

Opinion: Gilbert: Idaho is awash with cash, use it

By CHUCK MALLOY | Columnist
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With Idaho bursting at the seams with money — a whopping \$1.3 billion surplus — you know there will be a long list of people lining up for the windfall cash.

Terry Gilbert of Boise, the Democratic candidate for state superintendent of public instruction, plans to elbow his way to the front of the line if elected. He's already making his pitch.

“The state of Idaho is cheating its children and their families by amassing a \$1.3 billion surplus while underfunding education and pushing the cost onto homeowners through constant school bonds and levies,” he said in a recent news release. “Idaho needs a school-funding trigger law that will devote at least 50 percent of any state surplus to education, including paying off school bonds to lower property taxes.”

Good luck with getting anything like that through the Legislature. And don't expect the House State Affairs Committee to take up Gilbert's thoughts about raising the age limit to 21 for buying assault weapons. Being a Democrat in a sea of Republicans, Gilbert won't make much headway on proposals that stray from the beaten path. But those factors won't stop him from speaking out.



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Gilbert is a 76-year-old retired teacher and former president of the Idaho Education Association, so he is accustomed to the political fray. Shyness is not part of his DNA.

He asks, “Why does Idaho have \$1.3 billion in the bank while forcing patrons to pay for education by forcing school districts to constantly raise their property taxes?”

Good question — and there’s more. Why does Idaho have a teacher shortage? Why does the Gem State rank last in per-pupil funding? Why does classroom-aid funding rank dead last in the nation? Why does Idaho have the sixth highest ratio of students to teachers?

None of those things should occur with a \$1.3 billion surplus.

“Finally, why does the Idaho Legislature continue to ignore the Idaho Supreme Court, which ruled in 2005 that Idaho’s funding of education facilities was wholly inadequate to meet its constitutional requirement? A recent study revealed it would take \$874 million to bring our public-school facilities up to good condition,” he says.

That’s a small change, with a \$1.3 billion surplus.

One question I have is why does a guy who is 76 years old — with a teaching career long behind him — want to take on the worst job in state government? Bashing the state superintendent is a way of life for politicians and educators; it’s been that way for decades.

And what does Gilbert know about managing a department that looks more like a two-headed monster? Not much, actually.

But let’s not get hung up with age. “I am 76 ... as old as a former president and much different mentally than that man,” he said with a smile.

“I have great passion for a couple of things in life, and one is public education,” he said.

“Secondly, our democracy depends on public education. If we do away with public education, in whatever form the Idaho Freedom Foundation advocates, we will lose our democracy — and we’re on the cusp of losing that anyway in my estimation.”

Gilbert began his teaching career in 1967, two years before I graduated from high school (that's old, folks) and retired from full-time teaching in 2007. He's a former president of the Idaho Education Association — that was back in 1977 when the IEA had some lobbying clout. But he says that he is well versed on the changes and trends in education and has opinions galore about the shortfalls in Idaho's education system. He has endorsed the education initiative spearheaded by Reclaim Idaho.

And he's running for an office where Democrats have a fighting chance. Democrats received 49% of the vote in the last three elections. Gilbert is going against a stronger opponent this year in Republican Debbie Critchfield of Oakley, and Gilbert concedes that he is facing an uphill battle. But he says that some diverse thinking might be helpful for Idaho schools.

He describes the Republican platform for education as something that “could have been enthusiastically adopted by the southern segregationists of the 1950s. It would be equally popular with the anti-public-school libertarians and fat-cat privateers of today.”

Say one thing about Gilbert — he's not lacking for spirit.

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