evenly distributed. Some schools are suffering more severely than others.

How will you know if Hill and his colleagues are serious about regaining Idaho's commitment to public schools?

The number of school districts running on fumes and four-day weeks has expanded to 42 from 10 in eight years. That should begin to shrink.

As reported by Idaho Education News' Kevin Richert, 93 of Idaho's 115 school districts must turn to local property taxpayers to compensate for inadequate state support. That's close to double the number of districts relying on supplemental property tax levies a decade ago. Collectively, they're raising \$180 million.

If the state were doing a better job of paying its fair share, you'd expect that to drop, too.

And in a new poll commissioned by Idaho Politics Weekly, Dan Jones and & Associates found that 65 percent of Idahoans believe education funding is too low.

Here's betting handing out more table scraps is not going to fool anybody.