

Beaten down Idaho teachers accept table scraps

- *April 3rd, 2011*
- [\(1\) comment](#)

By Marty Trillhaase

For the second or, depending on how you count it, third year in a row, lawmakers are about to cut your child's public school funding.

This time, it's \$47 million less - on top of \$200 million that's already been siphoned away.

What's the reaction?

It could have been worse if legislative budget writers hadn't scrounged up another \$15 million.

"It's considerably better than we were anticipating," says state school Superintendent Tom Luna. "But it's still the third year in a row where schools are going to receive less money."

Budget panel members sliced 10 percent from the account that pays for everything from teachers' health insurance to heating and lighting, from routine building repairs to new textbooks.

What's the word from school administrators?

They dodged a bullet.

"We thought it was going to be 19 percent," says former Lapwai school Superintendent Harold Ott, executive director of the Idaho Rural Schools Association.

All the easy cuts - the loss of in-service days, the furloughs and the doubling up of administrative duties - are gone. By slicing into the pool of money used to pay for educator salaries, lawmakers have guaranteed that some teachers will be laid off, some classes will get more crowded and some school days will be curtailed. Where Idaho must compete with other states - for administrators, science, math or special education teachers - recruiting qualified applicants will be that much more difficult.

What do legislative budget writers say?

Some are straining their shoulders patting themselves on the back.

"To be at this point ... is amazing to me," says state Sen. Dean Mortimer, R-Idaho Falls. "I want to compliment those who worked so diligently to find additional revenue. We've come a long way."

Rather than trigger staffing cuts, some districts will launch efforts to raise local property taxes to compensate for the lost state dollars. So far, many voters across Idaho have gone along with the idea, rather than shortchange their students' opportunities.

That's a matter of choice, not necessity. Idaho House Republicans refused to raise \$50 million by raising one of the nation's lowest taxes on cigarettes by \$1.25 a pack.

They deliberately ignored an economic forecast that Idaho will take in another \$90 million above what has been budgeted.

They refused to spend millions of dollars held in reserve throughout various state accounts.

And they won't consider going after the tax owed on Internet and catalog sales but beyond the reach of Idaho's tax collection arm.

And what do they say?

"We don't need it (the cigarette tax increase)," says House GOP Caucus Chairman Ken Roberts of Donnelly. "The budget is balanced."

So here we have Idaho two decades after Democratic Gov. Cecil Andrus held Republican lawmakers to account because they wouldn't increase public school funding enough.

Here we have Idaho almost a decade after Republican Gov. Dirk Kempthorne and GOP lawmakers took every precaution to portray their failure to meet ongoing school needs as a net increase in overall spending for public education. At least they hadn't cut the budget, they said.

Here we have Idaho just a year after Republicans tested what was supposed to be the state's political third rail by draining \$128 million from school accounts. When the election came, voters rewarded them for it - cementing the GOP's lock on Idaho's leadership and adding to the party's strength in the Legislature.

Now the GOP claims a mandate to avoid tax increases at all costs.

And educators know to accept these table scraps with the gratitude of a frequently beaten puppy. - M.T.