

When people talk back, VanderSloot gets peeved

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

What's this? Eastern Idaho gazillionaire Frank VanderSloot grumbling about being outspent by folks trying to defeat the Luna laws?

"Idahoans have always believed in fairness. And this is not a fair fight," VanderSloot said Sunday in a full-page newspaper advertisement - his fourth - published throughout the state.

Fair?

Was it fair in the 1990s for VanderSloot to dump thousands of unanswered dollars into a campaign to intimidate Idaho Public Television from broadcasting a fairly mild program about teaching children who are being raised by gay parents?

Was it fair for VanderSloot to deposit \$50,000 into a last-minute smear campaign against Idaho Supreme Court Justice Cathy Silak in the 2000 election?

How fair was it two years later when VanderSloot evaded campaign spending limits and funneled \$35,000 toward Republican attorney general candidate Lawrence Wasden and then spent another \$18,000 bad-mouthing Wasden's Democratic opponent, Keith Roark?

In 2006, was it fair when VanderSloot and his wife Belinda invested \$15,000 defeating a judge they deemed unfriendly?

How about two years ago when VanderSloot spent \$42,000 in order to stop then-2nd District Judge John Bradbury's campaign for the Idaho Supreme Court? Or his attempt to conceal his involvement in that enterprise until Secretary of State Ben Ysursa started nosing around? How fair was that?

And is it fair that by contributing \$1 million - or more - to Mitt Romney's presidential run, VanderSloot can expect to get his calls to the White House answered while you'll have to settle for a form letter?

But now somebody is talking back to VanderSloot.

Millions of teachers across the country have banded together to urge Idahoans to defeat schools Superintendent Tom Luna's laws undermining collective bargaining, imposing merit pay and steering dollars from the classroom teacher toward out-of-state, for-profit providers of online instruction.

The National Education Association's 3.1 million members have contributed - so far - about \$1 million. The Idaho Education Association's 11,500 members have kicked in another \$280,000.

So far, they have outspent the Luna laws' supporters. YES for Idaho Education, Parents for Education Reform and the Idaho Federation of Republican Women have raised \$501,000.

Of that amount, VanderSloot has raised almost one-third - to say nothing of \$20,000 a week he's spending on newspaper advertising.

A shadowy group - Education Voters of Idaho - has refused to say where its \$200,000 came from. Two of Idaho's savviest political operators, former Rep. Debbie Field, R-Boise, and former congressional aide John Foster, formed the group for that very purpose.

Then factor in the other heavy hitters; Hagadone Hospitality, \$15,000; the Idaho Association of Commerce and Industry's PAC, \$20,500; the Idaho Republican Party, \$10,000; and \$23,000 from nearly 20 GOP legislators or legislative campaigns.

But they can't keep up with 3.1 million teachers each providing what it would cost them to buy a newspaper or a soda pop - or 11,500 Idaho teachers contributing the equivalent of a fast-food meal.

So VanderSloot has a grievance. He's told the Idaho Statesman's Dan Popkey he intends to redouble his efforts.

"We knew they were spending a lot of money. We didn't know how much," he said. "There's no way we can match that, but we are going to enter the fight."

In other words, when one man whose vast assets are exceeded only by his ideological ardor single-handedly weighs in on an election, that's fair.

But when thousands, even millions, of ordinary, middle-class teachers get in his way, that's not fair.

Got it? - M.T.