



Hon. Dean Cameron (R-26)
Co-Chair, Joint Finance & Appropriations Committee

The Joint Finance and Appropriations Committee (JFAC) on Wednesday set the public education budget. Prior to setting the budget we held and moderated meetings with education stakeholders. The purposes of these meetings have been to minimize the impacts of the reduced budget. Frankly, our goal is to protect teachers in the classroom and to preserve a child's education opportunities. Additionally, we acknowledge the important role of our locally elected school boards and of our good school administrators in managing the resources allocated to them. The stakeholders participating in the meetings were Superintendent Luna and his staff, the Idaho Education Association, the Idaho School Administrators Association, Idaho School Boards, the Senate and House Education Chairmen and their vice-chairs as well as my good co-chair Representative Bell and our vice-chairs and education budget members and staff.

The process was a little uncomfortable at first, with each of the stakeholders staking out their perspective, but after gentle encouragement we were able to move forward. We carefully brought up each issue, looking first for those issues everyone agreed upon. If any participant had a concern we would set the issue aside. By the end of the first day we had agreed on a dozen items. The next meeting was more difficult as we tackled the issues of disagreement, but by then the stakeholders could see the benefit and potential consensus. We preceded line by line, concept by concept and forged agreements. Although this is a difficult budget I could not be prouder of the process and of the stakeholders who set aside politics and personal agendas and each compromised for the benefit of public education.

The budget set by JFAC mirrored the agreements by the stakeholders except for one piece of intent language. Although everyone would have preferred a higher number, the number was based on public schools receiving 50% of the projected shortfall, after they had been held harmless for the last two years while other agencies took significant reductions. The total appropriation for public schools was \$1,582,328,500 of which \$1,214,280,400 was general tax funds. It represents a 1.4% reduction in general funds and an 8.5% reduction of total funds. As part of the budget we moved \$63 million dollars from existing programs to discretionary dollars. This is an acknowledgement that not all school districts are alike and have the same challenges. The proposal will allow local schools boards to have more flexibility in the money allocated by the state.

Last year the legislature passed H252, which provided steps school districts must take in order to declare a financial emergency and renegotiate with their teachers. Twenty out of 114 districts declared an emergency but most could not meet the conditions as outlined in H252. The last piece of intent language added to this year's budget makes that declaration for them. School districts claim they need the flexibility to renegotiate in a budget reduction. Teachers are concerned that the declaration will be abused and superintendents will use it to "bust" contracts. JFAC sided with giving the districts the flexibility to get through these difficult times.

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