

Frontiers of K-12 Reform Options for Idaho

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Preface

This is the first in a series of policy briefs meant to spark discussion about new directions for education reform in Idaho. Its goal is to introduce Idaho leaders to reform ideas being tried elsewhere, and to document the lessons learned by other states specific to the types of reform approaches or strategies that work best based on particular circumstances.

This policy brief provides background for Idaho deliberation, not definite recommendations. Though other states are remote from major population centers as is Idaho, and have many students in rural schools, no other state is enough like Idaho to justify imitating its reform initiatives exactly.

There are important lessons from other states that Idaho can learn from.

- The limitations of centralization (e.g. state mandates to use money in particular ways, controls on teacher evaluation and pay-setting) in a state as diverse as Idaho.
- The importance of encouraging local experimentation with new uses of time, teachers, and instructional technology, especially in a state like Idaho that has major achievement deficits.
- The importance of performance accountability for schools, as a complement to schools' freedom to adapt to the needs of their students and try out new ideas.

These lessons are starting points, not exact guides to action. Only Idahoans can judge which combination of ideas and approaches presented here are right for the state.

A Glossary of Terms

A Performance accountability system for schools: an annual cycle of measuring all schools' performance according to common standards; attaching labels to different levels of performance relative to expectations (e.g. fails, does not meet, meets, exceeds); making the results public; and authorizing action to assist, reward, change or replace schools based on performance.

Performance management: active use of the accountability system to bring about a better supply of schools, including seeking new innovative programs and school providers.

Centralization: Making key decisions about spending, staffing, teacher pay, or instructional programs above the school level.

Decentralization: Devolving key decisions to the school level.

Categorical programs: Federal or state programs that provide money for specific purposes, e.g. special services to English language learners, minority children or targeted teacher professional development

Portfolio strategy: district-wide management plan that gives all schools greater control over budgets and staffing, judges all schools on the basis of performance, and closes or replaces low performing schools with new schools, often charters.

State recovery district: A statewide school district empowered to take control of any persistently low performing school and assign it to a new operator, often via chartering.

Introduction

The struggle over state education policy can look partisan when voters reject key initiatives or top officials are defeated for re-election. Those things and more happened in fall 2012. However, looking across the states, it is hard to see a consistent pattern of one party, or unions, always winning or losing. Results don't fit the red-state blue-state pattern: Union-led resistance to change led to defeat of reformer Tony Bennett in Indiana and initiatives sponsored by Tom Luna in Idaho; but unions lost in Michigan and charter schools passed in Washington.

The politics of reform are turbulent because the problems affecting K-12 education are serious and nobody knows for sure how to solve them. State and local leaders know they can't get dramatically better results by continuing to do the same thing. They are searching for ideas and trying out an unprecedented variety of different policies.

Not all of these new ideas can be made to fit together, as we shall see. New policy ideas are by definition unproven, and many of them threaten people who have devoted their careers to making the current system go. Thus, the effort to get dramatically better results in K-12 education, though necessary, is always open to criticism that key approaches aren't sure to work in every case and can lead to conflict.

The problems facing public education are more complex than ever before. As the world gets more economically competitive and Americans are forced to rely more on their creativity and problem solving ability, too many children are left behind. Too many are not mastering basic skills, let alone the more advanced ones they will need to thrive in the future. This pattern of low achievement, where in some localities nationally less than half of the 14-year olds will ever graduate from high school and only a minority of high school graduates will complete any sort of college course, is not new. It has been the case for decades. But the consequences of low student achievement are more serious than ever before, and states are looking hard for ways to dramatically increase student learning.

This is particularly challenging because Americans have already done the non-controversial things to improve the current system. We have tinkered with schools, trying to improve them with a little more teacher professional development here, and some new courses and teaching materials there. These efforts have scarcely moved the needle: it is clear that the comfortable, easy approaches to improving schools are not enough.

It is also clear that many efforts states have made in past decades took K-12 in the wrong direction. For example, as the state share of education funding has increased, legislatures have imposed new regulations on permissible uses of funds that limit the flexibility needed to innovate and improve. Categorical programs, a common

state policy instrument, provide new funds but require districts and schools to use money and time in specific ways. From legislators' perspective, these regulations guarantee that new money won't all be captured by collective bargaining and used for salary increases. But, as the number and variety of categorical programs increase, schools become over-regulated and less able to respond to the special needs of their students. This is a particular burden for schools whose student population has been significantly altered due to economic change or immigration.

Mandates like class size minima [or requirements to teach particular courses can also come with funding](#) but reduce schools' flexibility.

This lack of flexibility has become especially painful as districts and schools struggle with falling revenues. Mandates that were merely inhibiting during flush times become crippling at times of scarcity. One mandate, the "last hired, first fired" (LIFO) principle, force districts and schools to lay off some of their best teachers because they lack seniority. Because LIFO preserves the jobs of the most expensive people, it forces districts to lose more teachers than would be necessary if layoffs could be made without respect to seniority.

What Other States are Trying

What can a state do to dramatically improve its schools? This question is infinitely easier to pose than to answer. State governments don't educate children directly; they must work through districts, schools, teachers and other means that motivate and inform children. Some states have continued making things worse by creating even more mandates, including requirements like those recently rejected in Idaho, required particular uses of technology.

If mandates are steps in the wrong direction, what other options do states have?

State leaders have come up with a variety of potential answers including the following initiatives:¹

Adopting common core academic standards that can both guide instruction and structure assessments that show the degree to which schools, districts and states are preparing their children for higher education and rewarding work.

Transforming their education finance systems to fund students, not schools, programs, or employees. California and other states are considering repealing separate categorical programs and consolidating all state funds into accounts linked to individual students. State funding therefore follows

¹ The Center on Reinventing Public Education, University of Washington, can provide much more detailed information on these initiatives. <http://www.crpe.org>

pupils to schools in which they enroll, and arrives at the school in the form of cash that the school uses to pay its expenses. This allows schools to make tradeoffs in light of student needs (e.g. additional teachers and fewer administrators, or fewer teachers and greater individualization through technology). Ready movement of funds from one school to another also makes it possible for families to exercise choice and the more effective schools to increase their enrollment.

Eliminating regulations that prescribe seat time, standard courses, and maximum class size, and instead prescribe outcomes to be attained to encourage schools to individualize and innovate, and in some cases to experiment with new hybrid forms of schooling which combine on-line instruction and face-to face teaching.

Encouraging growth of charter schools as platforms for innovation (e.g. longer school days and years, greater experimentation with technology, new teacher roles, and new sources of teachers), as a source of new opportunities for frustrated families, and to spur competition for existing schools and districts. In California and other states, extensive use of technology is starting in the charter sector and then spreading to conventional public schools.

Creating longitudinal student and teacher data systems that allow tracking of individual students' progress over time, and permit school, district, or state leaders to identify highly productive and less productive schools and teachers. These data systems make it possible for local and state leaders to grade schools on both average performance and rates of student growth, which makes it possible to judge schools based on performance, not rule compliance.

Using longitudinal student databases to drive accountability for districts, schools, or teachers. These data can trigger state or local actions in the lowest performing schools or districts. Possible actions vary from assistance, to major investment in new teacher training and materials, adverse publicity, staff changes, and the option of school closures and re-opening under new management.

Encouraging districts to adopt a "portfolio strategy," i.e. a district-wide management plan that gives all schools greater control over budgets and staffing, and closes or replaces low performing schools with new schools, often charters.

Opening all schools to new sources of teacher and principal talent. These individuals can be graduates of alternative certification programs, people vetted by innovative teacher providers like The New Teacher Project, Troops to Teachers, and Teach for America, as well as career-switchers from business and higher education.

Re-creating the state education agency (SEA) as a performance manager. Rather than simply administer federal and state regulatory programs, some SEAs are aggressively using performance data to identify schools in need of closure and replacement. Most then either work with school districts to place new school staff or providers. Louisiana, Tennessee, and Michigan use new state agencies (e.g. Louisiana's Recovery School District) to take control of failed schools and charter them out.

How these Initiatives Work Together (or Don't)

Each of these initiatives has its own objectives and likely effect, but none of them is likely to transform a state's schools all by itself. For example, common core standards set expectations and longitudinal student records systems track progress, but neither ensures long-term improvement. Similarly, charter schools and de-regulation open the door to innovation, but they do not guarantee it. Yet, courageous education leaders need the freedom and incentives to seize the opportunities these initiatives create.

These types of initiatives address different weaknesses of our public education system. Many are potentially complementary, but there is an inherent tension between initiatives that would **centralize** (i.e. limit schools' freedom of action by setting specific goals and mandating particular personnel policies and uses of funds) or **decentralize** (i.e. increase schools' freedom of action so they can search for more effective approaches to instruction, choose their own staff, make tradeoffs among different forms of expenditure, and experiment with technology).

Some states are adopting potent combinations of these initiatives, using broad strategies that combine some centralization with significant decentralization. These states centralize standard-setting and performance assessment, but also create flexibility so schools can innovate in staffing, hiring, and their use of technology. They also create a constrained market, in which government sets goals and performance floors, but people with new ideas, including non-traditional educators and new school providers, are free to innovate and compete for students.

Table 1 identifies which initiatives are centralizing and which use a decentralizing approach.

Table 1: Some Initiatives Expand State Control; Others Foster School-Based Initiatives, New Providers, And Competition

<i>Centralization</i>	<i>Decentralization</i>
Standards including common core	Eliminating regulations
State longitudinal student/teacher data system	Pupil-based funding system
Performance-based accountability system	Charter schools
Data-driven accountability	Portfolio strategies in districts
Takeover power for the state education agency	New talent strategy

One of the most effective examples of this type of hybrid approach was the rapid improvement in Louisiana schools after Hurricane Katrina. It’s a result of a combination of escalating state standards, measurement of individual student achievement, an accountability system that identifies consistent low performers, and creation of a new state institution empowered to close low performing schools and create new options for children in need, (all centralization) and pupil-based funding, dramatic expansion of charter schools to introduce new educational methods, and opening up the schools to new sources of principals and teachers (decentralization). This combination of new state capacities and decentralization is called *performance management*.²

Tennessee and Michigan are also pursuing performance management. They are creating a Louisiana-style combination of centralizing and decentralizing initiatives in efforts to transform educational opportunities in their largest cities. Ohio is supporting Cleveland’s Mayor in an effort to create a Louisiana-style system to raise achievement standards, and create new schooling options for schools in that city.

Louisiana and Connecticut are transforming their state education agencies to exercise a new form of state takeover for districts judged in academic or financial bankruptcy. State agents (the Recovery School District in Louisiana, a special master in Connecticut) take over all low-performing schools, allow well-led schools to use funds more freely and hire differently, and charter out schools that can’t improve to new providers. This use of performance management has worked far better than past forms of state takeover, where state officials simply sought to do a better job managing the existing set of schools.

² For more on how state governments are moving toward performance management see Patrick Murphy and Lydia Rainey, *Modernizing the State Education Agency: Different Paths Toward Performance Management*, Seattle, Center on Reinventing Public Education 2012.

Some states are pursuing centralization so strongly as to eliminate innovation and experimentation. This is particularly true when states try to use longitudinal student databases to set teacher pay from the state level. Centralized teacher evaluation and pay setting deprives school leaders of freedom to configure their staff and set pay scales in light of school-specific needs. It also discourages innovations like new technology-based forms of instruction and weakens school performance accountability by taking away school leaders’ most important function.

States and localities can make effective use of teacher value-added data by providing results to school leaders who, under a market-like scheme, must achieve high levels of student performance or face closure.

How These Ideas Might Apply To Idaho

Idaho leaders can glean ideas, but there are no infallible roadmaps from other states. No state has yet solved all the problems of low achievement and uneven performance. Moreover, Idaho’s communities and schools are unique, so initiatives working elsewhere will need to be adapted, not cloned. Idaho leaders will need to judge for themselves what combination of these initiatives works best.

Table 2 summarizes what other states have learned about the conditions to which particular initiatives are well or poorly matched. It identifies some broad criteria for considering whether Idaho is likely to benefit most from centralization alone or the combination of centralization and market forces, otherwise known as performance management.

Table 2: Lessons Learned from Other States--Different Initiatives Fit Different Circumstances

	Favorable Conditions	Unfavorable Conditions
Only Centralization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The one best approach to instruction is known. • All localities are similar. • Confidence exists that state mandates will be implemented. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Best approach is not known; innovation, experimentation needed. • Big local differences. • Danger of emphasizing compliance over performance.
Combining Limited Centralization with Decentralization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Few if any schools now prepare kids fully. • Many promising ideas are now sidelined. • Greater opportunity could attract good people. • Use of funds is driven by rules, not evidence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most schools are fine, only a few need work. • Schools are open to innovation. • Teaching, principal force is perfect; no better alternatives are possible. • Funds are now used in most efficient way possible.

One clear implication of the lessons learned is that centralization alone is ideal when the best approach to schooling is well known, and that one approach fits all circumstances. Centralization alone is less appropriate when new ideas about instruction are constantly emerging, and that a good approach for one situation (e.g. an urban school serving middle class children) might be poorly matched to another (e.g. a rural school) serving immigrant or low-income children. These later circumstances, which apply to Idaho as to most other states, require some mixture of centralization (e.g. common standards, performance based accountability) and decentralization to allow trial of new ideas and matching of methods to student needs.

If Idaho leaders conclude that performance management, which is a combination of centralization and decentralization is the most appropriate for the state, they will still need to decide what to do first. As other states have learned, some actions are necessary first steps for successful reform.

Figure 1 puts the initiatives onto a time schedule. It assumes that different initiatives will be started over a period of three years. Subsequent actions could be taken sooner than once every year as the figure assumes, or be introduced at intervals longer than one year. However, since the full effects of reform will become apparent only after multiple initiatives are in place, a brisk schedule like that illustrated in *Figure 1*, is best.

Figure 1: Sequencing Reform Initiatives

First year

- Adopt Common Core Standards
- Create a statewide accountability system that can rate every school
- Adopt measures to provide operational funding equity and facilities funding equity to public charter school students.

Second Year

- Replace the current school finance system with pupil-based funding
- Allow intra-district and statewide family choice of schools
- Allow districts to experiment with hybrid charter schools

Third Year

- Require all districts to use chartering to replace their lowest performing schools
- Recreate the state education agency (e.g. via a state recovery district)

Conclusion

The ideas presented here are challenging to adopt and implement. They also offend some people's ideas about how public education is supposed to operate. But that's the point: public education can't get better results unless it changes in significant and important ways. Controversy will always precede improvement.

Idaho leaders can learn more from materials available from the Center on Reinventing Public Education, University of Washington or can visit with state superintendents and legislators from leading states like New Orleans, Cleveland, Denver, and Jefferson Parish Louisiana to see performance management in action.