

Four years later, it's 'Teachers Come First'

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

You'd be forgiven for thinking the theme among Idaho legislators this year was "Teachers Come First."

That's a twist on former state schools Superintendent Tom Luna's 2011 "Students Come First" campaign. Four years ago, Luna got his fellow Republicans in the Legislature to approve:

- Rolling back teacher collective bargaining rights.
- Instituting a punitive merit pay system tied to how students performed on standardized tests.
- Adopting an agenda fueled by the belief that technology, not teachers, could cure what ailed Idaho schools.

All of which took place in an environment of declining state support for education budgets.

The following year, Idaho voters gave Luna's package an electoral heave-ho, setting the state on a path culminating in this year's mantra: No matter what else you do, education still comes down to having a quality teacher in a classroom interacting with students.

Almost in unison, Idaho lawmakers approved better pay and bigger budgets. The centerpiece was a \$125 million, five-year career ladder, promising to boost beginning teacher pay from \$31,750 to \$37,000 and bringing salaries for veteran educators to \$50,000. On top of that, teachers would be eligible for one-year bonuses.

Republicans also made limited concessions to teachers: They'll have a voice in how the bonuses are allocated. And if lawmakers fail to pay for the career ladder program's funding down the road, some aspects of the law - particularly those dealing with licensing and tenure - are put on hold.

As a practical matter, lawmakers had no choice. Call it the "Siddoway Syndrome," after Sen. Jeff Siddoway, R-Terreton, who pledged to block any tax cut until teacher compensation was elevated.

Between notorious low pay and a political culture so toxic that the Legislature's own Office of Performance Evaluations referred to an "undercurrent of despair among teachers," the state couldn't fill teaching slots. And not merely in the rural districts but in some of Idaho's urban centers.

"Our local schools are dying," Siddoway told the Tribune's William L. Spence. "I don't know how else to put it. We can't keep teachers or attract new teachers - and I'm afraid that's getting down into our education system, where we can't attract college students to the profession. Nobody goes to college to get a degree where they qualify for public assistance."

Under the circumstances, even Luna - who left office proposing a budget that was just shy of the 7.4 percent, \$101.2 million expansion lawmakers approved - would have pushed for more resources.

But his departure from Idaho politics - combined with a series of events that crushed his remaining credibility, including the recent \$61 million Schoolnet debacle - created an opening for more dialogue.

Ask around and you'll hear superintendents who never got along with Luna say they're on a first-name basis with his successor, Sherri Ybarra.

Are they singing "Kumbaya"?

Not necessarily.

The career ladder program won't allow Idaho to catch up with states that already pay teachers more.

Once you factor inflation and enrollment growth, it's likely Idaho schools still have yet to make up for the ground they lost during the Great Recession.

If teachers do indeed come first, you'll know when:

- Idaho attracts and retains more qualified educators.
- Schools reduce their reliance on supplemental property tax levies to compensate for inadequate state budgets.
- Some school districts now operating on a four-day week to shave costs return to a five-day schedule.
- Teacher furlough days are restored.
- The backlog of deferred maintenance declines.

Check back in two or three

years. - M.T.