

Luna dares you

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

JEERS ... to Idaho schools Superintendent Tom Luna. Defending his LunaTech overhauls against a popular uprising, he has taken hostages.

Don't forget how Luna staged a sneak attack on Idaho's voters, teachers and parents. Not until he was safely re-elected in 2010 did he unveil his plan to undermine teacher tenure and collective bargaining while shifting millions of dollars from classrooms to technology and for-profit providers of online instruction.

So voters resorted to the only tool left - rounding up enough signatures to put three referendum measures on Luna's deceptive package - merit pay, rolling back collective bargaining and siphoning dollars into technology - on the Nov. 6 ballot.

But Luna had one more heavy-handed maneuver up his sleeve.

Most of the laws Idaho legislators pass take effect the following July 1 - unless a referendum is certified before. Then the law is put on hold until voters have their say.

Not this time. Luna engineered an "emergency clause" to his measures, enabling them to become law before the referendum campaign could become certified for the ballot.

Here's what that means: LunaTech is dispensing about \$55 million for the schools - \$38.8 million for merit pay, \$13.6 million for technology and \$2.5 million to buy laptop computers for high school students.

If Luna loses on Nov. 6, the money goes away.

"I'm very curious as to what their plan is for managing this disruption," Luna told the Spokesman-Review's Betsy Russell. "We've made it very clear in the past that you cannot cut school budgets in the middle of the school year, and that's what this amounts to."

No, what this amounts to is extortion - vote Luna's way or the schools get hurt - and Luna's fingerprints are all over it.

CHEERS ... to the north central Idaho legislative candidates daring enough to take the Political Courage Test: State Reps. Shirley Ringo, D-Moscow, John Rusche, D-Lewiston, and Shannon McMillan, R-Silverton, House Republican candidate Thyra Stevenson of Lewiston and Democratic state Senate candidate John Bradbury of Lewiston.

Project Vote Smart calls its 10-part questionnaire - on everything from abortion to budgets and from education to gun laws - a test of courage because it forces candidates to level with the voters rather than relying on canned speeches and advertising.

But Project Vote Smart is a shoe-string operation near Philipsburg, Mont., manned by volunteers and interns, that compiles data on candidates and then distributes it, without spin or a partisan agenda - to ordinary voters. It's available at www.VoteSmart.org or at (888) 868-3762.

Project Vote Smart lacks the resources to get much of this information unless legislative candidates cooperate. In Idaho, about one in five state legislative candidates answered.

The scores vary. Rusche, for instance, got a zero because he filed his report about three weeks late, but he has answered the questions. Stevenson answered about a third of the questions and received a 31 percent, McMillan earned 91 percent. Ringo and Bradbury scored 100 percent.

JEERS ... to those regional legislative candidates who blew off Project Vote Smart. They include:

- District 5 - Sen. Dan Schmidt, D-Moscow, and his GOP challenger, Gresham Bouma of Viola; Republican House candidates Cindy Agidius of Moscow and Kenneth B. DeVries of St. Maries and Democratic House candidate Paulette Jordan of Plummer.
- District 6 - Sen. Dan Johnson, R-Lewiston, Democratic House candidate Pete Gertonson of Lewiston and Republican House candidate Daniel Santiago of Lewiston.
- District 7 - Sen. Sheryl Nuxoll, R-Cottonwood, and her challenger, independent Jon Cantamessa of Wallace; state Rep. Paul Shepherd, R-Riggins, and his Democratic opponent, Nancy Lerandean of Orofino.

JEERS ... to U.S. Sen. Maria Cantwell, D-Wash. She's got every possible advantage over state Sen. Michael Baumgartner, R-Spokane.

The two-term Democrat is running anywhere from 11 to 16 percentage points ahead in the polls.

She's raised more than \$10.5 million in campaign contributions; Baumgartner's campaign reports contributions of \$576,129.

She's worth between \$2 million and \$10 million.

Yet, with 53 days to go before Election Day, Cantwell has yet to agree to even one face-to-face debate with her opponent.

Cantwell's under no obligation to answer Baumgartner's request for 39 debates. But he is a legitimate candidate. He's won a legislative seat. He's raised some money. By avoiding even one debate with him, Cantwell is betraying an attitude of entitlement to her office.

Poor Baumgartner has been reduced to debating an empty chair. Now where have we seen that before?

Jeers ... to Melissa McGrath. To paraphrase former U.S. Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart, we can't tell you what campaigning on the public dime looks like but we know it when we see it.

And here's what we see: McGrath is paid \$69,922 as a State Department of Education's public information officer. Last week, she got caught air-brushing her boss' Wikipedia vitae.

It's one thing to remove inaccuracies. But McGrath omitted the fact Luna graduated from Thomas Edison State College in New Jersey - a last-minute addition to his resume qualifying him to seek the superintendent's office in the first place in 2002 - with an online degree.

When the Idaho Statesman's Dan Popkey asked her why, she said "I don't remember removing that."

McGrath's tinkering with Luna's online image comes just two months before his signature legislative package faces the prospect of repudiation at the polls. Is McGrath doing this on her own - or following orders? - M.T