

# Who has Clark's ear - you or her bosses?

Marty Trillhaase, Lewiston Tribune

Linda Clark is superintendent of Idaho's largest school system, the West Ada (formerly Meridian) School District.

She has the ear of most Idaho political leaders, notably Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter.

Whether it's the compensation of teachers, their licensing requirements or the other tenets of Otter's school reform package, Clark has been at the forefront - often serving as the point person who sought public and official support.

All of which makes her qualified to do just about anything in Idaho.

Except serve on the State Board of Education.

Otter's decision to place her there doesn't create the mere appearance of a conflict of interest.

It is the very definition of a conflict.

The State Board is responsible for 115 school districts. Which one will have Clark's full attention?

The State Board is responsible for clearing rules and regulations from the State Department of Education, such as teacher certification. When it does so, will Clark be thinking about how it affects Meridian or Moscow?

One day she could be voting on a funding allocation issue that helps small districts such as Troy hire more staff because they lack the economies of scale that favor big schools such as West Ada.

The next, Clark could be considering changes that would favor charter schools over traditional operations such as her own.

Sometime later, she could be the swing vote on a measure that pits the interests of slow-growing rural, eastern Idaho schools against districts that, just like West Ada, are expanding rapidly in the state's urban centers.

And every time the State Board lobbies lawmakers for a rule change or a budget, will its impact at home be in the back of her mind? How could it not?

Just take this to its logical conclusion.

If Otter can name a sitting school superintendent to the State Board, why can't he appoint Boise State University President Robert Kustra next?

Kustra is accomplished.

He has presided over substantial growth at the state's urban campus.

He has a loyal constituency, influence with lawmakers and a winning football team.

What's not to like?

That is, of course, unless you worry Kustra would look out for his own university at the expense of the University of Idaho, Lewis-Clark State College and Idaho State University, not to mention the state's community colleges.

Why stop there?

How about putting Idaho Public Television General Manager Ron Pisaneschi on the state board. Pisaneschi has broad knowledge. He's been with Idaho Public Television almost three decades.

Why would anyone worry about Pisaneschi pursuing state support for public television - which remains his full-time job - during the 15 days or so each year he's spending with the State Board?

While you're at it, how about putting someone on the State Board who earns his living selling software, computers and online instruction programs to Idaho schools? There's no reason to think he'd prioritize his own business interests, is there?

Meanwhile Clark's own school board members are worried she'll be so busy looking out for the state as a whole, she'll forget her day job.

"I was 'caught by surprise' with the announcement and wondered about conflict of interest," Trustee Russell Joki told the Idaho Statesman's Bill Roberts.

"It does take energy and time," Trustee Carol Sayles said. "I don't know how she is going to juggle them."

You'd think Idaho Education Network fiasco would have made Otter gun-shy about indulging his penchant for cronyism. After all, his best friend, former Administration Director Mike Gwartney, steered the \$60 million contract away from the low bidder, Syringa Network LLC, and toward the politically wired Qwest (now CenturyLink), setting up a lawsuit that ultimately voided the contract.

Not this governor.

Even now, it appears Otter is incapable of learning anything new.

