

Bringing Luna's monster back to life

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Last week, Idaho's House and Senate Education committees began collecting the dead scraps of flesh leftover from the repudiated Luna laws.

Discarded by the voters in a massive tidal wave of revulsion, these bits and pieces were lovingly sewn together.

Then the lawmakers wrapped the corpse in a gauze of bad faith, attached it to the current of their own political hubris and threw the switch.

Instantaneously, this new Frankenstein's monster stirred.

Who cares if 57 percent of Idaho voters said no? These lawmakers knew better. So they acquiesced to the Idaho School Boards Association and restored life to a new assault on the employment rights of Idaho's beleaguered teachers.

Under this newly introduced legislation:

- Gone would be the master contract. Every gain won through collective bargaining would disappear at the end of the year.
- School boards would retain the upper hand in those contract talks. If no agreement was reached by June 22, the board could impose its own terms.
- Any teacher at any time in her career could be forced to accept less pay for more work.
- The Idaho Education Association could be forced to prove its legitimacy at every turn.

Bad enough that this is a thumb in the eye of the Idaho voters, who not only killed this legislation last fall, but also its companion measures - Luna's rickety merit pay plan and his ploy to pull money from classrooms and spend it on his friends in the educational technology and online instruction industries.

Idahoans have endured such insults before. Lawmakers rewrote their 1978 tax reduction plan and repealed their 1994 term limits initiative. Far more common, however, was a decent respect for the voice of the voters, whether it was implementing a property tax break for homeowners or a state lottery.

Even worse is the calculated cynicism behind this tactic. Odds are the chemistry of national money and local commitment that merged to produce last year's successful referendum campaign won't recur.

What stands apart, however, is these legislators' willingness to make a short-term hit on their political adversaries within the IEA at the risk of leaving behind permanent wreckage in the public schools.

As much as Idahoans detested the Luna laws, what fueled their passion and anger was the heavy-handed process that produced this flawed product. Luna didn't talk to any parents, teachers or administrators before he initiated his scheme. He campaigned for re-election in 2010 as a champion of the schools. Then he launched a sneak attack just weeks later, hammering his opponents and ramming through a compliant Legislature his untested and poorly conceived vision of school reform.

With that package in tatters, Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter prudently reversed course. He called together the veterans of Idaho's education wars - the IEA, the business lobby, the State Board of Education, Luna and legislators - and advised them to reach consensus. Find a road map to reform, he said. Produce something the grass roots will enthusiastically implement.

"I'm convinced that acting too quickly or without due deliberation will generate needless distraction from our goals of improving efficiency, effectiveness, transparency and accountability in our education system," Otter said. "... I am neither calling for nor expecting major school improvement measures this year. But I believe there are areas in which we can make progress, and I encourage you and all citizens to engage in that public discussion. It's our very best chance to strengthen the foundation of our future."

That was just three weeks ago.

Now Senate Education Committee Chairman John Goedde, R-Coeur d'Alene, and House Education Committee Chairman Reed DeMordaunt, R-Eagle, have set foot on Luna's well-worn path. They have reinvigorated his mantra of an all-knowing, all-powerful state elite imposing its arbitrary partisan and ideological order upon teachers, parents and students.

Idahoans killed this monster once. Revive it and its first fatality would be public confidence in the governor's education task force. That alone ought to provoke Otter's promise to veto this bill now before it proceeds.

Otherwise, the only question will be how much more time Idaho wastes. - M.T.