

Idaho gets all the low-wage jobs it pays for

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

If you want to work in poverty, Idaho's for you.

So says an Economic Policy Institute study that ranked the Gem State eighth worst for the share of its people - 31 percent - working below the federal poverty line - pegged at \$23,050 for a family of four. You have to travel to the Deep South to find anything more dire. By contrast, Washington is one of the top 10 states - only 19.5 percent of its jobs pay a poverty wage.

Just as University of Idaho economist Stephen Cooke noted a year ago, Idaho is caught in a low-wage employment trap. The openings come in occupations that pay less - food preparation, personal care, building maintenance and retail sales.

Most of the employment Idaho is creating requires little advanced training. Which matches precisely with Idaho's poor record of producing highly skilled workers. It's a vicious cycle. Poorly educated workers attract low-wage jobs and vice versa.

For instance, 29.5 percent of Idahoans ages 18 to 24 are enrolled in college. That's the third worst score in the country.

When it comes to Idaho's labor pool, only 22.6 percent have a four-year degree - putting Idaho behind all but four states.

By contrast, when a state invests in its labor force, it draws industries that want skilled workers, who in turn earn more, and those wages filter throughout the economy. As in Colorado, where 36.1 percent of workers are college-educated. Or California, where 40.5 percent of its high school grads are attending school.

But you can't adequately prepare young people for the academic rigors of college if you keep cutting the share of a state's personal income devoted to schools. In Idaho, that commitment has fallen 23 percent in the past decade.

You can't simultaneously urge young people to attend school while throwing up roadblocks in their path, as Idaho also has been doing. Before they finally stopped, Idaho's political leaders slashed higher education spending more than a quarter, triggering escalating tuition rates to make up for some of the loss.

You wouldn't do that in a state where the cost of sending a child to college pinches the family budget harder than elsewhere. By one estimate, the average Idaho family must

devote more than 12 percent of its income just to pay the tuition its public schools impose.

You wouldn't do that in a state that already does next to nothing to help poor students attend school. In Idaho, needs-based scholarships average \$63 per student - vs. \$923 in Washington or \$611 nationally.

And you wouldn't do that in a state where 83 percent of young people say the cost of attending college is their top impediment to getting more education.

Not if you intend to break the vicious cycle of unskilled workers filling low-wage jobs and replace it with one that begins perpetuating more education and higher pay.

If breaking that cycle were Idaho's true strategy, it wouldn't just spend more on education. It also would invest more into infrastructure - and bring the gas tax up to date for the first time since Bill Clinton's first term as president - rather than borrowing against future federal highway funds.

And it would trigger a wave of innovation, spending robustly on public research and development in order to spread the benefits throughout the economy - rather than relying primarily upon private investment, where the fruits of R&D work become proprietary information.

But all of that takes money, which Idahoans would rather spend on themselves. Or more accurately, Idaho's wealthiest citizens and corporations would rather spend the money on themselves.

For the better part of a decade, Republican governors and lawmakers have been lavishing the well-off and well-connected with income tax breaks, property tax shifts and sales tax loopholes. Even after overdoing it on the spending cuts in the last budget cycle, lawmakers opted against repairing the unnecessary damage done to schools, higher education and services - and earmarked nearly \$36 million in income tax breaks for the 17 percent in Idaho's highest income bracket and its corporations.

At the top of Idaho's ladder, the catchall phrase is economic development.

At the bottom, it's, "Would you like fries with that?" - M.T.