

Why not have Hoffman champion this cause?

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Idaho Freedom Foundation President Wayne Hoffman sees himself as a champion for the beleaguered taxpayer and a defender of the Idaho Constitution.

That's why Hoffman recently sued the Boise School District.

Even if the school district and the local affiliate of the Idaho Education Association agree, Hoffman says it's not right to force taxpayers to cover the salary and benefits of a teacher - about \$36,000 - who is on leave while serving as the local IEA affiliate president.

Neither is it right, he says, to force taxpayers to provide paid leave for teachers while they attend IEA conferences.

"This lawsuit is intended to defend students and taxpayers from greedy union bosses who have figured out how to pull money and resources out of Idaho's classrooms in order to feather their own nests," Hoffman says.

And he cites two sections of Idaho's Constitution to back up his claim. Among other things, the state charter says no local entity "shall ... raise money for, or make donation ... to ... any such company or association."

Just one question: If Hoffman is willing to put the Idaho Freedom Foundation's financial wherewithal and political clout behind a \$36,000 constitutional violation, why not aim higher?

How about targeting a constitutional lapse worth millions of dollars to hundreds of thousands of taxpayers?

That same constitution Hoffman is defending says "all taxes shall be uniform upon the same class of subjects."

With respect to public school funding, that once was the case.

Under Idaho's statewide, equalized property tax levy, property owners paid the same rate to support basic school

operations and maintenance regardless of where they lived.

Until, that is, 2006, when interim Gov. - and now U.S. Sen. - Jim Risch called the Legislature into a one-day special session and repealed that equalized levy.

Left in its wake is a system of local supplemental property tax levies that generate about \$180 million among 93 of Idaho's 115 school districts.

But there's nothing supplemental about it. As the battle to pass Troy's levy demonstrated this summer, schools can't get by on what the state spends on education. These property taxes are paying for the basics.

Neither is it uniform. The tax rate is determined by the school districts' wealth.

Which is great if you happen to live in McCall-Donnelly, where the tax base puts an estimated \$2.6 million behind each student.

It's not so bad if you live in Cascade, where the tax base is worth \$1.7 million per student.

It gets a little tougher in Moscow, which has \$619,930 per student, or Lewiston, where the tax base breaks down to \$510,574 per student.

In places such as Blackfoot, things get really difficult. There, the tax base yields a paltry \$194,186 per student.

In other words, to keep up with McCall-Donnelly, Blackfoot's patrons must pay more than 13 times as much in taxes.

It's a little better for Lewiston taxpayers. They only need pay five times as much.

Idaho's constitution does not say the responsibility for public education falls to communities such as McCall, Lewiston or Troy.

In fact, the concept of a school district is not mentioned.

Instead, the state charter says it is the Legislature's obligation to "establish and maintain a general, uniform and thorough system of public, free common schools."

Education is a statewide system.

Just as highways are a statewide system.

Prisons are organized within a statewide system.

Health and welfare is part of a statewide system.

You cannot charge someone in Coeur d'Alene a 25-cent-per-gallon fuel tax to support a statewide highway system - while imposing a 50-cent tax to a motorist in Orofino.

Nor can you implement a 6-cent sales tax to support general state government in Lewiston but stick people in Cottonwood with a 10-cent sales tax.

How can you say the people of Troy must spend at least six times as much as the folks in McCall to support a statewide system of public schools?

Assuming the courts toppled that inequity, lawmakers would have to reverse Risch's folly - or they'd have to start restoring the money they've pulled from public education during the past decade or so.

Either way, taxpayers would get a break while the state constitution would get some respect.

If that's Hoffman's mission, this case is ripe for the picking. - M.T.