



It Should Be Crunch Time on Education Funding

Stephen Hartgen

February 23, 2020

Seasoned vets of Idaho politics know this, but are few times in Idaho legislative politics with more stress than the few weeks of February and early March in election years. The reasons are simple enough.

First, budgets are being set and with the state's continuing growth, there are needs almost everywhere. Yet – and this is particularly true this year — there's real public pressure to hold down government costs.

People's property taxes are rising sharply due to higher valuations, but also due to lack-of-restraint by local officials, whose tax-tax, build-build mentality is fueling tax jumps. Everyone, it seems, wants a legacy, but no legislator wants to go home and tell voters their taxes are going up yet again.

Then this year, there's the loopy, California-union drive to increase education spending with big tax increases and pour the money into ever-higher teacher salaries, where the median is over \$50,000 for elementary school teachers and over \$60,000 for secondary school instructors.

Reclaim Idaho pitches its union salary drive on the false picture of the poor, starving Idaho educator. But many citizens consider teachers fairly compensated today. In experienced, two-person educator families, household incomes are often pushing \$100,000 annually, twice the Idaho median household income. This is particularly true if one of the parties is in educational administration. (Bureau of Labor Statistics, Idaho, 2019.)

The real “elephant in the room” is that student test scores are lagging across Idaho, and have been for a long time. The more-money, more-money plea isn't showing results.

This “achievement gap” has gone on for decades while pay has incessantly risen. The state's school education budget is more than five times what it was thirty years ago, (Idaho Fiscal Facts, 1990 and 2019, \$418m and \$2.267b), but test scores have barely budged (Cato Institute), and may actually have slipped.

Educators say “social conditions” and “home deficiencies” are to blame. It’s the “cultural factors.” Can’t fix what you can’t fix. But oh no, you can’t tie educator pay to results; that wouldn’t be “fair.”

Two bills introduced this month would help citizen tax relief on public levies of all kinds. One would limit votes to once per 11 months, thus reducing taxpayer “fatigue” at repeated attempts. The other would consolidate bond and levy elections to November and May, thus increasing vote counts and – at least in theory – reducing the “off dates” which routinely suppress turnout and tilt results.

The once-per-11-months bill (HB 347) is being proposed by Rep. Heather Scott, R-Blanchard, North Idaho’s resident arch-conservative and firebrand (Northwest Inlander, Feb. 6.) The second bill (HB 393) is being carried by Rep. Wendy Horman, R-Idaho Falls, who recently has been questioning education funding without accountability. This has earned her some snarky opposition from those at the open-spigot, educator troughs. (Idaho Press, Jan. 15.)

It may seem an odd pairing of Scott and Horman on an issue, but they’re right to attempt to get some control on education fire-hose spending.

Both bills are good moves and suggest Idaho legislators are “smelling the coffee” on how huge annual education budget increases (\$100 million-plus annually) are strapping taxpayers, but not showing substantive results.

Measurement by real test scores, school by school and classroom by classroom, would be an obvious plus, but this has been fiercely opposed by educators.

In the past, the Legislature has made some feeble attempts at accountability, with so-called “master teacher” premiums, but objectively, there’s been little gain. Some teachers even disdained the “premiums” as not enough to have them even apply, (\$4,000 annually for three years).

And some administrators routinely rate every single teacher highly; to do otherwise would put their own community and union standing at risk.

Beyond education funding, there are important issues on legislators’ table, including tax relief, corrections reform and infrastructure improvements. The Treasure Valley is already coming to vehicle gridlock at certain times of the day, but there are important needs elsewhere statewide too.

None of these can be adequately addressed until there’s a corrective “balance” on the education funding front, which is siphoning off huge dollars with little left for other pressing needs.

Experienced legislative watchers know that progress in specific areas is often incremental; big, sweeping changes aren’t easy to achieve in one fell swoop. So partial successes with necessarily smaller gains are the most likely outcome. Maybe we could start by tying teacher and administrator pay to real results.

Stephen Hartgen, Twin Falls, is a retired five-term Republican member of the Idaho House of Representatives, where he served as chairman of the Commerce & Human Resources Committee. Previously, he was editor and publisher of The Times-News (1982-2005). He is the author of the new book "Tradition & Progress: Southern Idaho's Growth Since 1990." This column was first published in www.idahopoliticsweekly.com. He can be reached at Stephen_Hartgen@hotmail.com