

# Haven't we seen Tom Luna's movie before?

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Anyone of a certain age can recall the continuously running movie. If you arrived late, you found a seat, followed the film until it looped back. Then, you'd mutter: "This is where I came in," and leave.

Consider this cultural footnote a useful context to the latest Tom Luna permutation.

The embattled Idaho state school superintendent last week unveiled his budget - an increase of 5.9 percent, or \$77 million. Much of it is a down payment on Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter's education task force's plan to restore \$82.5 million in school operation funds and boost teacher pay by \$250 million.

Isn't this where we came in?

At the point before a freshly re-elected Luna declared in 2010 there was no hope in getting more money for Idaho schools, or even reversing the cuts being justified in the name of austerity?

Before Luna rammed his punitive school overhaul package down the throats of school teachers, parents, students and taxpayers? Without their support - or knowledge - Luna persuaded the 2011 Legislature to undermine long-standing teacher collective bargaining rights. He instituted a rickety merit pay system that rewarded teachers more for where they worked instead of what they achieved. And he siphoned scarce school dollars away from teacher pay and into the pockets of his cronies in the high-tech and online learning industries.

Before Idaho voters took matters into their own hands in the 2012 election and repealed the Luna Laws by margins as high as two-thirds?

Before Otter responded to the voter repudiation by forming a diverse task force, which reached an entirely plausible conclusion - Idaho schools are woefully underfunded?

Before all that, Luna was running for re-election in 2010. The schools, he assured Idaho voters, were the best they could be. And he was willing to break with his own Republican Party and support new taxes on Internet sales if that's what was required to support public education.

So forgive us our skepticism. Who's to say Luna's latest stance isn't just another political confection that will evaporate as soon as it becomes expedient?

OK, prove us wrong. All Luna need do is:

- Restore the \$82.5 million in operation funding in one year, maybe two. Luna's plan means Idaho schools will wait until 2019 to reach where they were in 2008 - without factoring inflation in health insurance costs, overhead and curriculum. At that rate, they'll

never catch up, Meridian School Superintendent Linda Clark and Idaho Falls School Superintendent George Boland told Idaho Education News' Clark Corbin.

"It may all be consumed before you can add it back fast enough," Boland said. While school budgets are strangled, patrons will get slammed with steadily rising supplemental property tax levies - which expanded more than 30 percent in the last two years.

- Publicly break with Otter and forswear any future tax breaks. Within the past six months, Otter has promised to continue reducing corporate and individual tax rates - the last round cost \$36 million - as well as fully repealing the personal property tax businesses pay on equipment, a \$120 million hit.

You can't spend money on schools you won't have.

- Show how Idaho can expand core government spending by nearly 15 percent in the next four or five years. That's how much the education task force recommendations represent. Surely, Luna does not expect to cannibalize higher education, prisons and health care to free up the money.
- Even if former Idaho Chief Economist Mike Ferguson is right about the state having an extra \$101 million on hand next year, there's no guarantee Idaho's economy will continue generating surpluses in years two, three, four or five. In other words, Luna should concede the need for higher, not lower, taxes.

And get Luna's commitment in writing.

In blood.

Don't wait for the next reel. - M.T.