

# Cheers & Jeers: Too little, too late

**JEERS** ... to Idaho Superintendent of Public Instruction Sherri Ybarra. She could not have bungled the release of an ugly audit of Idaho's teacher evaluation program any more had she tried.

That audit says 99 percent of teacher assessments conducted during the 2014-15 school year were flawed. Either information was left out; work came in late; or the correct procedures weren't followed.

This matters because beginning in 2018-19, those evaluations will be tied to teacher compensation.

Behind the scathing headlines, however, are some important caveats.

The audit was a mismatch. Standards were applied retroactively. The system itself was designed to inform teaching methods, not serve as a gateway to compensation. Finally, Idaho can't find enough teachers willing to work here. Elsewhere, the pay is better and the work environment is less hostile. Tying teacher pay too tightly to an evaluation form doesn't help.

Ybarra could have articulated all of those points - had she leveled with the State Board of Education last July when she got the audit results. Instead, she literally sat on it until Idaho Education News pried it loose from her fingers through a public records request on Dec. 5.

Even then, she blamed the messenger and the public records process.

Her behavior suggests bad faith and Ybarra's timing could not be worse. The largest chunk of Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter's five-year career ladder funding - \$58 million - is up for legislative approval next month. Ybarra's mishandling of this audit has given at least some lawmakers all the excuse they need to spend the money on tax cuts instead.

**CHEERS** ... to U.S. Sen. Jim Risch, R-Idaho. When they close the books on his long political career, historians may open their account with what's coming next: Risch's pursuit of the first wilderness area in Idaho's Panhandle.

Risch's Scotchman Peaks wilderness bill incorporates about 14,000 acres north of Lake Pend Oreille. Montana's congressional delegation is expected to run a separate bill covering another 74,000 acres on that side of the state line.

For decades, the area has been designated as potential wilderness. But Risch's timing could not be better. Sen. Mike Crapo, R-Idaho, passed an Owyhee Canyonlands wilderness package. With Risch's help, Congressman Mike Simpson, R-

Idaho, passed a Boulder-White Clouds wilderness bill.

The measure also has broad, local support. As the Tribune's Eric Barker noted, Risch has the backing of the Bonner County commissioners, Idaho Forest Group and the Sandpoint Chamber of Commerce.

All the obstacles have cleared away. But as a member of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, Risch is the indispensable man. It's now up to him.

**CHEERS** ... to U.S. Sen. Maria Cantwell, D-Wash. She helped strangle a Trump transition witch hunt in its crib.

Let's say you're one of the thousands of U.S. Department of Energy employees at the Pacific Northwest National Laboratory at Richland or even at the Idaho National Laboratory outside Idaho Falls.

Under the Obama administration, you followed directives and worked on global climate change initiatives and may have even attended international gatherings on the issue.

But President-elect Donald Trump doesn't believe in climate change. His transition minions want to know who you are - and where they can find you. The transition team issued a 74-item questionnaire to the DOE that, in part, singled out employees and contractors involved in climate change work.

While her Idaho colleagues have been silent about this, Cantwell delivered a full-throated response:

"On their face, these unprecedented questions suggest the incoming administration may be preparing to take arbitrary action against civil servants and government contractors simply because they worked, at the request of the Obama administration, on issues pertaining to climate change, the nuclear weapons complex and innovation policies, particularly related to clean energy technologies," Cantwell wrote to outgoing Energy Secretary Ernest Moniz. Tuesday. "The potential ramifications are chilling. Federal civil service employees and government contractors may in the future be reluctant to perform certain tasks for fear that a subsequent election may bring retribution."

Wednesday, the Trump camp said the questionnaire was all a big misunderstanding. "The person who sent it has been properly counseled," a Trump spokesman told CNN.

Was the Trump staffer "counseled" before or after Cantwell intervened?

**JEERS** ... to Idaho Assistant Majority Leader Brent Crane, R-Nampa. He just can't restrain himself. Idaho is sitting on top of a \$92 million surplus and he wants to cut taxes.

"We feel like it's time that we give some of the money back to the citizens that have been paying the bill," he said.

Of course, Crane is talking about citizens in the top income tax brackets and some of Idaho's biggest corporations. Here's what he fails to mention:

- By so underfunding public schools - in the name of passing tax cuts in the past -lawmakers have shifted more of the burden upon local property taxpayers. Supplemental levies are now at an all-time high of \$188.8 million.
- Idaho is not over-taxed. In its most recent analysis, the State Tax Commission says the state's per capita tax burden is ranked 49th lowest.
- Tax rates are not holding back the economy. Instead, Idaho suffers from an unskilled workforce.
- If Crane has his way, he would repeat a pattern of failure - pass unsustainable tax cuts while times are good and then balance the budget by cutting schools when the inevitable recession arrives.

Crane's doctrine is outdated. He's fighting the last war.

**CHEERS** ... to David Ammons. When Washington Secretary of State Kim Wyman's communications director retires next week, he will take 45 years of Olympia's institutional memory with him.

Before signing up with then-Secretary of State Sam Reed in 2008, Ammons spent 37 years staffing The Associated Press Statehouse bureau.

This affable, even-handed, walking-talking encyclopedia of Washington state government could do just about everything: Supply a history lesson about former Gov. Dan Evans. Explain the evolution of Washington's top-two primary and vote-by-mail process. Offer background about a piece of legislation or an initiative - and the various interest groups behind it.

About the only thing he could not do was take a winter vacation from Olympia during the winter legislative session. He intends to remedy that.

Good for him. - M.T.