

Child support bill is one fight Ybarra can't duck

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

State schools Superintendent Sherri Ybarra did not create Idaho's child support enforcement mess.

She had nothing to do with the House Judiciary and Rules Committee's nine-member majority that refused to bring the state into compliance with federal law.

Ybarra has no authority to call lawmakers back to fix it. That's strictly within Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter's discretion, which he has exercised by calling a May 18 special session.

So she apparently intends to sit this one out.

When Idaho Education News' Kevin Richert asked whether she supported a special session, Ybarra dodged the question: "There are many capable individuals in the Idaho Legislature, in the attorney general's office as well as other agencies that are currently working to find a solution on this issue. It is my role as the superintendent of public instruction to be an advocate for children, teachers, administrators and others that are directly meeting the needs of all students entering their schools, regardless of the situations that they may be facing." Some would call that politically prudent.

Nobody expects Secretary of State Lawrence Denney or Controller Brandon Woolf to step outside the confines of their constitutional parameters. It's not their fight.

Likewise, Congressman Raul Labrador, R-Idaho, raised eyebrows by volunteering to help Rep. Lynn Luker, R-Boise, defend his vote against the child support enforcement compliance bill.

But Ybarra is not merely an administrator at the State Department of Education.

Her responsibilities are not limited to setting policies, enforcing professional standards and drafting budgets.

There is more to serving as superintendent of public instruction than sitting on the Land Board or the State Board of Education.

As Ybarra noted herself, the post is a bully pulpit. She is an advocate for education.

How can she promote effective education without speaking up for the well-

being of Idaho's children?

They are one and the same. Any child who is growing up in a stable, financially secure home has a leg up when it comes to arriving in school ready to learn. Needless to say, a student living in financial distress is fighting a headwind.

About 183,000 Idaho kids - some in school, some in their preschool years - face that very prospect.

If lawmakers don't bring the state into compliance, Idaho's ability to compel non-custodial parents to make good on court-ordered child support payments will disappear. Not only will it lose \$16 million in federal funds, which covers the bulk of the Department of Health and Welfare's program, but the state will be unable to rely on the federal government's databases.

The cuts would take effect in about a month.

Under such circumstances, some of Ybarra's predecessors - including Republicans Jerry Evans and Tom Luna and Democrat Marilyn Howard - would have urged lawmakers to act.

As a Republican official, Ybarra's voice can still help. Although Otter appears to have enough votes lined up, members of his own party - notably the Kootenai County Republican Central Committee - have urged lawmakers to resist "federal extortion."

Ybarra emerged from the recent legislative session on a high, having rescued the state's floundering Idaho Education Network. The public is giving her a second look after a lackluster, gaffe-prone campaign.

Speaking up now also would reassure educators that the state superintendent is cognizant of the realities of childhood poverty that schools confront on a daily basis.

Frankly, some are wondering why she remains neutral on an issue that affects so many Idaho children.

Speak up, Superintendent Ybarra. You're being conspicuous by your silence. - M.T.