

Mea culpa

JEERS ... to Washington Senate Majority Leader Mark Schoesler, R-Ritzville.

What is it with Washington's 9th Legislative District, anyway?

First you have Rep. Joe Schmick, R-Colfax, who a couple of years ago tried to shut down a 130-mile portion of the John Wayne Pioneer Trail without telling anybody - only to get tripped up by a mistake in drafting the bill.

Then Rep. Mary Dye, R-Pomeroy, began 2016 by berating Pullman-area teenagers for not being chaste enough and concluded the year by repeating unverified rumors about snipers taking aim at workers on the lower Snake River dams and blaming Muslims.

But Schoesler was always the seasoned professional, the adult in the room, the fellow who carried the burdens of leadership.

Until last week, when he allowed freelance reporter John Stang to get under his skin.

Stang wanted to know when the Republicans in control of the Senate were going to produce a school funding plan.

Would they "wait until April?"

As the Tribune's William L. Spence noted, Stang can be snarky. Gov. Jay Inslee once offered to step into an alley with the reporter to settle their differences.

Nonetheless, this is the organizing premise of the legislative session - how is Washington going to answer the Supreme Court's McCleary decision? Inslee has his approach. What is the GOP's alternative?

"That's none of your business," Schoesler snapped. "You'll be the last to know."

Of course, it's Stang's business. It's everyone's business. When is the last time any lawmaker anywhere in this country told a reporter - or even a citizen - that public school funding is "none of your business."

This was out of character for Schoesler, who quickly went through the established rites of political contrition.

"I can't condone making the comment," he told Spence. "I snapped. I'm very sorry I said it."

Fair enough. Anyone can have a bad day.

Now why not answer Stang's question?

CHEERS ... to Idaho State Board of Education President Emma Atchley of Ashton.

When she opened this week's public school and higher education budget presentations in the Legislature, Atchley did not mince words: "Many students are being priced out of higher education."

In the past, state board members may have danced up to that line but they've never crossed it. Instead, they've contended that Idaho's institutions of higher learning remain accessible because what they charge for tuition is a bargain compared to other states.

Here's where that argument falters:

- As lawmakers have balanced the budgets through at least two recessions, they have raided public support for higher education. To compensate, colleges and universities have tripled tuition since 2003.
- If Idaho's tuition falls below what is charged elsewhere, that advantage is offset by the state's relatively lower incomes. Net result: The average Idaho college student will carry about \$26,000 in loans - which puts the Gem State in the middle of the pack, according to the Institute for College Access and Success.
- Students aren't blind. When the University of Idaho's McClure Center surveyed high school graduates who opted not to continue their studies, 39 percent said the cost of college kept them home while another 15 percent presumably weighed the expense and saw no economic advantage to going to school.
- No wonder the go-on rate of Idaho high school graduates entering college is heading in the wrong direction - to 48 percent, down from 54 percent nearly five years ago.

Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter's measly 2.1 percent higher education budget increase guarantees another boost in tuition. Atchley's frank admission won't change that.

At least, the state board is no longer in denial. Recognizing the problem is a step forward.

JEERS ... to Idaho State Reps. Ron Nate, R-Rexburg, and Steve Hartgen, R-Twin Falls.

Tuesday, they were the ringleaders behind protesting the otherwise routine practice of syncing Idaho's income tax code with its federal counterpart. The reason?

They don't like recognizing the constitutional right of same-sex couples to be married. Ever since the U.S. Supreme Court overturned Idaho's constitutional ban on marriage equality, the state's code must treat all marriages alike.

But Nate and Hartgen objected when the code conformance measure cleared the House tax committee.

"If we here in Idaho think that the laws or even the ruling of the Supreme Court is not constitutional, then we have an obligation and a duty to defend our state Constitution against those infringements," Nate said.

You'd expect that from Nate, who when he's not busy surreptitiously tape-recording his colleagues teaches economics at the Mormon church-owned Brigham Young University-Idaho.

But how do you explain Hartgen, an otherwise fairly sober, mainstream conservative? Last year, he voted for conformance. Now, he says, the "landscape has changed."

By that, he means Donald Trump's election and his prerogative to name a conservatives to the U.S. Supreme Court.

That's speculation bordering on clairvoyance.

But Thursday, Nate, Hartgen and 16 House Republicans voted against the tax conformance bill. Among them were Reps. Priscilla Giddings, R-White Bird, and Paul Shepherd, R-Riggins.

Is this what they mean by relying on alternative facts?

CHEERS ... to Kerry Uhlenkott. Legislative coordinator for Right to Life of Idaho, Uhlenkott this week repudiated the idea of charging women with first-degree murder if they get an abortion.

Scott Herndon of Sagle and the group Abolish Abortion Idaho have proposed a ballot initiative to that effect.

Meanwhile, freshman Sen. Dan Foreman, R-Moscow, says he will sponsor a piece of legislation that says much the same thing.

"Subjecting women to criminal penalties for an abortion is inconsistent with the historic pro-life position," Uhlenkott said. "We have never supported legislation containing criminal penalties for women."

Good for her.

Now what about her allies in Idaho's anti-abortion rights movement?

What have you heard from Idaho Chooses Life's David Ripley?

How about Cornerstone Institute's Julie Lynde?

Or Generation Life co-founder Brandi Swindell?

Where do they stand? - M.T.