

# Education spending boost takes Idaho only so far

**Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune**

If you want to know whether Idaho's schools are recovering from years of legislative neglect, don't take the politicians' word for it.

Look at the evidence:

- Are you seeing any decline in the number of school districts relying on supplemental property tax levies to fill in the funding gaps?
- Is there less money being raised through the property tax?
- Are fewer school districts operating on a four-day week?

Lawmakers closed their 2015 session with the best public school budget in years - a 7.4 percent, \$101.2 million increase. But the share of Idaho's personal income devoted to public education is down more than \$500 million a year since the turn of the century. And when you consider inflation and growing enrollments, schools have yet to recover what they lost during the Great Recession.

So little has changed.

By the last count, 93 of Idaho's 115 school districts have resorted to a supplemental levy.

They've raised about \$180 million.

In Tuesday's election, Idaho's largest district - West Ada - renewed its two-year, \$28 million levy by 59 percent. Nampa went even further - boosting its two-year \$6.8 million levy to \$15.65 million, and it got 57 percent approval.

Meanwhile, 42 school districts remain on a four-day schedule. Among them are Orofino, Salmon River, Highland and Culdesac. That's one of every three school districts - which puts Idaho ahead of every state.

Going to four days a week cuts costs - but probably not as much as they had hoped. Earlier this year, a study commissioned by Rural Opportunities Consortium of Idaho and the J.A. and Kathryn Albertson Foundation found the savings miniscule. Teachers got paid whether they worked four 10-hour shifts or five eight-hour days. Some operation savings never materialized. Even without Friday classes, for instance, school buildings remained opened.

Always present was an undercurrent of concerns about younger children forced to endure longer days. Or questions about how a three-day break would impede students and teachers from re-engaging on Monday.

All of that was dismissed by assurances that parents, students and educators in rural Idaho like the arrangement.

But some parents in Preston aren't even waiting for more state dollars to arrive. Hopeful that lawmakers will follow up this year's budget with another installment next year, they're urging the school board and Superintendent Marc Gee to restore the five-day schedule.

"We've got to step back now," Gee told Idaho Education News' Kevin Richert. "Maybe our reason for moving forward is not the same as we've had before."

Preston schools are surveying the community and results are due next week. But here's the kicker: Restoring a five-day week will increase busing costs by \$115,000. Spreading the school calendar across five days a week may cut into attendance. If that happens, state support for Preston might drop about \$155,000 to \$216,000.

That's a 3 percent loss on the overall \$12.2 million budget. In other words, to operate five days a week, Preston may turn to its patrons for supplemental levy.

Net result: one less school on a four-day week; one more drawing relief from the property taxpayers.

Progress, that is not.

Keep that in mind the next time Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter and lawmakers talk about how much good they've done for Idaho's schools. - M.T.