When Idaho scrimps, students pay the price

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Afters years of cutting corners, Idaho's roads and bridges had become a network of rutted, potholed and congested lanes. Lawmakers had no other choice. They had to raise money. So they raised the gasoline taxes and vehicle registration fees motorists pay.

So why are they still scrimping on education?

Connect the dots Idaho Education News' Kevin Richert has compiled.

The Center for Budget and Policy Priorities says virtually no other group of state leaders cut their public schools as deeply during the Great Recession as did as the people running the state of Idaho.

As of 2014, Idaho school spending still fell 22.6 percent from where it stood in 2008. Only Arizona schools suffered more, falling 36.6 percent behind.

By comparison, Washington spending was about 1 percent behind 2008 levels.

It wasn't much better when you figured how much money Idaho invested in each student. Six years after the Great Recession, Idaho's per pupil spending was 8.5 percent short - ranking it 11th worst. By contrast, Washington had increased its per-pupil spending by 18.3 percent during those years.

There's no mystery to this. While many states raised taxes to avoid or at least mitigate the damage done to public schools, Idaho Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter and the GOP-led Legislature chose to balance the budget entirely with spending cuts.

Even when the economy began to recover, Otter and the GOP diverted money into tax cuts for businesses and the wealthy - as well as putting cash on ice in reserve accounts.

Local patrons tried to compensate by voluntarily raising their own property taxes. But they couldn't keep up.

That's why - as Richert reported in September -s chool spending has barely kept pace with inflation. As of last year, the statewide school budget was a mere 1.1 percent ahead of where it was 10 years ago - but 86 school districts, including Lewiston, Kendrick and Lapwai, have fewer resources in real dollars.

If the numbers are bad at the front gate of the system, why would you be surprised to see these results at the back end?

Idaho's 78.9 percent high school graduation rate is ranked 39th in the nation. That's a bit better than last year, when the state came in 41st.

The ratio of Idaho high school grads continuing their education dropped again. Between 2014 and 2015, it slid from 52 percent to 46 percent. For a state supposedly committed to seeing 60 percent of its young adults holding some sort of post-secondary degree or certificate by 2020, that's clearly going in the wrong direction.

Yet, you'll still hear the argument that throwing money at public education is no solution. For a group of people who have been doing anything but throwing much at the classroom, that's a rather convenient line of reasoning.

As former state economist Michael Ferguson documented, Idaho cut the share of its personal income devoted to public education by about 25 percent since the turn of the century - the equivalent of more than $500 million a year. Much of that money paid for tax cuts.

So now you have high school grads choosing between jobs where they'll earn $13 an hour - or paying Idaho's jacked-up college tuition rates and taking on something close to $40,000 in student debt.

That, of course, assumes they get through high school prepared - academically and emotionally - for college. Bare-bones budgets did not provide many of them with the school guidance counseling and support they needed.

Two consecutive 7.4 percent state budget increases notwithstanding, many public schools now are encountering a "famine" of qualified teachers. Who's to say how many students suffered as a result?

All of which begs the question: Is it enough for the people seeking to serve in the Legislature to simply promise they'll provide incremental progress on school funding without ever closing the gap that's opened up? Or is it time to find more money? - M.T.