

Still too early for the balloons and confetti

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

They're celebrating down in Boise.

Lawmakers are congratulating themselves about their public schools budget that adds \$109.5 million in new money - a 7.4 percent boost. And it comes on top of last year's \$101.2 million increase, another 7.4 percent boost.

But Idaho schools are in such a deep financial hole that even a couple of back-to-back healthy budgets won't help that much.

So says the Education Law Center at the Rutgers Graduate School of Education.

Last week, it ranked Idaho dead last in the country for per-pupil spending. That's where it stood for four of the past five years. Only in 2011 did Idaho eke past Utah.

True, Rutgers relied on the numbers from 2013 - the most recent year available - which does not include Idaho's recent strides.

It also gave Idaho a bit of a break by accounting for the state's lower living costs and wage scales - and it computed Idaho spent \$5,746 per pupil.

Just to catch up with Utah, the state would need to spend \$549 more on each of its students - or \$161.5 million.

Reaching Nevada's per-pupil average would cost \$429 million.

To equal Oregon, Idaho needs \$693.2 million more.

If Idaho wants to reach Montana's level, it would need \$815 million more.

Achieving parity with Washington - which Rutgers last week ranked 28th in the country - would cost Idaho \$867.6 million.

Fat on oil and gas revenues, Wyoming's per-pupil expenditures are the fifth best in the country and beyond Idaho's reach. Catching up with the neighbor on Idaho's eastern border would cost \$2.5 billion.

Idaho is poor. Wealthier states such as Oregon and Washington tax themselves comparatively less and still get better results, Rutgers says.

But Idaho does not pay less for textbooks, school supplies, construction costs or utilities bills. Nor are young teachers willing to work here at a substantial discount because that's all Idaho can afford.

In fact, states just as strapped as Idaho are making a greater effort.

For instance, Mississippi's per capita GDP is about 10 percent smaller than the Gem State - yet it taxes itself 32 percent more for schools.

The per capita GDP of West Virginia and Idaho are virtually identical - yet West Virginia taxes itself 45 percent more to support public education.

That's a deliberate choice on the part of Idaho's political establishment.

In the years since the turn of the century, the state's governors and legislators have sliced the share of Idaho's personal income devoted to public schools by 25 percent - or the equivalent of more than \$600 million a year.

Most of that money rewarded Idaho's corporations and well-to-do with tax cuts.

Yet House Majority Leader Mike Moyle, R-Star, persists in the idea that Idaho already has spent enough on education and wants to obligate future generations to another round of income tax earmarks.

"We do our best to take care of education and always have," Moyle said. "We will continue to make those commitments. But when we get done making those payments to education, and when we get done with the other functions of government there's money left over."

There's money left over for Idaho's comfortable because the state's afflicted attend some of poorest schools in the country. Rutgers characterizes Idaho's education system as one of the country's most regressive because it does little to help kids who attend schools in disadvantaged areas. That's the result of Idaho's spreading reliance on local supplemental levies - about \$180 million and counting - which work a particular hardship on struggling communities such as Troy.

If you doubt it, look no further than the 42 Idaho districts - mostly rural - that have resorted to four-day weeks to save a few dollars. That's one of every three Idaho school districts.

Wouldn't you expect to see fewer kids on a four-day week - and fewer of their parents forced to tax themselves just to provide some of the basics - if Idaho's school budgets truly were gaining ground?

Sure, the past two budgets have helped. But the view from 35,000 feet shows a state where the schools are treading water.

Is it really time for the balloons and confetti? - M.T.

