



**TESTIMONY TO THE IDAHO SENATE EDUCATION COMMITTEE
JANUARY 14, 2019
BILL RUSSELL, PRESIDENT OF THE IDAHO CHARTER SCHOOL NETWORK**

Chairman Mortimer, Vice-Chair Thayn, and members of the committee.

For the record, I am Bill Russell and I am speaking today to you in my role as the CEO of the Idaho Charter School Network.

Idaho's 46 brick and mortar charter schools and 7 virtual charter schools educate approximately 22,000 kids, with 11,000 more on waitlists. In the fastest growing state in the nation, Idaho's public charter schools are an important piece of the puzzle in meeting an ever-growing demand for high quality education.

It is my privilege to be with you and to provide answers to the three questions posed by Chairman Mortimer.

1. What are the top priorities for your group for 2019?

We have three priorities that matter greatly to us this year.

First, the state school funding formula. We support Idaho's effort to modernize and upgrade the state's school funding formula. The current funding formula, designed in 1994, simply does not provide the flexibility needed by educators to improve learning for all students. Nor does it do anything to encourage innovation in our schools and classrooms, or recognize that different students have different needs. It is a one-size fits all funding formula, and it was designed before public charter schools even existed.

Building level leadership know what their students need most and should be empowered to direct resources in ways that work best for their students. We support the effort to put resources, based on the needs of students, in the hands of local schools and districts, including public charter schools. Local educators should make more of the spending decisions that impact their students

and staff. And, as is currently the case with public charter schools that are required to have “performance certificates” with their authorizer, flexibility to decide how dollars should be spent locally need to be matched by accountability for student outcomes. In short, trust but verify results.

It is also important that some schools not be put at an economic disadvantage by taking away hundreds of thousands of dollars they rely simply because of a new formula. We strongly resist the wealth adjustment.

Second, Charter School Administrator Flexibility. We want to see the charter school administrator flexibility bill that passed both the House and the Senate in 2018 become law. Research tells us that, “effective principals are key to strengthening teaching and schools.” We agree and as the nation’s fastest growing state we need to welcome and embrace the very best talent we can for our schools and children. We have some outstanding nontraditional leadership talent wanting and prepared to run a charter school in Idaho.

When launched back in 1998 the legislative intent of the state’s charter school program was to “serve as learning laboratories with hope that successes could potentially be applied throughout the larger public education system.” Our administrator flexibility bill builds on this intent. Further, Idaho’s 50 plus public charter schools are required to have a state approved authorizer, and with this authorization comes a detailed performance certificate that all public charter schools must have to operate. In exchange for this additional level of accountability, charter schools are supposed to be free to operate their programs as they think best for students.

Third, credit enhancement for high-performing and seasoned schools. We support legislation that would create a credit enhancement for high-performing and seasoned public charter schools, similar to the credit enhancement already available to our traditional district schools. Unlike their public district school brethren, public charter schools do not have access to local property taxes or public levies. On average, according to a new report just issued by Bellwether Education partners, charter schools in Idaho receive just \$445 per student in state funding, while public districts on average receive \$1,206 per student in both state and local dollars. What’s more, public charter schools pay higher interest rates and more fees than their district peers due to their lower per pupil

funding for facilities and the fact that they don't have a credit enhancement tool like the traditional districts do.

Texas, Colorado and Utah have active credit enhancement programs for charter schools, and none have seen a default for schools that benefit from these efforts. Time for Idaho to do the same for our established public charter schools.

2. What advances has your agency witnessed in the last 24 months regarding student growth and achievement?

We are proud to report that Idaho's public charter schools continue to add students and buildings. Since 2016, Idaho has launched eight new charter schools and enrollment has grown from about 20,000 to close to 23,000 students. Despite this growth, the *Idaho Education News* recently estimated there are almost 11,000 students on charter school waitlists across the state. Charter school students are performing well, as is demonstrated by the table attached to my testimony:

PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOL STUDENTS ARE LEARNING

**TABLE 1: PERFORMANCE OF ALL PORTFOLIO SCHOOL STUDENTS
ALL STATE CHARTER STUDENTS & ALL STUDENTS STATEWIDE**

	All Charter Cohort	All State Public Schools
Share Proficient ELA	63%	55%
Share Proficient Math	53%	45%
Share Making Adequate Growth ELA	71%	65%
Share Making Adequate Growth Math	60%	54%

**TABLE 2: PERFORMANCE OF "ECONOMICALLY DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS"
BY PORTFOLIO SCHOOL COHORT, ALL CHARTER COHORT & ALL STUDENTS STATEWIDE**

	All Charter Cohort	All State Public Schools
Share Proficient ELA	50%	42%
Share Proficient Math	39%	32%
Share Making Adequate Growth ELA	62%	56%
Share Making Adequate Growth Math	49%	44%

**TABLE 3: PERFORMANCE OF "MINORITY STUDENTS"
BY PORTFOLIO SCHOOL COHORT, ALL CHARTER COHORT & ALL STUDENTS STATEWIDE**

	All Charter Cohort	All State Public Schools
Share Proficient ELA	52%	40%
Share Proficient Math	40%	29%
Share Making Adequate Growth ELA	63%	55%
Share Making Adequate Growth Math	49%	41%

*Bluum is appreciative to the Idaho State Board of Education for providing this data and analysis
**Minority student is defined as Hispanic, American Indian, Black, more than one race, and Hawaiian/Pacific Islander

3. If you could make any changes to general education and/or education policy, what 2 things would those be?

Two things: First, we would like to see more instruction that children receive be connected to real life . Despite efforts to move towards things like individualized instruction far too many students in Idaho still take coursework that lack any connection to real life. This bores students to death and is a leading cause of young people giving up on school completely. Schools need to make learning relevant by connecting it to real life.

Second, we would like to see greater emphasis on student outcomes, rather than adult-oriented inputs. Across the country and across the world, in higher education and in elementary and secondary education, the state of the art and best practices answer is outcome driven success evaluation, not input evaluation. Give school leaders greater local control with how they spend their money and how they teach their students, and judge them based not on whether they checked all the boxes people in Boise proscribed to them as part of a thorough education, but based instead on their actual outcomes with their kids.