

More help than holiday protests

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Tone deaf?

At least, but maybe it's even worse than that.

Maybe it's just a case of being so insulated from the rest of the world that what is obvious to the most of us is a mystery to them.

That's not to say teachers did not have reason to protest.

The proposals by Superintendent of Public Instruction, Tom Luna, for dealing with the shortage of money and the plenitude of future are significant. These are not minor modifications the legislature is considering. The proposals Mr. Luna has made would mean a major shift in how public schools do business in Idaho. Given all that, it makes sense that teachers staged protests throughout the state.

But did they have to do it on a government holiday?

And let's not kid ourselves. Presidents' Day is a government holiday. That is, Presidents' Day is one of those ♦ holidays' that is a day off for people who work for the government while everyone else goes to work.

Protesting about one's government job on a government holiday tends to distort the message for the rest of us. The fact this government holiday came only a few weeks after the last government holiday is all the more reason for teeth gnashing among voters.

If the teachers' union wanted to stage a statewide protest over Mr. Luna's proposal, they may have done better to schedule it on a Saturday.

Teachers will make the point that they weren't getting paid last week on President's Day when some went out to protest. And they would be right. That is, teacher contracts pay teachers for the 180+ days they work so essentially they are not being paid on a government holiday.

So, chalk that up for one argument in support of holiday protesting.

Except whenever there is discussion of how much teachers are paid compared to the rest of us, those same teachers refuse to acknowledge they work fewer days than other folks. At that point, the discussion is all about annual salary.

But we're not here to quibble about teacher pay (the median teacher salary in the St. Maries school district is about \$41,500) the point is to examine what teachers were protesting.

Since the education reform package was introduced there has been plenty of clamor and clatter about the horrific consequences we all face if the changes are adopted.

But is all the angst merited?

Here's what the senate approved last week:

Good teachers will be paid more than poor teachers.

That doesn't seem so radical to the rest of us. That is how the world works. But under the current system teachers are paid based on how long they've been on the job and how much education they have. How well they do their job? Not a consideration at all.

This idea upsets teachers. They fear administrators will not be fair. Well, welcome to the real world.

But here's the weird thing. We already know who the good teachers are, now we're just going to reward them for their effort.

This also makes sense for other reasons. Chemistry and math teachers are harder to find than history teachers. Perhaps they should be paid more.

No more tenure.

There is beachfront property for sale in Arizona for anyone who doesn't get this.

Open negotiations.

Long, long overdue. Every year union negotiators sit down with the school board to spend 85 percent of the budget and the public is locked out. That has never been right. The fact it will take an act of the legislature to change it shows how much teachers oppose the idea.

Despite all the hoopla, none of these changes are as dire or drastic as protestors would have you believe. Quite the opposite. Once you discard all the union carping, these changes make sense and will improve schools.

Now the hard part starts.

The problem is money.

In the last two years, \$200 million has been cut from public education and the state faces yet another shortfall this year. Mr. Luna does not believe the system, as it is structured now, can survive more cuts. So he proposes expanding on-line education and cutting teachers n increasing class sizes n to make the system fit the budget.

This is unpopular with everyone. While taxpayers support merit pay and the elimination of tenure, very few support larger class sizes. No matter how many studies support the move, it simply cuts against everything we think about schools.

But consider the alternatives.

There are only two ways to get enough money for education to avoid cuts. We can either raise taxes or throw people off Medicaid. The budget already mandates substantial cuts in welfare payments while the economy dictates tax increases are off the table. If teachers have better ideas, now would be a great time to share them.

Much more helpful than a holiday protest. DAN HAMMES is publisher of this newspaper.