

A COMMENTARY

OUT OF STATE INTERESTS AND MONEY DRIVING PRIVATIZATION OF EDUCATION IN IDAHO

By Rod Gramer

One can identify the genesis of the school privatization movement in Idaho to a column the president of the Idaho Freedom Foundation (IFF) wrote in February 2019 that called for the abolishment of what he called “government schools.”

“You can take my observations with some grains of salt,” wrote IFF’s Wayne Hoffman. “I don’t think government should be in the education business. It is the most virulent form of socialism (and indoctrination thereto) in America today. The predictable result has been higher costs, lower performance, and a system that twists itself in knots to prove it’s educating kids when really, it’s not.”

As usual, Hoffman leveled inflammatory accusations with absolutely no evidence to back them up. But the column did create a stir because no one until that point had been totally honest about the goal to abolish Idaho’s public schools and turn them over to private groups with various political, financial, and religious agendas.

Looking back, Hoffman’s declaration of war on public education was just the start of a drumbeat that has only intensified over the past several years. Idaho has experienced three unsuccessful efforts to pass voucher legislation that would hand millions of taxpayer dollars to private and religious schools.

The attempt to pass voucher-like legislation a fourth time during the 2023 Legislature is expected to be one of the most contentious issues in the current session. This time the voucher advocates are more confident they will succeed simply because they have put so much money on the effort to elect voucher-friendly legislators.

One example of their success is how the Senate Education Committee – long a bulwark against vouchers – is now populated with many pro-voucher senators, most of whom were elected in the 2022 May GOP primary and general election. Gone are rural anti-voucher legislators like Senators Carl Crabtree, R-Grangeville, and James Woodward, R-Sandpoint.

To show why they may be successful, let’s connect the dots and follow the money.

Since Hoffman’s column at least 14 groups, many of them with out-of-state ties and funded by powerful out-of-state billionaires, have been working to privatize Idaho’s public schools. The poster child among this group, of course, is the Idaho Freedom Foundation. But while the IFF has drawn most of the attention, other privatization groups fly largely below the public’s radar.

But make no mistake these groups collectively represent a threat to our local public schools.

Money, power, and secrecy is at the root of how these privatization groups operate.

For example, nobody except Hoffman knows where the Idaho Freedom Foundation gets its money to employ an ever-growing staff because the IFF won't disclose its funders. But it is a good bet that a significant amount of its funding comes from out of state dark money funders.

The best evidence for this is the Idaho Freedom Foundation's ties to the State Policy Network (SPN), a dark-money group that counts the IFF as its Idaho "affiliate."

In turn, the State Policy Network gets funding from two dark-money funds - Donors Trust and Donors Capital Fund, both of which have been called the "ATM" of the far-right. Contributors to the Donors Capital Fund reportedly must maintain a balance in their account of \$1 million. (You can learn more about these groups by researching them online.)

Other State Policy Network affiliates across the country are also in the school privatization business. In Wisconsin, the [Institute for Law and Liberty](#) just joined a coalition to push universal vouchers in the Badger State's 2023 legislative session. Other SPN "affiliates" include the Indiana Policy Review and the [Cardinal Institute](#) in West Virginia.

Last May, the Cardinal Institute jumped into the Idaho privatization debate by co-authoring a commentary for Idaho Education News with Terry Ryan, the president of BLUMM, an Idaho group promoting charter schools, but apparently also private schools.

One of the most influential out-of-state groups trying to privatize education in Idaho is the [American Federation for Children](#), which was founded by former U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos. DeVos has been one of the most vocal leaders for school privatization in the country and one of the most successful in electing pro-privatization candidates to state legislatures

Between 2010 and 2022 the American Federation for Children spent more than \$8 million to elect pro-privatization candidates in Wisconsin. In 2020 alone, AFC spent \$600,000 electing candidates to the Wisconsin Legislature and was rewarded when the Legislature passed a universal school voucher bill during the 2022 session. If passed, the Wisconsin Department of Education estimated the universal program would raise property taxes in Wisconsin by nearly \$600 million.

The AFC is taking Idaho down the same electoral path as Wisconsin. During the 2022 Republican primary election in Idaho, AFC spent \$200,000 to elect pro-privatization candidates to the Idaho Legislature, obviously hoping that a voucher bill can finally get approved in 2023. The group spent another \$74,000 in September and October during the general election to elect pro-voucher candidates.

Overall, the American Federation for Children and its Idaho "chapter" raised a total of \$332,600 for its war chest, according to the *Idaho Capital Sun*.

Another out-of-state player operating in Idaho is [Yes. Every Kid](#) which was founded by billionaire Charles Koch. Yes. Every Kid has spent thousands of dollars on Idaho television

stations during the last two legislative sessions promoting taxpayer support for private and religious schools in the Gem State.

The [Citizens Alliance of Idaho](#) is another group which raised \$354,000 to elect privatization-friendly legislators in Idaho last year. It raised \$150,000 from the Ohio-based Citizens Alliance Super PAC, according to the *Idaho Capital Sun*. Two of its biggest donors – Doyle Beck and Bryan Smith of Idaho Falls – are on the board of the Idaho Freedom Foundation and gave \$30,000 each to the Citizens Alliance of Idaho.

Another group playing a significant role in the privatization movement is the [Idaho Family Policy Center](#) which wants Christian churches to take over Idaho's public schools.

Blaine Conzatti, president of the Idaho Family Policy Institute, was the featured speaker at the Idaho Republican State Convention in Twin Falls last July. He told the GOP delegates, "How do we preserve a constitutional government in the United States? Through education based upon the Christian religion. Again, what's the purpose of a public education? Love of God, love of country."

The Idaho Family Policy Center is affiliated with four national groups – the Alliance for Defending Freedom; the Family Policy Alliance; the Family Research Center, Focus on the Family. It is also part of a network of similar groups working in 40 states. Conzatti worked at the Family Policy Institute in Washington, D.C. before moving to Idaho two years ago to run the Idaho Family Policy Institute.

Even the influential Heritage Foundation, based in Washington, D.C, has weighed in on getting Idaho private and religious schools funded by taxpayers.

In a commentary published by the *Idaho Statesman* in September, The Heritage Foundation praised Idaho's public schools as being the best in the country when it comes to "return on investment." It even noted that Idaho educators were overachieving because Idaho ranks last in the country in per pupil funding but has above average academic achievement.

The Heritage Foundation also rated Idaho high on the "freedom" index and suggested it could only get better if it passed voucher legislation.

Oddly, The Heritage Foundation's report on Idaho's public schools shot a torpedo into the main argument of pro-voucher advocates that Idaho's public schools are "failing" our students. The Heritage Foundation report begs the question: Why privatize education in Idaho if our public schools are among the best in the country and achieving this with rock-bottom investments from the Legislature?

Other groups that support some kind of privatization legislation are the Diocese of Boise, the newly formed Western States Policy Center, the Alliance Defending Freedom; Young Americans for Liberty; and Make Liberty Win which backed a slate of winners in the May GOP primary who joined the Legislature this winter.

As the Legislature weighs the decision to pass the first voucher bill in Idaho history, it is important for Idahoans to know that this issue is being thrust on them by powerful out-of-state groups which are backed by some of the wealthiest people in our country. Many of these people have no ties to Idaho and may have never stepped foot in the state.

Legislators also should know that once they pass the first voucher-like bill the pressure on them will not stop – it will only intensify until the advocates of privatization get universal vouchers or education savings accounts with no income limit on which families are eligible to receive these taxpayer subsidies. That is what is happening in other privatization states.

We need to send a message to these people and their front groups that Idaho's public schools belong to the people of Idaho and that they are not for sale to out-of-state billionaires who want to use our tax dollars to weaken our public schools and advance their private agendas.

Before it's too late, we need to save Idaho's schools for Idaho's kids.

Rod Gramer is president and CEO of Idaho Business for Education, a group of more than 250 business leaders working to strengthen education, create the workforce Idaho needs and set our students up for success in school, work and life