



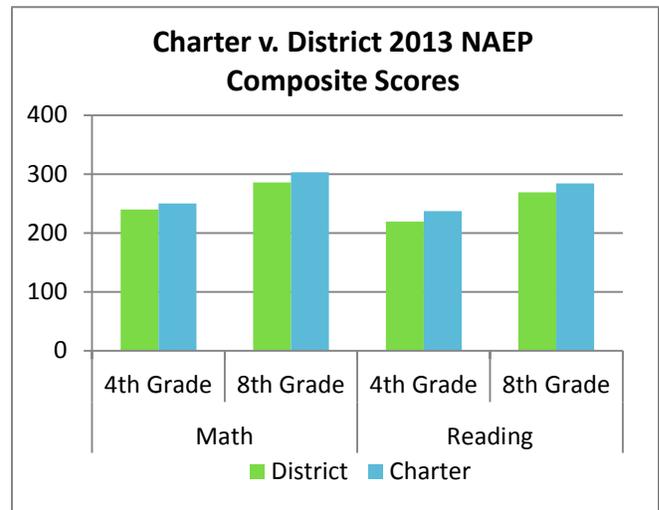
POLICY BRIEF: IDAHO'S RURAL CHARTER SCHOOLS

Idaho's first charter schools opened in 1999, and the number and quality of these schools has grown steadily ever since. At the start of the 2013-14 school year, the Gem State had 48 charter schools serving more than 19,000 students.¹ According to the Idaho Department of Education, an additional 11,400 students were on waiting lists.² More than six percent of Idaho's public K-12 student population attends a charter school.³ Charter schools are distributed fairly evenly between geographic locales. Twelve of Idaho's charter schools are located in rural areas, and collectively these schools serve about 5,100 students.⁴

As a group, Idaho's charter schools outperform their district peers. On the 2012-13 report cards, 69 percent of charter schools received a four- or five-star rating. In comparison, 59 percent of traditional Idaho public schools received a four- or five-star rating.⁵ Further, Idaho charter school students as a group performed better on National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading and math assessments than their traditional district school peers.⁶

Idaho's rural communities and its families and children could benefit from more quality school choice options, including more charter schools. To get there, state education policy needs to better support rural charter schools.

Often isolated from talent pools and facing significant diseconomies of scale, rural charter schools require a policy environment that reflects their unique needs and challenges. It is time to reconsider the laws and regulations that govern rural charter schools and to craft policies that facilitate the growth of these schools in the areas where they can make a positive difference. In particular, three key policy areas need to be revisited —charter authorizing, human capital, and funding.



CHARTER AUTHORIZING

Idaho has made steady improvements to its authorizing laws. In 2004, it created a statewide authorizing body, the Idaho Public Charter School Commission.⁷ The Commission currently oversees 33 charter schools, including eight of Idaho's 12 rural charter schools.⁸ In 2013, new legislation expanded authorizing power to institutes of higher education (IHEs).⁹ Although no IHEs currently authorize charter schools, new authorizers could help seed smart growth of high-quality rural charter schools. For example, a university or college could focus its authorizing efforts exclusively on rural charter schools and work with them, their communities, and their families to make sure they receive the supports necessary for success.

Idaho's law is favorable to charter school growth. In 2012, it eliminated its statewide cap, which had limited the number of new charter schools in the state to six per year and removed a provision that limited charter school growth to no more than one per district. Removing caps allows current and prospective authorizers to evaluate all charter school applications on their merits, approving high-quality proposals and denying weaker ones, instead of simply adhering to an arbitrary number of schools.

However, Section 2(a) of Idaho's charter school law limits charter conversions, stating, "No whole school district may be converted to a charter school district or any configuration which includes all schools as public

charter schools.”¹⁰ This prohibits charter school conversions in the 16 of Idaho’s 115 districts that operate a single school—most in the remotest areas of the state. This prohibition also casts doubt on whether a new charter school could be started in these districts; the specter of parents preferring the charter school could threaten the viability of the district school and pre-emptively preclude the charter school’s approval.

Converting a district-run school to charter status may be a useful strategy for rural education leaders, for example to gain valuable flexibilities from state laws and regulations or to prevent the closure of a local school due to consolidation. Idaho policymakers should remove this limitation on charter school conversions and ensure that all communities that might want a charter school have the ability to pursue one.

HUMAN CAPITAL

Idaho’s alternate routes for teacher certification do not provide individuals with sufficient flexibility to explore a second career in teaching. In 2013, the National Council on Teacher Quality gave Idaho’s alternate route policies a “D+.”¹¹ A high-quality alternate-route process for teacher certification could help all rural schools—and rural charter schools, in particular—meet a persistent need for highly effective teachers.

Idaho’s alternate routes require three important changes. First, with the exception of Idaho’s “Computer-Based Alternate Route” through the American Board for Certification of Teacher Excellence (ABCTE), Idaho’s alternate routes are limited to high-need subject areas.¹² Policymakers should remove this restriction and ensure that candidates interested in teaching any grade or subject area can pursue alternate certification.

Second, alternate routes should maintain high standards for candidates while providing a program that can adapt to candidates’ existing skill-sets, experience, and knowledge. In Idaho, these specifics are left to the alternate route provider and, with the exception of ABCTE, providers are limited to colleges and universities.¹³ Colleges and universities have little incentive to provide meaningful alternatives to their own traditional preparation programs. State policymakers should provide for a variety of organizations to serve as alternate-route providers and then encourage these providers to create streamlined programs for career-switchers and set high but flexible standards for candidates. This might include, for instance, the ability to substitute a subject-matter proficiency test for course work or a college major or minor.

Third, existing rules can not only make it more difficult for alternative providers like Teach for America and TNTP to work in Idaho but also prevent some of the innovative school-based programs pioneered by Yes Prep in Houston and High Tech High in San Diego. A school-based, grow-your-own alternate certification program could help rural charter and district schools recruit nontraditional candidates; it could also help rural schools retain teachers, by making program eligibility contingent upon a commitment to spend five years at the school. Policymakers should open the field of alternate route providers beyond colleges and universities to allow for multiple types of innovative programs to emerge.

CHARTER SCHOOL FUNDING

Idaho disburses 25 percent of estimated per-pupil funding to a new charter school in the summer before it opens. This helps cover charter school start-up costs that would otherwise require philanthropic or other forms of grant dollars. Idaho also distributes facilities funding to charter schools. These provisions are helpful, but charter schools in Idaho still operate on meager funding.

While charter schools are funded by the same formula as district schools, they do not receive any local tax revenues or supplemental levies. This means North Star Charter School in Eagle, Idaho receives approximately \$5,500 per-pupil funding, while nearby district schools receives approximately \$6,400. Similar trends hold true for Idaho’s urban charter schools. Boise Independent School District receives approximately \$9,400 in per-pupil revenue each year. ANSER Charter School, located in Boise, receives approximately \$6,000.¹⁴

In addition, local school districts rely on local levies to support capital costs. Charter schools must instead use significant operating funds to secure school facilities. Idaho charter schools spend \$542 per pupil on facilities, while the new facilities fund provides charter schools with \$114 per pupil.¹⁵ A punishing gap remains.

Policymakers should encourage and incent charter school access to local funds. This might include giving charter schools the authority to submit their own levy proposals through district, and encouraging districts to issue the proposals on charter schools' behalf. Policymakers could also require districts to include charter school facility needs in their capital funding requests.

Policymakers should also revise current law, which allows but does not require a district to share "surplus, district-owned property."¹⁶ State law should require districts to provide full use of unutilized buildings and shared use of under-utilized buildings. Policymakers should also make a broad spectrum of vacant public assets available to charter schools—including state lands, municipal facilities, or state offices—particularly in rural areas where vacant school buildings may be few and far between.

Idaho policymakers have taken some important steps to strengthen the state's charter schools—allowing multiple authorizers, removing most caps, and providing a small degree of facilities funding. If charter schools are to fulfill their potential to provide better school options to Idaho's young people, however, there is more work to be done. Charter school conversions must be an option for district schools—no matter their location or the number of schools in a district. The state must create better opportunities for individuals to pursue alternate certification, and provide charter schools the opportunity to build pipelines and programs that suit their needs. Finally, charter schools in Idaho—particularly rural Idaho—will face a steep climb toward financial sustainability so long as funding disparities persist. State policymakers must ensure that per-pupil dollars follow students to the school of their choice. When these conditions are met, Idaho will have created a more hospitable environment for high performing charter schools—and Idaho students will have a better chance of attending a high-performing school that meets their needs.

¹ National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS), "The Public Charter Schools Dashboard," 2014, accessed March 4, 2014, <http://tinyurl.com/q9zy82s>.

² As cited in IdahoEdNews.com, "Charter Commission Approves Expansions," December 13, 2013, accessed March 5, 2014, <http://tinyurl.com/m8rk663>.

³ NAPCS, "The Public Charter Schools Dashboard," 2014, accessed March 4, 2014, <http://tinyurl.com/q9zy82s>.

⁴ Idaho Charter School Network (ICSN), "School List," n.d., accessed March 4, 2014, <http://tinyurl.com/k7mv2hp>.

⁵ Author's calculations, IDSDE, "Star Ratings 2012-13," 2013, accessed March 4, 2014, <http://tinyurl.com/mr6ckmf>.

⁶ National Center for Education Statistics, "NAEP Data Explorer," accessed March 12, 2014, <http://tinyurl.com/dbdfbx>.

⁷ Terry Ryan, "Free-Up the Public Charter School Commission," ICSN, January 14, 2014, accessed March 2, 2014, <http://tinyurl.com/qzfp8wx>.

⁸ Author's analysis, Idaho Public Charter Schools Commission (PCSC), "Idaho Charter Schools," January 16, 2013, accessed March 2, 2014, <http://tinyurl.com/pj7r8rb>; IDSDE, "List of Rural School Districts," n.d., accessed March 2, 2014, <http://tinyurl.com/pzblcqb>.

⁹ National Charter School Resource Center, "Idaho to Dedicate Funding for Charter Facilities, Require Authorizer Fees and Performance Contracts," April 13, 2013, accessed March 2, 2014, <http://tinyurl.com/njdsevs>.

¹⁰ *Idaho Rev. Stat.*, § 33.52, <http://tinyurl.com/mf7x2vf>.

¹¹ National Council on Teacher Quality, "State Teacher Policy Yearbook," 2013, accessed March 2, 2014, <http://tinyurl.com/lmx567v>.

¹² IDSDE, "Summary of Alternative Authorizations/Routes to Certification in Idaho," n.d., accessed March 2, 2014, <http://tinyurl.com/os446ag>.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Author's calculations, IDSDE, "Complete Financial Summary Reports," 2013, accessed March 4, 2014, <http://tinyurl.com/paxfesw>.

¹⁵ ICSN et al., "An Analysis of the Charter School Facility Landscape in Idaho," September 2012, accessed March 2, 2014, <http://tinyurl.com/psaj433>; Adam Cotterell, "Idaho Lawmakers Approve More Modest Charter School Law Overhaul," April 3, 2013, accessed March 2, 2014, <http://tinyurl.com/n3h2wb4>.

¹⁶ ICSN et al., "An Analysis of the Charter School Facility Landscape in Idaho," September 2012, accessed March 2, 2014, <http://tinyurl.com/psaj433>.