Office of Performance Evaluations

News Release: ISIMS Lessons for Future Technology Projects

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(BOISE) August 25, 2006— Idaho Student Information Management System (ISIMS)—a partnership between the state and the JA and Kathryn Albertson Foundation—failed because of poor planning and lack of end user involvement, concludes a report released by the bi-partisan Joint Legislative Oversight Committee (JLOC). The Office of Performance Evaluations—an independent, non-partisan legislative oversight office—conducted the study at the direction of JLOC.

ISIMS was approved by the Legislature in 2003 with the foundation pledging $35 million for the project. Citing cost overruns and development costs projected to reach an estimated $182 million, the foundation terminated the project in December 2004. The state spent over $1 million of public resources on the failed project. The foundation's federal tax returns show that it spent nearly $23 million on the project between 2001 and 2004.

Idaho Code defined ISIMS as "a secure, centralized data system where public school information [would be] stored, accessed and analyzed." But while the vision was grand, evaluators found that the State Board of Education did not monitor the projects' progress and did not establish rules to guide the project; the Albertsons Foundation retained "absolute and sole" control of the project. The Department of Education's representative on the ISIMS management team lacked authority, limiting the department's ability to advocate for the state and resulting in poor contract oversight and poorly invested public resources.

As the state moves forward with improvements to its system of collecting and reporting student information, the State Board and the Department of Education should learn from the lessons of the ISIMS project. Technology projects should clearly define the roles and responsibilities of all stakeholders and consider views, needs, and resources of end users at each stage of the project. In addition, technology projects should maintain a realistic scope, supported by realistic expectations of technology and an updated project plan. The ISIMS project did not adequately address these key issues. The report includes a best practices checklist and strongly recommends the use of this checklist for future large- or small-scale public information technology projects.