

Luna shies away from helping preschoolers

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[Luna shies away from helping preschoolers](#) Marty Trillhaase The Lewiston Tribune | [6 comments](#)

For school Superintendent Tom Luna, even a modest attempt to improve Idaho's abysmally poor effort to prepare preschoolers for a lifetime of learning was a step too far.

Luna turned thumbs down on a \$50 million, multi-year federal Department of Education "Race to the Top" early learning grant. The grant had Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter's blessing, but without Luna's support, it's going nowhere.

While children in most states profit from expanded preschool offerings, Idahoans will fall further behind.

Only 10 states spend nothing on prekindergarten programs. Idaho, of course, is on the list, along with Montana, Utah and Wyoming. Idaho also spends nothing on Head Start, relying solely on federal support.

No, not every child in the remaining 40 states goes to a public preschool. Even in the busiest states - such as Oklahoma, Florida and Georgia - only about a third of the 3- and 4-year-olds attend. Washington accommodates about 4.5 percent of its preschoolers. In Oregon, it's 6.6 percent.

But Oregon is ranked fourth in what it allocates to each preschooler, \$8,435. Spending \$6,817 per child, Washington is ranked sixth. Both can expect a huge payoff.

Quality early education produces more successful adults. They make money and pay taxes. They're less prone to drug abuse, teen pregnancy and getting in trouble with the law.

Tracking a Chicago early education program, researchers figured for every \$1 spent, society got \$16 back.

Assuming Idaho only did half or even a fourth as well, it still would mean every dollar spent on early education today would save \$2.50 later in larger prisons, more law enforcement and expanded welfare.

What's keeping Idaho from joining the mainstream is a prejudice against working mothers. Saddled with one of the oldest collections of legislators in the country, Idaho is led by people such as state Rep. Tom Loertscher, R-Iona, who once famously boiled the issue down to: "What can we do to keep Mom at home?"

What he fails to mention is Idaho wages fall about 25 percent short of the national average, forcing more women into the workplace.

Luna, however, bowed to the ideology that dominates his party. He would not seek federal dollars to launch programs Idaho taxpayers ultimately would be asked to sustain. To do otherwise might derail his political aspirations.

"We came to the conclusion we did not want to expand our current public education system with one-time funding," Luna's spokeswoman Melissa McGrath said.

But the federal grant itself precluded spending money on early childhood teaching positions. Moreover, the cross-section of Idaho child advocates pursuing the grant already yielded to political correctness. Its members chose to focus upon private-sector daycare centers rather than create a state program.

They wanted to improve the training of daycare providers and those who deliver library childhood literacy programs.

The grant would have helped develop new ways to measure the skills children bring to kindergarten.

And these dollars would have helped social workers and educators talk to each other.

A giant leap toward meeting Idaho's early childhood schooling needs, it was not. But this promised to be a reasonable step, nonetheless.

When it comes to gambling with your state taxes on untested online instruction programs in the schools, Luna is all in.

But he won't spend federal dollars on something that works. - M.T.