ATTACHMENT 1

Idaho Department of Correction

Committee Presentation

Kevin Kempf, Director

Board of Correction

Debbie Field

Howard "J.R." Van Tassel

David McClusky

Idaho Department of Correction

Mission

To promote a safer Idaho by reducing recidivism.

Vision

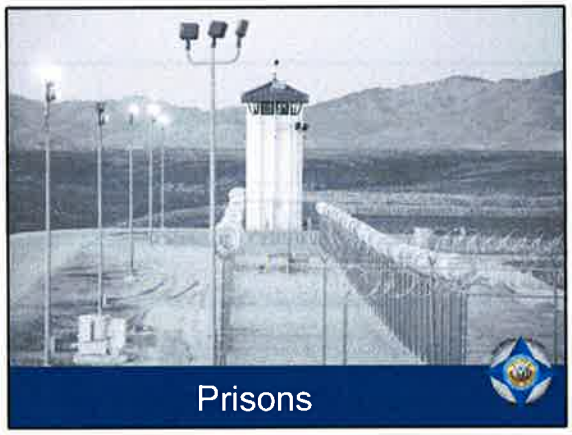
Dedicated and committed staff will transform lives
one person, one family, one community at a time.

Values

We value our staff.
We value a safe and professional environment
that promotes dignity and respect
for staff, the public and offenders.

We expect of ourselves...
Open Communication
Trust
Honesty
Integrity
Teamwork

First, Look Within



Security Retention Plan

Experienced Staff

New Officers

Experience = Security

Experienced Staff

New Officers

Supervisors
50%, less than
2 years experience

Officers
64%, less than
2 years experience

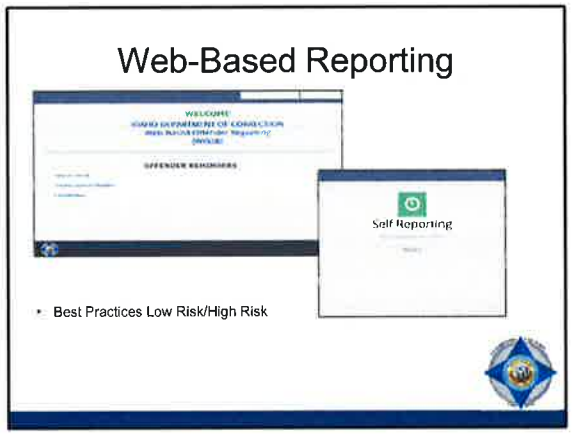
ISCC

Meaningful Opportunities

IDAHO CORRECTIONAL INDUSTRIES
BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS BUILDING LIVES

Community Corrections

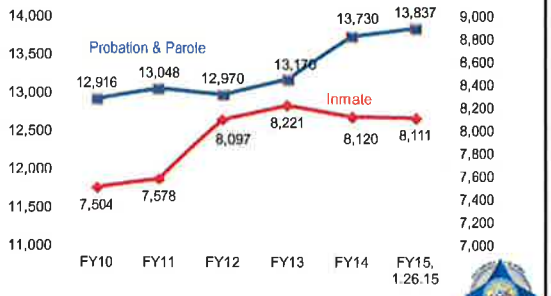
Idaho Justice Reinvestment
Strengthen Supervision
Prison Beds for High Risk
Track Effectiveness
IDAHO DEPARTMENT CORRECTION


Web-Based Reporting
Self Reporting
• Best Practices Low Risk/High Risk

Education

393 GED Graduations, FY14
IDOC FY 2015 mid-year GED Completions – 66
Typical IDOC mid-year GED test completions
150 – 200

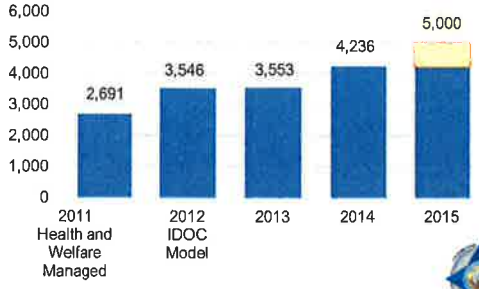
IDOC Populations Comparison FY10-Current



Treatment- Increase Access to Care

SUD Clients Served via Provider Network

FY11-FY14,Estimated FY15



Idaho Department of Correction

Mission

To promote a safer Idaho by reducing recidivism.

Vision

Dedicated and committed staff will transform lives
one person, one family, one community at a time.

Values

We value our staff.
We value a safe and professional environment
that promotes dignity and respect
for staff, the public and offenders.

We expect of ourselves...
Open Communication
Trust
Honesty
Integrity
Teamwork

Where we are-

2014 GED Test Results (April – October, 2014)
Passed - 43
Pass Rate – 72%
Test Takers - 194
GED Tests Taken - 549
GED Ready Tests Taken - 205

FY2014 Completions—achievements are recognized through industry certification and secondary diplomas recognized by the State Department of Education

Adult Basic Literacy – Attainment of 6th grade level in Reading/Math
63 completions
Secondary Education – High School Diploma/GED
350 completions (364 completions occurred before 2002 GED test close out)
Computer Literacy – Microsoft Digital Literacy— 589 completions
Work Experience – 600 hours of ETR programming w/ 240 hours of work
112 completions
Post Secondary - 604 completions
Pre-Release – 2,015 completions
Education/Career Planning – 352 completions

Where we are going -

Provide skills training resulting in living wage jobs for offenders returning to the community

- **GED testing process** – The 2014 GED test is normed by high school graduates and aligned to Common Core State Standards, raising the academic bar substantially. Preparing students to pass the 2014 GED test will require more and varied instruction than was required in the past. There is concern that current resources will not adequately meet the demand of the offender population. Approximately 40% of the offenders entering the IDOC do not have a secondary education completion—32% read below a 9th grade level.

- **Vocational offerings,** to include computer technology—
  54% of offenders entering the IDOC claim to lack job specific training. Such individuals are largely incapable of obtaining or retaining employment beyond the entry level, and many are unable to secure a job at all.

- **PreRelease**— expand class curriculum to include Computer Literacy (Microsoft Digital Learning) and Education/Career Planning (using Department of Labor material) and continue delivery goal to every offender releasing from IDOC custody.

- **Advanced technology instruction** training for education personnel to expand the boundaries of current teaching and learning activities

Post Secondary Classes

- Vocational Reading/Math—8th grade
- Post Secondary Reading/Math—12th grade
- NCCER Core
- Horticulture
- Carpentry
- HVAC
- Commercial Cleaning
- Masonry
- Electrical Wiring
- Plumbing
- Advanced Computers—Microsoft Office Specialist

IDOC Education Staff—52

1– Director
5– Managers
29—Instructors
11—Inst. Asst.
2– Librarians
1- Ed IT Coor.
3—Admin. Support

Position Funding

34—General Fund
18—Grant Fund

Education Summary FY14

IDAHO DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTION

Education, Treatment and Re-Entry
To Promote a safer Idaho by reducing recidivism.

11/3/14

Where we've been—

2011-2012 Restructuring the Education program

Education Integrated Pathway – The purpose of the IDOC Education program has changed from providing basic literacy, English language instruction and preparation for the GED test to preparing individuals to be ready for post-secondary education and for living wage jobs. The change is in response to a large and growing portion of the national workforce lacking basic academic and work readiness skills needed to succeed economically and the IDOC's pathway delivery system. The restructure includes:

Common Core State Standards- aligned to college and work expectations and used as a basis for GED 2014 testing standards.
Aligning resources to changes in program curriculum – updated materials and classroom technology
Support offender reentry through **delivery of PreRelease and Education/Career Planning** – both classes consider offender ability, goals and post incarcerations needs to address prior to release planning.
Outcomes provide **transition between educational levels and employment**

2012 – 2013 Closing out the 2002 GED and preparing for 2014 GED computer-based testing

PearsonVUE GED Testing Center - Seven IDOC prisons are now GED Testing Centers; IMSI and CAPP are in approval process. The contract also includes Juvenile Corrections and Ada County Sheriff's Office

Conversion of offender computer labs to support 2014 GED testing in the correctional institutions

Staff training in 2014 GED testing process and continued training on CCSS

Education SOP updated to reflect programming changes

Received $50,000 grant from **Albertson Foundation** for implementation of Khan Academy in RJS classrooms. The project expanded computer aided instruction and embedded technology/media in the Education program.

2013-2014 Strengthen Instructional Technology and broaden opportunities for offender technological proficiency

2002 GED test closed in December, 2013

Coordination with IT to enable off line computer labs to meet computer based testing requirements

April, 2014 – **2014 GED testing protocol in place**

Identify **instructional materials** for Common Core State Standards/GED 2014

Staff training in 2014 GED test prepataion and delivery to make adjustments for classroom and testing expectations.

ATTACHMENT 2

Rural Charter Schools Face Special Challenges

By Katie Ash
Photos by Jerome A. Pollos for Education Week
Rathdrum, Idaho

edweek.org

Students walk across a soaked playground during recess at the North Idaho STEM Charter Academy in Rathdrum, Idaho. Like many rural charters, the school has found it difficult to acquire adequate space for its growing enrollment.

But their challenges differ from those of counterparts in urban centers

The North Idaho STEM Charter Academy operates here out of seven portable buildings that house the school's offices, classroom space for 317 K-8 students, and a "cafegymatorium."

Although the school may not boast state-of-the-art facilities, it took three years of searching and negotiations to acquire the four-acre campus on which the school sits, said Scott Thomson, one-half of the husband-and-wife duo who opened the school in fall 2012.

"Facilities is a huge issue, especially for a rural school," he said.

In fact, rural charters face a host of challenges that set them apart from their urban counterparts, charter experts say. Besides a lack of suitable facilities, they have smaller budgets and fewer support services than urban charters; a smaller pool of students, teachers, and administrators to draw from; and, often, particularly tense relationships with their local school districts as they compete for limited resources and relatively few students.

Such difficulties may help explain why the proportion of charters serving rural communities, though growing, is still small: Rural charters make up about 16 percent—785 schools—of the total number of charter schools across the United States. And only 111 of those schools operate in remote rural areas.

But proponents of charters say those independent public schools can breathe new economic life into rural communities with dwindling populations by adding jobs and attracting families to a town, even as they provide an alternative to local schools that, like big-city schools, may be struggling.

In some cases, rural charters have been founded to stave off consolidation and keep schools open in small communities, said Andy Smarick, a partner at Bellwether Education Partners, a Boston-based nonprofit consulting firm that works with schools to improve achievement. Mr. Smarick recently examined such schools in five states and argued for the expansion of rural charter schools as a way to strengthen rural education.

Mr. Smarick also wrote a 2012 book, *The Urban School System of the Future*, about the impact of vouchers and charter schools on school districts.

"Chartering can do great things, but it's much more complicated in rural areas," he said. "If you live in a rural state, chances are you have a weak charter law or not one at all."

The eight states that do not allow charter schools are mostly rural, he said. Those states are: Alabama, Kentucky, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, Vermont, and West Virginia.

Twelve-year-old Bailey Freeman, left, and Christopher Clark, 11, work on a Mars Rover project in a corner of the "cafegymatorium" at the North Idaho STEM Charter Academy in Rathdrum. The 317-student K-8 school opened in 2012 but already has a waiting list of 300 students.

'Huge Financial Issue'

Robert Mahaffey, the spokesman for the Rural School and Community Trust, a Washington-based research and advocacy group, said his organization rarely supports the growth of charters in rural communities.

"From a resource standpoint, where we come down when it comes to charters is, first and foremost, how are they being funded?" he said. "Are you in essence draining essential resources from the traditional public school?"

If a local public school isn't meeting the needs of its community, Mr. Mahaffey said, before turning to a charter school, "let's bring the parties together along with local business leaders, the school board, parents, and, most importantly, the students ... and figure out a strategy where we can improve the existing public school."

Kai A. Schafft, an associate professor of education at Pennsylvania State University, said that his research on rural charters supports Mr. Mahaffey's stance.

"The charter school advocates present [rural charters] mostly in terms of 'this is a good thing because it results in more choice,' but the problem with that argument is that the choice comes at a potentially significant cost, and that is the institutional undermining of the option that already exists," Mr. Schafft said.

"In the context of Pennsylvania, with shrinking school district budgets, superintendents are facing increasingly tight fiscal circumstances," he said. "The movement of students from public schools into charter schools is really a huge financial issue."

But back in Rathdrum, where the playground of the North Idaho STEM Charter Academy overlooks one of the local district's high schools, parents and students don't have time to wait, said Shauna Foss, whose son Chance, an 8th grader, has attended the school since its opening.

"Chance is an advanced learner, so he tended to be fairly bored in the classrooms [at his local public school]," she said. "Instead of having our kids taught to the test or giving them ditto after ditto, [the STEM academy] makes them really think outside the box and figure out what they need to make it work."

STEM Curriculum

The school infuses instruction in the STEM fields—science, technology, engineering, and mathematics—throughout its curriculum and promotes project-based learning for all students.

Each day, students take their core classes in the morning and work on projects in the afternoon. The projects include such hands-on activities as preparing for the Mars Rover and MINDS-i competitions, which require students to work in teams to program and create robots that can perform a series of tasks such as climbing a hill or collecting rocks.

Ms. Foss has been so impressed with the school that she, along with a group of other parents, pushed the Thomsons to add high school grades to the school. The state has since approved the expansion, and the charter will be adding one grade level a year, starting with 9th grade in 2014-15, until it is a K-12 facility.

To accommodate the expansion, the school is building a new, 19,000-square-foot facility next to its portable classrooms that will soon house students in K-4, and it has purchased an additional three acres of land. The expansion is being funded through a private loan from a local bank.

The school also received a $50,000 grant from the Boise-based J.A. and Kathryn Albertson Foundation shortly after opening.

Between its first and second years of operation, the school had a 98 percent re-enrollment rate, and its waiting list has grown to nearly 300 students for next year, school officials said.

Encouraging Competition

When the North Idaho STEM Charter Academy opened, the school initially pulled students from 47 different schools in the area, Mr. Thomson said.

About 130 students were from the 4,100-student Lakeland district, in which the charter school operates, said Tom Taggart, Lakeland's director of business and operations.

Although the district knew the school would be opening, "we were already losing students on our own, and that was a bit of a blow," Mr. Taggart said of the charter's arrival.

Maguire Duncan uses a small magnifying glass to inspect rock samples in her 2nd grade class at the STEM-focused school. Nationwide, there are 785 rural charter schools, accounting for just 16 percent of the total number of charters in the United States.

It's not just funding that the regular public schools are losing, he said.

"The students who do leave are sometimes the leaders in their class. They're good examples with involved parents," Mr. Taggart said. "So the school's taken a hit more than just [in terms of] numbers of students."

But he also said that the charter school was a "good thing" for parents who want their children to have a more STEM-focused curriculum. And it has even spurred some changes to the local high school, such as an afterschool STEM club, to make it more competitive, he said.

Revitalizing Communities

In Walton, Kan., the Walton Rural Life Center is a rural charter school that has received national attention for its agriculture-based, project-centered curriculum. (The school has no association with the Walton Family Foundation.)

The school converted from a regular public school to a charter in 2007 at the suggestion of the local school district's superintendent, said Natise Vogt, the principal of the 240-student K-4 school.

Conversion to charter status allowed the school to pull students from a larger area, potentially increasing its enrollment, which hovered just shy of 100 before the transformation, said Ms. Vogt. Over the eight years following the conversion, the school has more than doubled its enrollment, and student behavior problems have plummeted, she said.

Students at the school grow food to package and sell to the community and raise a variety of animals as well. They learn about the life cycle by watching chickens hatch, and the 2nd graders learn multiples of 12 by packaging the eggs and selling them in dozens.

"When we first started this, the community was an aging community, and now people move here because they want to be assured that their kids will be in our school," said Ms. Vogt, who was quick to say that the school has never actively recruited students from other districts, so as not to "steal their kids."

Similarly, the Rural Community Academy, a 100-student school in Graysville, Ind., converted from a regular public school to a charter model in 2004 under the threat of consolidation.

The K-8 school centers around a place-based instructional model that "means bringing people into the school, and that also means taking kids places," said Susie Pierce, the school's leader and chief operating officer. "[The students] get to know their community and the people in it."

The school draws on partnerships within the community to provide services to students and make ends meet, said Ms.

Pierce. For example,when the school first opened, the hospital provided meal services for the students. (The school has since taken over providing meals on its own.)

And the local Lions club holds annual student vision screenings at the school, Ms. Pierce said.

The school, in turn, is one reason why the community has continued to thrive, she said. It has 28 full- and part-time employees, she noted, and spurred the opening of at least three new businesses in the town.

Local Roots

Having the buy-in of the community is key to the success and longevity of rural charter schools, said Terry Ryan, the president of the Boise-based Idaho Charter School Network.

"The school has to be seen as being locally owned or locally imported by people who have the right motives," he said. That may be part of the reason that charter-management organizations, which operate networks of charter schools and make up a large portion of such schools in urban areas, have little presence in rural settings.

One notable exception is the Knowledge Is Power Program, or KIPP, charter network, which is now branching out to the Mississippi Delta region.

The network is also planning to open a school in rural North Carolina this summer, with help from a program run by the pro-charter group Parents For Educational Freedom in North Carolina, in Raleigh.

"Our target is really in these underserved communities, which are primarily rural," said Christopher Gergen, a senior consultant to the organization who helped design and implement the program, known as the N.C. Charter Accelerator Program.

In that state, which has seen a big increase in charter schools since lifting its 100-charter cap in 2011, urban areas are approaching a saturation point, "leading to the exploration of new markets," including rural communities, Mr. Gergen said.

Nina Rees, the president and chief executive officer of the Washington-based National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, called rural communities "the last and final frontier in [charter school] expansion efforts."

"When you look at the illiteracy rates [in rural areas] and the fact that we're not focused on it at all in a comprehensive way, it is a shame," she said.

While polls show that rural communities tend to have higher levels of trust and affection for their local public schools than communities in other areas do, rural residents may become more comfortable with charters, Ms. Rees said, as charter schools begin to have more success in those areas.

"The best way to make the case for expanding into another rural area is if you've done it well," she said.

Education Week
Vol. 33, Issue 30, Pages 1,22-23

Founders cultivate 'dream' school

Millions of American children are learning the new way to do math based on Common Core State Standards: Gone are the traditional methods of carrying numbers or multiplying tables, replaced by intuitive ways of understanding basic principles like division or subtraction. Thousands of parents have spoken out, saying the new standards are bewildering and render them unable to help their kids with homework they thought they had mastered long ago.

But at Anser Charter School in Boise, new math is old hat.

Anser began serving as a pilot for what is now known as Common Core math back in the early 2000s, when Boise State University professor Jonathan Brendefur introduced Mathematical Thinking for Instruction methods to the start-up charter school. The collaboration has paid off: Anser is now considered a national leader in teaching math.

"We've been doing what the state is requiring teachers to do for 15 years," Anser Organization Director Heather Dennis says. "It's funny for me to listen in the news; you hear parents are really stressed out about trying to help their kids with math right now with this transition. But I remember that as a parent myself when my kids were here. I remember that exact same frustration: 'How do I help them? I don't know how to do this!' Everyone else is going through our growing pains."

What would a "dream" school look like?

For Anser, growing pains are an essential part of the process. The school was founded in 1999; it was the first charter school in the Boise Independent School District and the second charter school in the state.

Suzanne Gregg, Anser's education director, is a founding member of the school. Gregg joined Boise's Garfield Elementary Principal Darrel Burbank's call to his fellow teachers, asking: What would a "dream" school look like?

"It wasn't that we were unhappy where we were at," Gregg says. "In fact, most of us *were* happy."

But the idea of a from-scratch school — one that included deep parental involvement and excellent professional development for teachers, as well as consistency for students — was too much to pass up.

The founders originally envisioned a private school with plenty of scholarships for low-income children, but, as Gregg says, "that didn't go over well." The idea for Anser was born as states across the nation were embracing charter schools as ways to push change and innovation, and the founders decided to explore that route instead.

For three years the founders met regularly, devoting weekends and summer vacations to building their vision. They delved deep into the Expeditionary Learning model, which was developed by Outward Bound founder Kurt Hahn and stresses in-depth, project-based learning. Anser served as a pioneer for other charter schools around the state.

"The relationship with the chartering district was new to everybody," Gregg says. "I think they felt like we were stepping away from public education, and nobody really understood a lot of what was happening. So the first year was a rough, rough year all the way around."

Anser opened on Sept. 7, 1999, with 117 students. By December 1999, the school was big enough for a

move to the gym at the former Bronco Elite Athletic Club (there were a lot of runny noses from leftover chalk dust, Dennis says). By 2005, it was clear the school needed more space — and to get it, Anser had to be creative.

Doing more with less

The new building in Garden City, which Anser occupied in 2011 — increasing enrollment to more than 350 — was purchased and renovated thanks to a capital campaign that soldiered on despite the crippling recession. The J.A. and Kathryn Albertson Foundation and the Laura Moore Cunningham Foundation provided funding, but parents and family and community members stepped in and opened their pocketbooks.

Anser student artwork

Ninety-seven percent of the financial pledges Anser accumulated were fulfilled, Dennis says. Anser raised $850,000. This is especially important because charter school students in Boise, according to a recent study by the University of Arkansas, receive 42.7 percent less funding than students enrolled in a Boise district school. Boise charter schools do not receive local levy dollars.

"You're not going to find a school operating on less money per pupil," Dennis says.

In many ways, Anser is in the same position as a rural school without access to property wealth, Dennis says. "We're very similar in our challenges," she says. "There is a point at which you have to give up on things that you would like to do because you can't afford to do them. We don't have a reading specialist. We have larger class sizes. We had to increase that. That has a really big impact in the way teachers are able to teach and what they're able to teach. We don't have the custodial staff we really need. We don't have a school nurse. People wear a lot of hats, and I think any small business is that way — it's very similar to a small business."

The lack of funding is mitigated by Anser's Family Council, which puts on two major fundraisers a year. "Anser is fortunate in so many ways other schools aren't in that we do fundraise almost $130,000 a year," Dennis says. "We have committed parents, but we also have parents who struggle financially, too, like any other school."

Anser's can-do spirit

Anser's can-do spirit is critical to its success, says parent and Family Council (the school's parent organization) member Erin McCarter. McCarter's daughter, Ruby, is in eighth grade; her son, Indy, is in fourth.

"That's one of the things I really love about this school," she says. "There's constant examination of practices and outcomes and a movement toward making it as good as it can possibly be. It doesn't matter if there's a change every year; I love that. I feel like too many times people are like, 'Oh, we can't really do an overhaul because that will be too hard and people will be upset. Here, it's like, 'Let's just keep improving.'"

That attitude includes the children, McCarter says. They're encouraged to

Anser student poem

create multiple drafts when writing, for example, under the assumption that their first effort won't be their best. Instead of traditional parent-teacher conferences, students conduct their own learning assessments and present their work to their parents. And the students hold each other accountable, Ruby McCarter says.

"You can't talk bad about somebody, and you can't feel bad about yourself, and it's hard to get into an uncomfortable position here because the community is so supportive," Ruby McCarter says.

The school's community really is special, says board member Penelope Gaffney. Gaffney has three children in the school. "It just feels like an incredibly responsive community I can be part of and continue to be actively engaged in their learning," she says.

Gaffney's family found Anser when they were looking for a more hands-on school for their oldest son, Brennan, who is now in seventh grade. Brennan received the extra attention and mental stimulation he needed to thrive, Gaffney says, and his development has been "phenomenal."

"The other thing I really appreciate and didn't expect is that my middle child is a very different person," Gaffney says. "He has the same teachers my oldest had, but each teacher really gets to know the student and their learning styles and their best qualities, whatever those happen to be — which I love."

Student-focused teaching style

Anser's rigorous, student-focused teaching style has become an inspiration for other schools around the state and the nation. Anser is an Expeditionary Learning mentor school. It's also a studio district for Idaho Leads, a project of Boise State University's Center for School Improvement and Policy Studies. The school recently hosted visits from schools in Melba, Gooding, Star, and Idaho Falls, and held a three-day math institute in October with food provided by parents.

Helping other teachers is one of the core philosophies at Anser, Gregg says. "One of the tenets of the school is to give back to the profession," she says. "We've got some really high quality and highly effective teaching staff, and I think that's based on our rigorous interviewing process we have teachers go through."

Teachers must thrive through an intense screening protocol, which includes a portfolio and interviews with parents, board members — and students. But the responsibility for hiring rests with the teachers who will be part of the new instructor's team: At Anser, grades are joined in pairs, so teachers work together extensively. New teachers "very rarely" have experience in expeditionary learning, Gregg says, so instructors participate in a lot of training.

But all of that extra work shows through in the students, Dennis says. She hopes Anser will always be focused on what is right for each child.

"We're about students reaching their own, personal bests and their potential," she says. "And that looks different for everyone."

I-DEA models digital learning methods

There's something you notice when you step inside GEM Prep classrooms: Even though they're full of tiny kindergartners and first graders, the rooms are mostly quiet. Look closely and you'll see why — each student has a small computer and a colorful headset and is completely absorbed in matching shapes or solving puzzles.

For these digital natives, this classroom is the norm. But for older generations, it's a pioneering method called blended learning.

GEM Prep, located in Pocatello, is the first foray into blended learning for the Idaho Distance Education Academy, or I-DEA. I-DEA is a public, online charter school founded in 2004 by Whitepine Joint School District #288 in Deary. It serves K-12 students throughout Idaho, with brick-and-mortar resource centers in Boise, Post Falls and Pocatello.

I-DEA has long been a trailblazer of digital learning methods, but for several years its students did not seem to be performing at high standards. That changed in 2012, when I-DEA received its first five-star rating from the Idaho State Department of Education; it has been a high performer ever since. Although the school enrolls more than 700 students statewide, I-DEA Director Jason Bransford wants to bring I-DEA's best practices to a broader audience.

I-DEA photo 2

"We've always had this one problem," Bransford says. "Only 40 percent of Idaho families can take advantage of I-DEA. In order to have your kid at home all day, every day, you have to have an adult at home all day, every day; someone who is in the room and working with the student as necessary."

That need puts I-DEA out of reach for most of Idaho's working families, Bransford says.

"We'd been brainstorming for years," Bransford says. "What do we do for that other 60 percent of Idaho families who can't utilize I-DEA? We'd been looking at some of the highest-performing schools in the nation, and we kept hearing they were using this approach called 'blended learning.' Working in the online world, we already understood what online looked like."

Bransford and his team, backed by grant support from the J.A. and Kathryn Albertson Foundation, began researching blended learning schools in Southern California. They studied everything: How schools trained students to move from in-person instruction to online learning and back again. How they selected an online curriculum. How they used level groups, which divide students by ability level so instructors can get a snapshot of how, and how quickly, students are learning. And, importantly for I-DEA, how the schools practiced accountability.

"The schools said, 'We're so forward with parents and students and teachers before we ever start that everybody knows we're about growth,' " Bransford says. "You're going to get students at all different levels, regardless of what you do as a school. So you might as well be about how much growth they show when you're with them."

There is no single, standardized model for blended learning; as technology has changed, so has blended learning. At its most basic level, blended learning is about customizing the learning experience for every student, and this is made possible by teachers and students using technology to target learning. Some blended learning schools look very much like traditional schools, but students employ technology

throughout the day in the form of mobile devices or other digital tools. Other models resemble I-DEA and include mostly online learning supplemented by face-to-face support from certified teachers and teacher aides.

Early in 2014, I-DEA decided to move forward with its GEM Prep pilot program.

"We decided the best way to learn was to just do it," Bransford says. "On one hand, it's a separate school. On the other hand, it's an extension of what we've been doing for years in online learning. It is under the same charter."

The pieces needed to open the school fell into place quickly. A building that once housed a private school went on the market; Bransford hired new teachers and purchased new technology; students began enrolling. The school opened Sept. 2, 2014, to about 40 kindergarten and first-grade students.

One of those students is first-grader Isabella Roper. Her mother, Bethany, has been thrilled with GEM Prep. Isabella is one of the youngest students in her class, and Bethany Roper has been concerned about her ability to keep up. Isabella went to a traditional kindergarten last year.

"I was in her classroom a lot in kindergarten, and I feel that the kids who really needed help often weren't noticed," she says. "With computer programs, they're always noticed because the teachers know what they're doing and the students get that feedback."

Meeting students where they are

Feedback is a crucial part of I-DEA's success, and it's one of the key differences between a traditional model and an online or blended learning model, Bransford says. It gives teachers the opportunity to capture snapshots of their students at any time and make adjustments to how learning opportunities are presented to each student.

"If you have a student in first grade who is struggling with spatial reasoning and math, you may know that from the data you get, but what do you do with that information?" Bransford says. "We try to remediate the situation and catch the student up to the level they need to be at so there aren't holes in their learning."

Part of the need to teach students at their current level and push for growth is driven by the unique needs of I-DEA students.

Instructor Danette Thompson, who teaches social studies, history, American government and economics, says students run the gamut.

"I always thought there would be a stereotypical virtual student, but they're all very different," she says.

Bransford says I-DEA, like many online schools, has a high turnover rate. Some parents don't realize how involved they must be to make an online-only model work for their child, he says. Other students, like I-DEA eighth grader Michael Nilsson, have medical issues that keep them out of school. Michael's dad, Brian, says I-DEA offered the best option for his son.

"My wife looked at a lot of different schools," Brian Nilsson says. "But because this school is here and there's a building (the resource center), we figured it would make more sense because there would be a point of contact. That's helped a lot."

The road to five stars

I-DEA didn't always appear to be meeting the needs of students like Michael Nilsson. When Idaho measured school progress through the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) method mandated by the No Child Left Behind Act, I-DEA failed to meet standards. It didn't meet AYP standards in 2005-2006, 2006-2007 or 2009-2010.

Bransford wasn't yet director during those years; he worked at the I-DEA support center in Pocatello. Those were frustrating times, he says.

"It was a bit depressing," he says. "In one way, we knew we were making progress by that third year. But at the same time, it's hard to show that progress when you're doing just a snapshot in time."

When Idaho adopted its current assessment method, the Idaho Five-Star Rating System for all public schools and school districts, I-DEA received five stars. It has received a second five-star nod since then.

"We have been really excited to celebrate this idea of being a five-star school," Bransford says. "We felt like it validated this concept that online learning can be every bit as deep, every bit as powerful — and maybe even more so than a traditional classroom."

I-DEA was an early and enthusiastic adopter of the recent Common Core standards. "We found the standards so much more rich and deep than the previous Idaho standards that to get there was going to be more than a one-year proposition," he says.

I-DEA teachers read every word of the Common Core standards, which Bransford calls a "grueling exercise," as part of a full year of prep work before I-DEA's early adoption. Thompson says the standards have made a difference in the classroom.

"There are higher expectations," she says. "Our classes are very aligned to the Common Core standards."

As I-DEA continues to prove its success, Bransford has additional plans to expand. I-DEA celebrated its 10 th anniversary in 2014 by redesigning its logo, website and course management system. It used part of the money from a 2013 Idaho State Department of Education Tech Pilot grant to institute a digital library so students may check out digital books, ebooks and audiobooks. There is room to grow at GEM Prep, and eventually Bransford would like to open a blended learning school in the Treasure Valley.

Bethany Roper hopes her other four children will eventually take advantage of I-DEA and GEM Prep. Children today will enter a workforce in which virtual meetings and online communication are the norm, she says, and online learning helps students prepare for the real world. She says she can already see Isabella becoming more comfortable with technology.

"That's amazing," she says. "I think it's going to give her a big edge."

Academy Public Charter School breaks ground for new school planned in Chubbuck

idahostatejournal.com

CHUBBUCK-- One by one dozens of students at The Academy Public Charter School donned hard hats and pressed ceremonial golden shovels into the mud on Philbin Road in Chubbuck Tuesday, breaking ground on a new beginning for their school.

"We are grateful that we are outgrowing it (our current location) and can get another facility," Academy Charter School principal Joel Lovstedt said at the groundbreaking ceremony.

Academy Charter's new 50,000-square-foot building aims to accommodate a bulging wait list for the behavior-based harbor charter school. The school will almost double its size, educating 550 students in in grades K-8. Current enrollment is 280. Classes in the new building will begin in the fall.

Although numbers fluctuate throughout the year, more than 180 locals are sitting on the waiting lists for the school, Lovstedt said. The average waiting list is about 200 students strong.

"We are frustrated seeing parents signing up their kids and not getting in year after year," Lovstedt said.

Current students are guaranteed a spot as they progress through school. Any open spots created through natural attrition are then filled by a lottery system.

While student-teacher ratios will stay the same (topping out at 34 kids per class), classroom sizes will jump from 600 square feet to an average of 1,000 square feet each. The new two-story school will also accommodate two classes per grade level. First, second and third grade classrooms (two rooms each) will be on the ground floor and grades four through eight (also two rooms each) will meet on the top floor. Two kindergarten classes will be offered - one in the morning and another in the afternoon. Other facilities, including a gym, bathrooms, library and computer room will also be updated and larger. The current Academy Charter school building dates to the 1930s.

Academy Charter School is one of two charter schools in the Chubbuck/Pocatello area and one of 41 brick-and-mortar charter schools throughout the state of Idaho. Many others operate only online.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, charter education has increased substantially over the past decade. Since 1999, the percentage of all public schools that were public charter schools increased from 1.7 to 5.8 percent taking the national number from 1,500 to 5,700. In addition to increasing in number, charter schools have generally increased in enrollment size over time, according to data from the center. Since 1999, the number of students enrolled in public charter schools increased from 0.3 million to 2.1 million students. During this period, the percentage of public school students who attended charter schools increased from 0.7 to 4.2 percent. Just between 2010 and 2012, the number of students enrolled in public charter schools increased by almost 300,000.

According to the Idaho State Department of Education, the funding for public education follows the student, meaning greater enrollment in charter schools could take some money away from District 25's traditional public schools. The funding formula is based on three things: average daily attendance, experience and education of teachers, and type of students taught. The formula is consistent for all public schools.

"Why should they get money for a student they are not teaching," Lovstedt said.

While Academy Charter School does get about $1 million in funding that would otherwise stay with District 25, it is responsible for its facility and handling its own finances.

Charter schools cannot raise money from public levies, cannot use the state's credit rating to obtain loans and Academy Charter will be responsible for its own mortgage payment. While charter schools have more flexibility in terms of their curriculum, they are accountable to the district and must achieve positive results. If they don't, their charter can be revoked.

"The bottom line is that people like what we produce," Lovstedt said of Academy's long wait lists. "It is worth it to them. Unlike public schools, if we don't do a good job we shut down. We have to do well."

The $6.5 million project is possible because of funding assistance from Building Hope, a non-profit organization that helps high-quality charter schools with facilities costs.

While Building Hope is a key funding partner, the school received major assistance from the J.A. and Kathryn Albertson Foundation.

"We only invest in what we think are better schools," said Joe Bruno, President of Building Hope. "This is a better school."

Waldorf-inspired school opens in Hailey

The students in Angie Grant's fourth-grade class listened intently, nestled amongst handmade pillows in Grant's reading area, while she told a story about the Norse god Loki. Now they're trundling back to their desks on the other side of the classroom, pulling out their class materials and singing a song to the tune of "Oh! Susanna!":

I'm a Viking, for that's the thing to be! For there's no greater joy than pirating for a Norse warrior like me.

Syringa students

Welcome to Syringa Mountain School. This Waldorf-inspired school in Hailey is Idaho's newest public charter school, and as such it faces some steep challenges: It's using a curriculum traditionally taught in private schools, yet must adapt it to meet Common Core academic standards; it opened in August and has had to design nearly everything, from its interior building design, to its outdoor garden, to its teacher training and development.

"It's a wonderful responsibility to have," says School Director Mary Gervase, who initially became involved with the school as an education consultant. "I just feel so honored to be part of it, as I think everyone does here."

A new way of thinking about an old curriculum

Traditional Waldorf education is based on the methods of Rudolf Steiner, who launched his education philosophy in Germany in 1919. Steiner's method stresses the natural development of the child and breaks it up into three distinct phases: birth to 7 years, 7 to 14 years and 14 to 18 years. Waldorf methods emphasize handwork, the outdoors, movement and storytelling. It is one of the fastest growing educational models in the world. There are more than 250 such schools in North America, but Syringa Mountain is Idaho's first public Waldorf school.

"The way Waldorf is set up, children developmentally need certain stories at certain ages," Grant, the fourth-grade teacher, says. "For Norse myths, it brings in all these characters that make children question their character. Such as Loki, who is very sweet and kind and smart and very crafty and sly. So the children can relate to these characters. I can say, 'Oh, you're really being like Loki today!' And they can stop and think and say, 'Maybe I am being a little sly today.' It's very interesting to watch."

Those stories are integrated throughout the day. Later, children in Grant's class created pictures of Loki and replaced his hair with adjectives to describe the god, which carried the myth into the language arts.

"The curriculum, I feel, is really rich in that we use source material in mythology and biography components," says Mende Coblentz, Syringa Mountain's curriculum director. "It creates a rich world literacy."

As they progress, students move from fairy tales and Hebrew and Greek mythology, eventually integrating Idaho, national and world history.

Syringa Mountain, like traditional Waldorf schools, places a lot of importance on natural materials. Everything is tactile. Students mold, paint, sculpt, whittle and move their bodies — a lot. The crayons are natural beeswax rather than Crayolas. The classrooms are hand-painted in designs and landscapes by parents, volunteers, and students. The kids learn science, in part, by working in the school's garden. The children reproduce their best work in lesson books, which are then bound and given to their parents at the end of the year. The chalkboards are old-fashioned blackboards.

"We're really low-tech," Gervase says. "Part of the Waldorf training is that you learn how to do chalkboard art, you learn how to do painting, figure drawing — that wasn't part of my training, you know?"

Syringa's gardening room

Training has been an issue for Syringa Mountain from the start. There are no Waldorf training centers in Idaho or nearby states, so Gervase and the school's board decided to bring trainers to Idaho. This past June, all teachers went through a two-week intensive with three professors recruited from Kentucky. Gervase says that process will continue for the next three years until all of Syringa Mountain's teachers are certified in the Waldorf method.

"The unintended benefit was that we had teachers traveling here for the training," Gervase says. "We had teachers coming from Montana, we certainly had a contingent from Boise, interest from Salt Lake. So we're the closest Waldorf training center for the surrounding states. That's really our hope — that we'll continue to be a training center, specifically for public Waldorf schools."

Unlike private Waldorf schools, however, the students at Syringa Mountain must meet or exceed Idaho public education standards, and the methods needed to assess students don't fit into the traditional curriculum. Take computers, for example, which are used during Idaho's Common Core assessments. At a Waldorf school, students in younger grades are virtually tech free.

"In private Waldorf schools, they wouldn't even use it until middle school," Gervase says. "But as a public school, we are required to participate in all of the state assessments, so as a result we will be introducing at least computers starting in third grade."

Part of Coblentz's job is to help integrate Waldorf methods with the Common Core. "Any time you blend the two methods, you're going to have to adapt," she says. "You're going to have to speed something up, slow something down, chuck one thing and invite another thing in."

Students at Syringa Mountain tend to be more advanced mathematically than students at traditional public schools but a bit delayed in reading, which isn't introduced in Waldorf-method schools in early childhood.

"Fourth grade is where we even out and the curriculums really become quite similar," Coblentz says.

It's all part of a process of working with an older educational method, she says.

"You constantly have to upgrade and update to keep up with the times," Coblentz says. "Education changes because we change over time."

Syringa Mountain attempts to keep Waldorf alive in the Wood River Valley

The Syringa Mountain School was born out of the ashes of the Mountain School, which was located near Bellevue.

"It was just sort of the perfect sequence of events," says Gervase, who once served as the assistant superintendent for the Blaine County School District. "There was a small, private Waldorf school here with

about 40 children and it was closing. The way this all got started was that a group of parents came to me and asked me if I would help them write a charter. That school was closing, these parents wanted a Waldorf option for their children, so we didn't have any time to lose."

The Syringa Mountain founders initially considered opening as a magnet school within the Blaine County School District, but, given the impending closure of the Mountain School and immediate need for an alternative, decided to go the public charter route instead. The Blaine County School District referred the founders to the Idaho State Charter School Commission, which accepted Syringa Mountain on its first application in August 2013. Idaho First Lady Lori Otter joined the school's advisory board in April 2014.

Annie Bloomfield, whose two daughters, Grace and Gaby, attended the Mountain School, moved her youngest to Syringa Mountain when the school closed. Grace, who is in seventh grade, had to move to a different school because Syringa Mountain is only K-5.

"It just was a fit for both of them," Bloomfield says of Waldorf. The method was a natural extension of her parenting style, she says, giving children a lot of hands-on and outdoor experience.

"It's shaping who they are as human beings," Bloomfied says. "They have reverence and respect for each other, the kindness that you show another person, reverence for the outdoors, for nature, for earth, and how we're all part of this big, beautiful world together."

Now, Bloomfield says, her daughters are hopeful that Syringa Mountain will continue its planned expansion. The school would like to include grades 6-8 by 2017; it currently has about 135 students and a waiting list of 5-10 families.

That's not the only way Syringa Mountain would like to expand, however. The board's strategic plan includes a goal of reaching a three-star rating or higher through the Idaho State Department of Education (assuming the state keeps its star-rating system); further build out of the school's campus (currently housed in a business park); and development of deeper roots within the Blaine County community.

Syringa Mountain is also considering education throughout the Wood River Valley. Greg Bloomfield, chair of the Syringa Mountain School Board and husband of Annie Bloomfield, recently sent a letter to Blaine County School District asking them to consider an "uncharted" new option that would benefit public charter, magnet, and traditional schools.

As the Idaho Mountain Express reported in mid-December, Greg Bloomfield also read the letter aloud at the Blaine County School District's monthly meeting. Board Chair Shawn Bennion "responded in writing to the Bloomfield letter, stating that the School District will research state law that might pertain to a union of the district and Syringa and would consider the proposal in its new strategic plan that will be developed in the first half of 2015," according to the Mountain Express.

It would be a big move for a small school, but such thinking is typical of Syringa Mountain's broad outlook.

"I think one of our challenges is to try to figure out, What does Waldorf education look like in the 21st century and beyond?" Gervase says. "This is one of those things we're learning about. I'll let you know at the end of the year how it goes."

Coeur d'Alene Charter: 'Above and Beyond'

Ask the seniors at Coeur d'Alene Charter Academy what sets them apart from other public high school students and they'll tell you: They're survivors. They've watched their class shrink from more than 120 students to just over 40.

"The moral and academic expectations here are set way higher," says student Anna Verhaeghe. "All of the teachers expect you to do your best and try your hardest. You don't just get an A for doing an assignment. You get an A for going above and beyond."

Above and beyond is the standard for Coeur d'Alene Charter Academy, a public charter school that serves students in grades 6-12. The school has piles of accolades: It has earned five stars, the highest school ranking, from the Idaho Department of Education. In 2014, the Washington Post named it Idaho's most challenging high school — again. Newsweek has ranked it one of the top 20 public high schools in the West. U.S. News and World Report has ranked it among the top 100 high schools in the country.

Yet it's also a school in transition. The Coeur d'Alene School District, which has authorized the school since its inception in 1999, decided to cut ties with the academy in 2013, citing financial considerations. The academy recently applied for authorization with the Idaho Charter School Commission.

It's been a long process, says Principal Dan Nicklay, but the school is sticking to its singular focus: Academic success.

"The philosophy is: The few, the proud," Nicklay says. "It was never stated that way, but that is the sentiment. Our philosophy has always been, and continues to be, teacher autonomy and academic freedom."

'Just challenge them'

CDA charter lockers

The academy was founded in 1999 by Bill Proser, who still teaches at the school. From the start, the school attracted teachers, like Nicklay, who saw the potential in Proser's vision of high standards and independence. Nicklay came to the academy from Montana in its second year to teach English and literature.

Back then, the entire school was housed in a building that had previously been a pet store. The walls didn't reach all the way to the ceiling, so students and teachers could hear what was happening in other classrooms. The academy's playing field was full of rocks.

The second school year commenced with about 200 enrolled students.

"The kids who came in were a hardy lot," Nicklay says. "I cannot believe that parents agreed to bring their kids to this experimental, goofy little school that used to be a pet store. But we worked them hard and had no mercy."

By the end of that year, only 140 students remained. At first, Nicklay says, not even all of the parents were on board with the school's rigorous standards. Teachers are free to teach college-level lessons in the eighth grade, for example, and many were concerned their children couldn't handle the advanced pace. In Nicklay's own class, most of his students started the year earning Ds. By the end of the year, he says, most of the students were earning As and Bs.

But performance begins with the academy's teachers and its traditional focus. Students are required to take Latin, and there's a heavy emphasis on Western Civilization, the humanities, foreign languages, math and science. One hundred percent of the students take advanced placement classes.

Nicklay recalls one of his conversations with Proser when he arrived at the academy.

"I asked him, 'What should I teach?' " Nicklay says. "He said, 'I don't care. Just challenge them.' "

The school has stood by that mandate, shunning any sort of standardized teaching method. Instead, Nicklay says, teachers are encouraged to pursue their own gifts and use them in the classroom.

"What we've discovered is that when you push kids and demand much of them, they will perform," he says.

Nicklay stresses that the school isn't exclusionary; it's a public charter school and is open to everyone who wants to enroll. He cites the academy's success with autistic students, for example, as well as other students who were thought to be poor performers, but when challenged academically rose to the high standards expected of them.

The main focus has always been the school's mission to challenge students, says Vice Principal Brett DePew. ("You'll be able to find his office," student Nadia Hitchcock joked, "by the aura of despair emanating from it." DePew is known among students as somewhat of a rules enforcer.)

"I found that the mission is the essence of what this school is about," he says. "Every decision that we make, we weigh that against the school mission. ... But the mission is the bottom line here at our school: 'Providing a rigorous, content-rich, college preparatory education for any students who are willing to accept the challenge.' That's something that makes us special and sets us apart from other schools, whether they're public schools or private schools."

Discipline, discipline, discipline

There are other standards that set the academy apart. Students are expected to stick to a strict moral code. Student Becca Mann was a bit surprised when she arrived at the academy.

"I came here and there are no locks on lockers," she says. "There aren't individual inspections. They hold you to a higher standard. If you mess up, you're going to get punished for that. But, overall, that's taught everyone to be really responsible. It's disciplined. It's good."

There is also a dress code, though some students try to flaunt it by wearing colorful scarves or changing their hair color; if caught, those students face detention. "After we graduate we all dye our hair and wear the craziest clothes," Mann says.

No money is spent on sports, though the school does have sports teams. Parent volunteers drive students to and from games, Nicklay says. If students want new uniforms or equipment, they have to raise the money themselves.

"Every dime we spend on basketball is a dime we don't have for books," Nicklay says.

Evidence of the school's college prep focus is everywhere. The high school's entryway includes university pennants from around the country with the names of students who have attended listed underneath them. National Honor Society minutes are posted on the wall. Ninety-nine percent of the school's students go on to higher education, DePew says, and college admissions counselors visit the school every week.

Like other public schools in Idaho, Coeur d'Alene Charter Academy took a financial hit when funding dwindled during the recession. That hasn't affected its success.

"We're still cranking out the lion's share of the National Merit Scholars around here, our kids are walking out of here with an average of about $100,000 in scholarships," Nicklay says. "So we're still doing a great job."

Waiting for authorization

Funding has changed the way the school operates, though. When the school was founded in 1999, the Idaho Charter School Commission didn't exist; the law dictated that public charter schools had to be authorized by their districts.

In 2012, the Idaho Legislature amended the law so schools could instead be authorized through the Idaho Charter School Commission. Districts had the opportunity to continue authorizing their public charter schools, but the Coeur d'Alene School District chose to sever its ties with the academy.

Nicklay was not exactly pleased with the move, though he says he still remains on good terms with Coeur d'Alene School District Superintendent Matt Handelman. Nicklay thought the academy enjoyed a "good, positive working relationship" with the district. "It had been great," he says. "At worst, it had been mutual tolerance. At best, it had been a good, cooperative relationship."

Handelman calls the process an "amicable divorce" that made sense both practically and financially. Had the relationship continued, the school district would have had to cover the cost of providing care to the academy's special-needs students at a time when "we don't have enough staff to cover our own kids," Handelman says.

There were other potential liability concerns about accidents, for example. "Are we the deep pocket as their authorizer?" Handelman asks.

The separation was key to the school's continued independence, Handelman says. "We don't have any interest in being big brother to them," he explains. "And they didn't have any interest in us being a big brother to them."

The academy is now applying to the Idaho Charter School Commission for an authorization transfer. The commission asked the academy to make some slight changes to its transfer petition during its December meeting and is expected to give its ruling on Feb. 12. Nicklay is confident the transfer will be approved.

The school is proceeding with plans for the future. DePew says he would like to focus on infrastructure, replacing old "falling-down" modular classrooms and expanding the school's classroom space. And Nicklay says the school will always keep its focus on being the best.

"We always try to do everything above and beyond," he says. "That's our philosophy."

Heritage Charter's remarkable turnaround

Heritage Community Charter School in Caldwell welcomed its first class of students in the fall of 2011. By June 2012, it was uncertain the public charter school would reopen after its first summer break.

Money was scarce. The school's board was in a state of upheaval. Its unaccredited high school pilot program ended. Heritage received an academic rating of just two of five stars from the Idaho Department of Education. The Idaho Public Charter School Commission, which authorizes the school, warned it was considering sanctions.

"I'll be honest: We struggled," says Richard Hammond, parent and vice-chairman of Heritage's board. "We really did."

Heritage Charter student

Fast forward to 2015. Heritage is financially solvent and quickly filling its halls with K-8 students. They leave proficient in both English and Spanish thanks to the school's dual-language immersion program, a rarity in Idaho public schools. Its board, no longer warring, is looking to the future. There's even a waiting list for grades K-5.

The credit for the school's success goes to Javier Castaneda, Hammond says, who became principal in 2012.

"I could not dream of a better person to lead the school," Hammond says. "He's a good man. He cares. He works very hard."

The jump to four stars

Heritage's remarkable turnaround began with Castaneda's hiring, says board Vice Chairman Robb MacDonald.

"We wanted someone who was going to be able to come in and take charge, fulfill that leadership position, and rally the rest of the school community behind him," MacDonald says. "We interviewed Javier and we felt like he was a good fit. He was actually a lot better than we even knew at the time."

Hammond credits Castaneda's "rare" combination of business sense and people skills. "He has been instrumental in bringing the vision," he says.

Castaneda came to Heritage from Oregon, where he worked in elementary education. His first order of business: Replace half of Heritage's teaching staff. Some had quit because the school's high school pilot ended, but some chose not to continue for a second year, Castaneda says.

"The big piece when I started, and when all of these new staff started, was to create a common vision and direction," Castaneda says. "The board came together, the administration came together, the teachers came together, and it was really asking, 'What is it that we want from our school for our students? It really boiled down to just one thing: No more percentages of looking at student success. We'll focus on each, individual child."

That doesn't mean data is out of the picture — far from it. Instead, Castaneda says, the change comes from the way the data is used. Castaneda and Heritage teachers established professional learning

communities who meet each week and evaluate students' current results.

Each bit of data is analyzed by asking three questions, Castaneda says: What do we want our students to learn? How do we want them to learn it? What do we do if they didn't learn it?

"If we don't shift from percentage to child by child, you're not going to get that growth," Castaneda says. "The students aren't going to learn. We're not going to be sure that each child is learning."

The process is reassuring to MacDonald, who has two daughters enrolled at Heritage.

"In organizations where you're dealing with a lot of people, it's easy to get into the mindset of dealing with numbers," he says. "But the fact that the school is focusing more on looking each individual and finding out what the needs are and figuring out what we can do to help — it's encouraging. I know if my kid's ever on the low end, or the high end, or anywhere, they're being looked at specifically for what their needs are. It makes me feel a lot better."

Castaneda says Heritage's teachers make the school's academic approach work.

"Our teachers are amazing," he says. "As we're looking at this child-by-child concept, they're volunteering their time after school to stay after with select groups of students who may be struggling to provide them with an extended learning opportunity."

So far, the work is paying off. Heritage received just two stars from the Idaho Department of Education during the 2011-2012 school year. By 2012-2013, the school had jumped to four stars.

"The teachers were extremely thrilled, I was thrilled and the board was thrilled to see that we really could come together to make this school move forward," Castaneda says.

Core Knowledge meets dual immersion

Heritage, like White Pine Charter School in Ammon, is a Core Knowledge school. The emphasis is on a broad, content-rich education in history, science, literature, the arts and geography.

What sets Heritage apart is that classes are taught in Spanish and English, adding an extra level of rigor to an already demanding curriculum.

"As our students are going through, we're teaching them through that vehicle of classical education," Castaneda says. "And we're doing it with a dual-immersion model. It's quite a lot to bite off for anyone starting here at the school."

Shantell Mullanix, who is in charge of federal programs and counseling at Heritage, has a son in first grade at Heritage and a son who is taking Spanish in high school. Her sons speak Spanish at home, she says.

"What I've learned is that high school Spanish is kind of the textbook Spanish, whereas (Heritage students) are immersed in the language," Mullanix says. "It's the dialect they're hearing all the time. It's been really interesting."

The dual language program is "critical" to the success of the school, Castaneda says.

"It's really a big piece," he says. "Research shows that students who are multilingual, over time, will have greater gains academically than their monolingual counterparts.

Maci Mattravers, a fourth grade student at Heritage, didn't know a word of Spanish when she started first grade at Heritage. After a few days of instruction in English, her teacher changed gears.

"All of a sudden, she said, 'OK! Put your thinking caps on. We're going to Spanish now,' " Mattravers says. "It was really exciting."

Most of the school's teachers are either new to a dual-immersion program or have limited experience. Castaneda says Heritage is investing in professional development, including national dual-language conferences. But the program faces a larger hurdle, as well — the school is 55 percent white, 40 percent Hispanic and 5 percent other. The school also has a free-and-reduced price lunch percentage of 71 percent.

"The challenge we face is having a sufficient number of native Spanish speakers in the community to fill part of the need of a dual-immersion program," Castaneda says. "It's simply because of where we're located. Over time, dual-immersion programs that have succeeded have had an equal number of students who speak native English and who speak native Spanish."

Growing for the future

Hammond says joining the school's board was a wake-up call. "There's a lot about the school system, and the way the state handles the funding, that I didn't understand at all," he says.

Like all public charter schools in Idaho, Heritage does not receive additional funding from public levies or bonds. Board members say a large part of Heritage's turnaround involved rethinking the school's funding and putting the focus on priorities. MacDonald renegotiated the school's five-year building lease, which was a crucial step toward solvency.

"Finances — that's a problem statewide," MacDonald says. "Schools have trouble with finances because the education system may be underfunded. The charter school system is underfunded. That's a battle we're constantly working with and I feel like we have control of it and we're moving in the right direction, but it's just always there."

Castaneda has tightened budgets among his staff, and Mullanix says teachers have been resourceful.

"The teachers have been amazing about going and asking for donations, writing grants, seeking whatever they can find for the classroom," she says. "I'm just very proud of them for always taking those opportunities."

Finances will be an ongoing struggle, MacDonald says.

"We have such a great program here," he says. "It's a shame to have the program suffer because we're a little short on funding. Everything else is working so well, so we're trying to bridge that gap in funding. We really appreciate what the teachers do to seek it."

Funding will become more of an issue as the school grows. Castaneda says the school hasn't quite met its enrollment cap of 540 students, but expects to. In the meantime, he's been thrilled with the support the school has received from the community — free school supplies, support for fundraisers, and donated time and money.

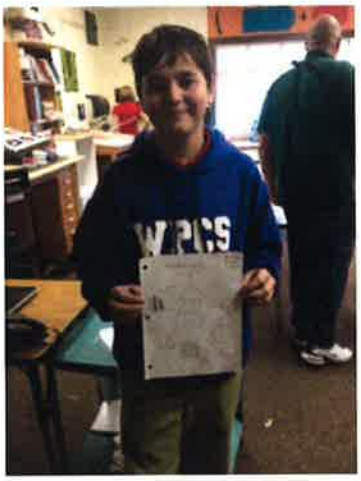
Heritage is gaining control of its finances, but charter school funding is a statewide issue, Hammond says.

"It costs the same for a chair, whether the kid is sitting in a chair here or they're sitting in a chair in a public school," he says. "The chair is the same price. Why do we treat a child differently because they're in this place?"

White Pine plans for ambitious expansion

White Pine Charter School Principal Jeremy Clarke likes to tell a story about the day he was schooled by his 8th grade students.

White Pine, a public charter school in Ammon, has a dress code: navy, light blue, red or white collared shirts and khaki or navy bottoms. The only exceptions are "spirit days" — or so school administrators thought. The 8th grade students found a loophole that would allow purple hoodies, a privilege that can be seen on many of the older students walking the halls.



White Pine student

"A lot of the kids here are brilliant," Clarke says. "But they're allowed to figure out they're brilliant. There's no one correct way to do things."

That kind of independent thinking has been the key to White Pine's success. As the school matures into an elder statesman among Idaho's charter institutions, it's scrambling to meet the needs of the communities it serves. Its plans are ambitious: A second K-8 school and an expansion into dual-track high school.

All of White Pine's expansion plans are still in the nascent stages; school leaders are engaged in conversations with the Idaho New School Trust, Building Hope, the J.A. and Kathryn Albertson Foundation and other partners about options for making their plans real. White Pine's dual-track high school would be unlike any other high school in the state, perhaps in the nation. If their plans come to fruition, students would choose between a traditional track or a medical track. Those on the traditional track would earn college credits thanks to concurrent enrollment with a higher education institution; those on the medical track would graduate as certified nursing assistants, medical assistants or paramedics.

A medical-track public charter high school, Meridian Medical Arts Charter High School, already exists in the Treasure Valley. But a dual-track high school could serve eastern Idaho's booming medical needs, Clarke says. Eastern Idaho is home to, among others, Bingham Memorial Hospital, Madison Memorial Hospital, Eastern Idaho Regional Medical Center, Portneuf Medical, Mountain View Hospital, and the state's medical education powerhouse, Idaho State University.

It's an ambitious dream, and one that hasn't been submitted to the state or possible funders for approval. There's also talk of an additional K-8 campus that would serve the other side of Bonneville Joint District #93. Clarke says the current school had 64 openings this year and 492 applications.

"We have such large waiting lists that we know we could fill another school," says parent and White Pine board chair Nick Burrows.

More than a decade of growth

It's been a long journey to White Pine's current success, says Vice Principal Randy Crisler. Crisler joined the school shortly after it was founded in 2003.

"We've grown a lot since my first year, when everyone was part-time and we didn't really have a lot of extracurricular activities, to now offering extracurricular activities and robotics and the GATE program," Crisler says, referring to the school's gifted and talented education program. "So it's been fun."

White Pine built its permanent facility in Ammon in 2006. The school follows

White Pine student 2

White Pine built its permanent facility in Ammon in 2006. The school follows the Core Knowledge model, founded by University of Virginia professor E.D. Hirsch, Jr., which emphasizes a broad, content-heavy knowledge of science, arts, literature, history and geography. The idea is that students need a foundation of knowledge they can then employ in critical thinking. As the Core Knowledge Foundation puts it, "... what children are able to learn at any given moment depends on what they already know — and, equally important, that what they know if a function of previous experience and teaching."

Backing up the Core Knowledge model are the White Pine teachers, Clarke says.

"We look for uncommon teachers to do uncommon things," Clarke says. "I can go hire a traditional teacher; that's not difficult. They can go and teach what everyone else teaches. We want uncommon teachers who do it a little bit differently, who think a little bit differently, because those are the people who gets things done."

They're often getting things done long after school ends. "We had to set the alarm to go off to get the teachers to leave," Burrows said. The alarm now rings at 9 p.m.

The school hasn't always stuck faithfully to the Core Knowledge model. White Pine went through some turbulent years: In 2012, then-Principal Terry Rothamer was arrested in connection with a burglary of an eastern Idaho restaurant and resigned soon after.

When Clarke took the helm after Rothamer's departure, he realized the school needed to re-focus.

"There have been some things that we've had to leave behind that were difficult," Clarke says. "At one time we said we were a Core Knowledge school, but we didn't really focus on it. We recommitted ourselves to Core Knowledge, saying, 'We will do this, this is our identity.' Some of the things that didn't apply to Core Knowledge went away. And some of those were pet projects of teachers or of others."

The teachers got on board, Clarke says. One instructor left because she had to move, but the rest stayed. The work paid off: White Pine received a 4-star ranking from the Idaho Department of Education for the 2011-2012 school year. When the rankings came out the following year, White Pine had jumped to 5 stars.

"We pride ourselves on being the most challenging public school in eastern Idaho, and we're unabashed about that," Clarke says. "That being said, that doesn't mean we don't service every kid. We just make sure they're challenged wherever they're at. And we have a lot of fun doing it."

Students are tested at least monthly, and often every two to three weeks, both in the classroom and the computer lab. Teachers meet regularly to go over results and adjust their teaching methods, if needed.

"It's not so much so we can say that everyone tests better, but let's be honest: Those who are familiar with testing are more comfortable with it," Clarke says. "We're just providing them an avenue. When they sit down in front of a national standardized test, it's just a test. It's no big deal. We've taught them how to think, we've taught them how to reason."

Funding for the future

White Pine's big plans require big money. As Burrows says, the dual-track high school, if it progresses, will require a lot of resources. "That's going to require equipment, that's going to require partnerships," he says. "There's going to have to be grant writing and fundraising to just equip those programs and for those

students to learn what they need to."

White Pine, like all of Idaho's public charter schools, operates on lean rations. The school's state funding is supplemented by the fundraising of its Parent-Family Association, but White Pine has also received public and private grant support over the years. The Albertson Foundation gave the school a grant recently to develop a business plan, which includes its expansion.

Clarke and Burrows would like to hire a grant writer to pay for the school's expansion and development. The needs are great: medical equipment, teachers and a new building.

"Charter schools don't get access to public bond and local levy dollars," Crisler says. "If we want to build a new school, we can't take it to the community and have them help us with that. We have to do it with our own means."

"We love donors!" Burrows adds, half-jokingly. But he and Clarke stress that the school is determined to expand in a meaningful, if unorthodox, way.

"When we talk about what we want to do in the future, it's not just pie in the sky, how are we going to get there," Clarke says. "We've got a pretty good strategic plan that we're now finally putting down on paper to go after it. ... As a board, as a school, as an administration, we've all grown."