

Not leaving for Luna; not staying, either

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By Marty Trillhaase of the Tribune

You can't blame Idaho school Superintendent Tom Luna's anti-teacher "reform" package for driving Lewiston High School's Agatha Trickey out of the classroom.

Trickey, who is going to apply her math background toward another degree to become an actuary, is not the first teacher to suffer burnout early in her career and quit.

In fact, this happens so frequently it's practically a syndrome.

Anywhere from a third to half of newly minted public school teachers leave the profession after five years.

Full of idealism and enthusiasm, young teachers quickly learn there is a lot of drudgery to this work. The hours are long. If you do it right, teaching can take your evenings and weekends.

Distracted by electronic gadgets, students are less willing to apply themselves in class.

With both of them working, parents are less engaged with whether their children are learning, or how well.

Then young teachers confront their low pay. Maybe it didn't look so bad in college. Or in the first year of working. Not even the second. But a young father eventually recognizes his teacher's salary is never going to get better and goes somewhere else. If he has a math or science background, all the better. Rewards in the private sector are much greater.

Top it off with where public education is heading. For a decade or more, creativity and personal ingenuity have played second fiddle to the standardized No Child Left Behind test score.

Then the economy tanked. First came unpaid furloughs. Compensation concessions followed. Next comes layoffs.

At age 25, what would you do?

With five years in the classroom, a teacher is just hitting her stride. She's experienced enough to know what works with kids, still young enough to retain her enthusiasm. The money taxpayers have spent training her on the job is beginning to pay off. Students have confidence in her. So does the community.

Lose that and the school district most likely starts over with a new college graduate - who, over time, will become a more proficient teacher. Until she, too, decides to leave the profession.

Lurking in the background is the cadre of baby boomers who got into teaching decades ago and who are about to retire. Who will replace them if the current generation of young teachers leaves?

As the leader of Idaho's public school system, Luna should have been trying to help.

Instead, Luna, with the assistance of Gov. C. L. (Butch) Otter and the GOP-led Legislature, pitched curbs on collective bargaining and merit pay. These, they suggested, were needed to target a vast group of classroom malingerers shielded by union "thugs."

LunaTech - the idea that eliminating teaching posts to pay for online instruction and laptop computers - treats teachers as if they were fungible. It suggests that what a teacher brings to his classroom can be replicated, even improved upon, by a machine.

And as this plan first took shape and then was adopted, teachers were on the outside looking in.

Treat people that way long enough and hope disappears. Morale slumps. Resignation and defeat set in.

"I know there are people out there who still respect and support us," Trickey told the Tribune's Kerri Sandaine. "But it's hard to see that when our government isn't part of the group."

Trickey may have quit teaching anyway.

But Luna certainly made it easier for her to never look back. - M.T.