

A COMMENTARY

WHY VOUCHERS ARE BAD FOR IDAHO

By Rod Gramer

It is not an overstatement to say that the most crucial decision since statehood over the future of public education will take place during the current Idaho legislative session.

It's a decision that determines whether our lawmakers remain faithful to the Idaho Constitution which states that "it shall be the duty of the legislature of Idaho to establish and maintain a general, uniform, and thorough system of public, free common schools."

It's a decision that determines if Article IX, Section 5 of the Idaho Constitution is repealed by statute instead of by a vote of the people as required by the Constitution itself.

It's a decision that could have a significant impact on Idaho taxpayers for years to come by increasing the financial burden of education in our state.

It's a decision that could tear at the social and economic fabric of communities across our state, especially our rural communities.

It's a decision that will decide whether it is the state's role to use taxpayers' money to directly subsidize enterprises that are privately owned and operated.

The decision is whether the Idaho Legislature votes to use taxpayers' money to support private and religious schools.

It should be noted that when I write of vouchers, I am speaking of the various ways taxpayer dollars end up in the pockets of those who run private and religious schools. These include voucher scholarships, education savings accounts (ESA) and tax-credit programs. The essential point is that public funds in each of these methods ends up financing private and religious schools.

Legislators have already proposed using the education savings account method, arguing that it gives parents many choices other than private and religious school tuition. But the result is the same – taxpayer funds are used to provide tuition to private and religious schools, and it diverts badly needed funding from public schools.

Besides, the flexibility these legislators argue for – excluding tuition – is already provided for in the Governor's Empowering Parents grants, which Idaho Business for Education supports.

It's also important to realize this is not just an Idaho issue. There is a nationwide campaign by wealthy and influential individuals and their front groups and lobbyists to privatize education in our country. They have already invested hundreds of thousands of dollars in Idaho to get a successful outcome and they are prepared to spend more money this winter.

Applying Stephen Covey's "Begin with the end in mind" maxim, I have researched what has happened to public education, taxes, and student academic achievement in long-time privatization states like Wisconsin, Ohio, Indiana, and Arizona. Looking at these states is the best way to see what privatization will do to Idaho if the Legislature passes a voucher or ESA bill.

My conclusion: vouchers will take money away from public schools, they will increase the cost of education to taxpayers, and they will not fulfill the promise of improving academic achievement for students.

The negative impact on public education and taxpayers will be especially acute for rural communities which are already struggling with inequities in funding, deteriorating school buildings and teacher shortages. Furthermore, they have little or nothing to gain from privatization. At last count, nearly half of Idaho's counties have no private school and more than half of the private and religious schools in Idaho are concentrated in four counties – Ada, Canyon, Kootenai and Twin Falls.

Furthermore, when the public schools suffer in our rural areas, so does the social and economic fabric that holds these communities together.

In other states, rural citizens have to choose to raise their property taxes to keep their schools viable. Do Idaho rural citizens really want to raise their taxes so people in the cities can send their students to private schools? Not really.

The latest Boise State University Idaho Policy Institute survey shows that 56 percent of Idahoans already think their property taxes are too high – a 10 percent increase over last year's survey of the same question.

Here at idahobe.org you will find my series of commentaries looking at the privatization issue from various standpoints. I look at what has happened in Wisconsin after it was the first state to create a voucher program 33 years ago and the latest impact of vouchers in Ohio and Indiana. I look at what is happening in Arizona which just passed the nation's first universal education savings account law with no limit on how much a family can earn to qualify for a tuition subsidy.

I will connect the dots between the wealthy individuals and their front groups that are advocating for taxpayer-supported private and religious schools in Idaho and in these other states.

I will cite studies, including some from pro-voucher think tanks, showing that students who move from public to private schools don't do better academically and sometimes do worse. I will also show that there is little or no accountability or transparency when taxpayer dollars flow to private and religious schools. Surprisingly, this is even the conclusion of one study released in 2021 by a prominent pro-voucher think tank.

I will also include findings from another pro-voucher think tank that rates Idaho's public education system as the third best in the nation and the best when it comes to "return on investment" for taxpayers.

Lastly, one of the arguments Idahoans will hear during this debate is that voucher-like programs are about parental choice, and that the taxpayers' money should "follow the student." I will argue that vouchers and education savings accounts are not about **parental choice** – they are about which students **private and religious schools choose**. It's really about who pays for private and religious education, not choice.

Unlike public schools, private and religious schools only take the students they want. They only keep the students they want. Parents who expect their child to be chosen by one of these taxpayer-subsidized schools may be surprised when they are not accepted, and the school doesn't even have to explain why.

I encourage you to read these essays on *idahobe.org*, do your own research and then decide whether privatization is good for Idaho. My answer to that question is an emphatic no.

Rod Gramer is President and CEO of Idaho Business for Education, an organization of more than 250 business leaders whose mission is to strengthen education, create the workforce our employers need, and set students up for success in school, work, and life