

Saltines and tomato soup for a starving man

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

From the top of its ticket down, the Idaho Republican Party has morphed into the champion of public school funding.

Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter advertises how he's "making it a great state to get a good education. We've got \$35 million back in the classroom."

State Rep. Thyra Stevenson, R-Lewiston, proclaims to television audiences: "I'm positive that great things happen in Idaho schools and my votes show it."

And in accusing Democratic incumbent John Rusche of voting against the GOP school budget, Lewiston Republican Mike Kingsley touts how "Idaho's Legislature passed the largest education budget since the recession. ..."

You'd never know it was Otter and his party that put public education on a starvation diet in the first place. Now they're giving their emaciated victims a stack of saltine crackers and a bowl of tomato soup.

According to the Center on Budget and Public Policy, Idaho cut its school spending more deeply than just a handful of states:

- The amount of money Idaho put behind each child's schooling fell 16.2 percent since the recession began. Only Oklahoma (23.6 percent), Alabama (17.8 percent) and Arizona (17.5 percent) did worse.

Washington's per-pupil spending actually rose 5.9 percent during that time.

- In dollar terms, Idaho's per-pupil spending dropped by \$964 - behind only Alabama (\$1,128) and Wisconsin (\$1,014.)

Washington is spending \$306 more per student than it did in 2008.

- The GOP's self-promotion aside, that \$35 million increase barely moved the needle. The resources Idaho devotes to each child's schooling rose by \$75 or 1.5 percent. Fourteen states did better. Idaho tied with Mississippi.

Washington boosted its school numbers by \$144 per student, or 2.7 percent.

CBPP's numbers are adjusted for inflation and enrollment growth.

How did it happen?

Idaho didn't get any breaks.

First, its economy crashed harder and deeper than most states.

Then, the political class made things worse. In past recessions, Govs. John Evans, a Democrat, and Dirk Kempthorne, a Republican, chose tax increases over school cuts. But Otter and the GOP balanced their budget deficits exclusively by cutting.

Finally, when the economy sputtered back to life, they began cutting taxes. Of the seven states that cut per-pupil spending the deepest, six took that path - including Kansas under Gov. Sam Brownback and Wisconsin under Gov. Scott Walker.

So when Otter delivered his most recent State of the State address in January, CBPP estimates Idaho schools were about \$197 million behind where they stood on the eve of the Great Recession.

In other words, Otter and the Legislature restored about 18 percent of that gap. And where did the remaining \$162 million go?

Into eliminating the property taxes most businesses pay on equipment.

Into reducing the income tax burden carried by corporations and wealthy Idahoans.

Into a sales tax grocery credit for the poor who need it and the rich who don't.

Into business incentives - from a sales tax break on technology to a jobs tax credit.

And into the bank. By the time the current budget cycle closes June 30, Idaho's budget reserves will have grown 50 percent.

It's a big hole the GOP has been digging. As hard as they try, they can't spin their way out of it. - M.T.