

# A Bold Approach to School Reform

Sweeping changes to Idaho's education policy turned into a hot potato issue that's landed in the voters' laps.

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BY BETSY RUSSELL

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Idaho Senator John Goedde (R) compares the changes under way in Idaho's schools to how the printing press changed religion.

A thousand years ago, elaborate stained-glass church windows told the story of faith to illiterate crowds. "Then came the printing press," says Goedde, "and suddenly the whole paradigm of how religion was taught changed, because books were mass produced and readily available for people who were learning to read."

Goedde says we're at a similar pivotal point today. "The technology is available for children to learn in a different manner, and teachers need to be able to adapt to those tools."

Idaho lawmakers adopted a sweeping school-reform plan in 2011 that requires two online classes to graduate and provides a laptop computer for every high school student. It also introduces performance pay for teachers based partially on their students' achievement, offers students who finish graduation requirements early a chance to take up to a year of dual-credit college classes on the state's dime, and pays for students' college entrance exams.

Perhaps most significant, however, is that lawmakers reallocated education funding to pay for all these changes without raising any new revenues. That is also where the controversy centers. To pay for the changes, the reforms cut into traditional school budget priorities like teacher salaries and brick-and-mortar school buildings. And those changes didn't sit well with many parents and teachers.

## The Players

Idaho schools Superintendent Tom Luna was the reform's author, Senator Goedde its lead legislative sponsor and Governor Butch Otter its biggest booster. All three are Republicans who believed the state desperately needed to ratchet up student

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Senator  
John Goedde (R)  
Idaho

achievement and catch up with technology. "We must adapt or we risk becoming irrelevant. Research has shown the 1-to-1 ratio in the classroom helps improve student achievement," Goedde said during Senate debate, touting the laptop component of the reforms.

With a tight state budget, the leaders felt the need to make some tough changes. "We have to do something different," Goedde says. "We can't just continue to cut, cut, cut the current system."

The early version of the plan met resistance from the teachers' union, the 120-year-old Idaho Education Association. Dubbed "Students Come First" but known popularly as the "Luna laws," the reforms removed most teachers' collective bargaining rights, limited teacher contracts to one year and shifted tens of millions of dollars from teacher salaries to performance-pay bonuses, a move that was later softened by a follow-up bill in 2012. The plan originally called for cutting teaching positions and increasing class sizes, but the final version left it to local school districts to decide whether to eliminate teachers, cut their pay or seek local property tax increases to make up for the crimp in state funding for salaries. The plan also allows parents to enroll their children in online classes and redirects part of the district's state funding to the online class providers.

A huge outpouring of public opposition resulted, from demonstrations across the state to testimony at public hearings. The bills passed without a single Democratic vote—but with bipartisan opposition. "This is a direct slap in the face to every teacher," says Senator Joyce Broadsword (R), one of the opponents.

The reforms' sponsors "basically ignored the public," says Mike Lanza, a Boise father of two. "They had decided before their first hearing that they were going to pass these bills." Lanza chairs a state-wide parent-teacher group that gathered nearly double the number of signatures required to force a referendum vote on whether to repeal the new laws on the ballot in November.

"I work on a computer all day long," says Lanza, a freelance writer and field editor for Backpacker magazine. "There is much more

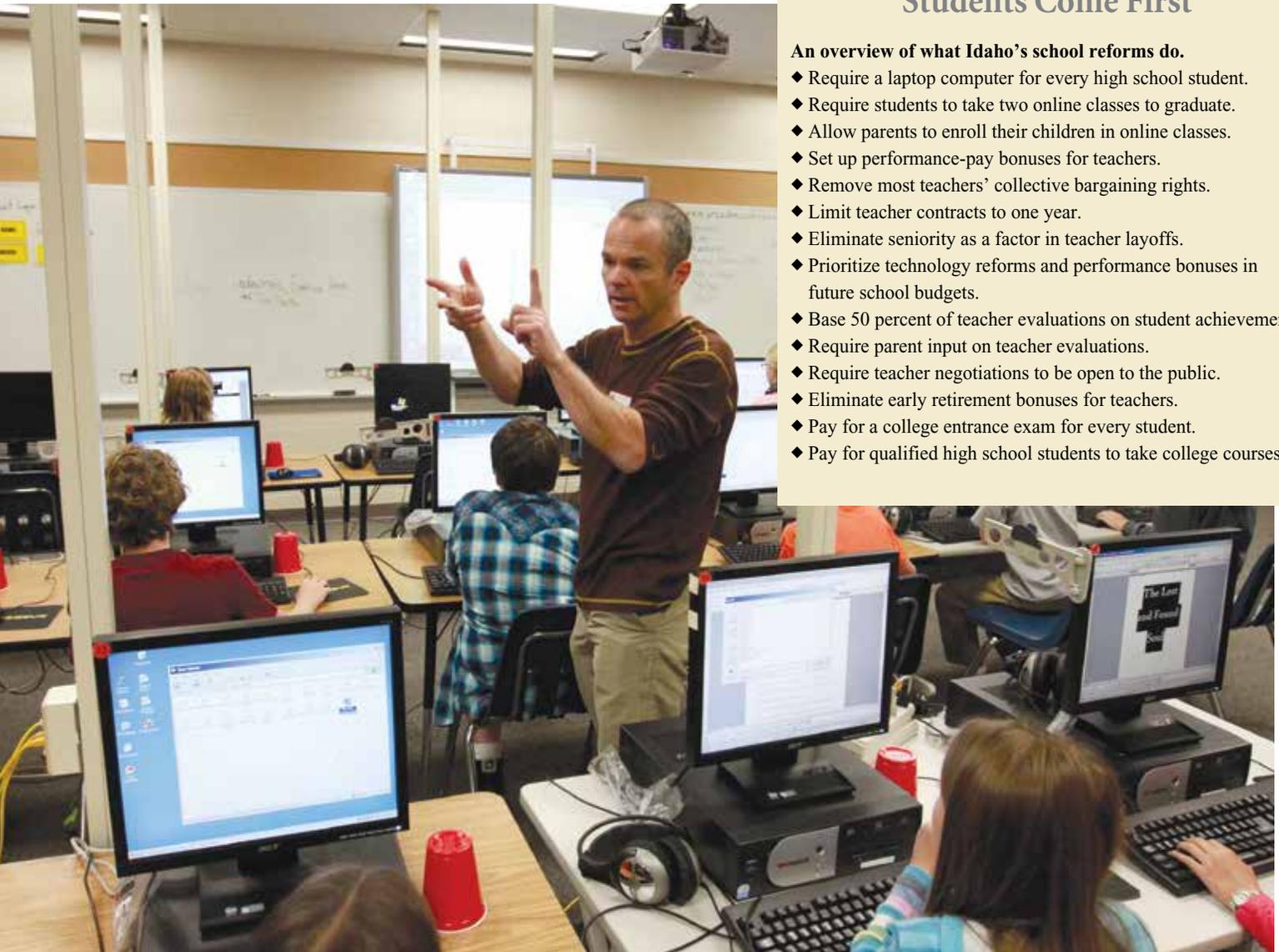


Senator  
Joyce  
Broadsword (R)  
Idaho

## Students Come First

### An overview of what Idaho's school reforms do.

- ◆ Require a laptop computer for every high school student.
- ◆ Require students to take two online classes to graduate.
- ◆ Allow parents to enroll their children in online classes.
- ◆ Set up performance-pay bonuses for teachers.
- ◆ Remove most teachers' collective bargaining rights.
- ◆ Limit teacher contracts to one year.
- ◆ Eliminate seniority as a factor in teacher layoffs.
- ◆ Prioritize technology reforms and performance bonuses in future school budgets.
- ◆ Base 50 percent of teacher evaluations on student achievement.
- ◆ Require parent input on teacher evaluations.
- ◆ Require teacher negotiations to be open to the public.
- ◆ Eliminate early retirement bonuses for teachers.
- ◆ Pay for a college entrance exam for every student.
- ◆ Pay for qualified high school students to take college courses.



value and educational benefit in having a good, live teacher in a classroom with a moderate number of kids. Tom Luna's plan does the exact opposite of that. It introduces more technology into schools, but by sacrificing teachers and increasing class sizes."

### The Future Classroom

Goedde, who serves as co-chairman of the NCSL Education Committee, says he doesn't think there was anything especially unique in the education reform bills passed in Idaho; the only difference was "the comprehensive nature of what was done" with the realization that "we were facing a shrinking revenue stream."

"We're setting the direction for a vision of the 21st century classroom, and there is no additional money," Goedde says. "So we have to use the funds we have in a manner that accomplishes the goal."

Luna agrees. "What we saw was a convergence of crises in 2011, where an economic downturn was forcing us to do something we'd never done before: cut education," he says. A busi-

nessman and the first non-educator ever to head Idaho's public schools, Luna says he couldn't support tax increases, so resolved to spend the state's existing funds differently. "I'm one of those who believes that if you raise taxes you'll get less revenue," he says. "It makes the recession longer."

Idaho lawmakers cut funding for K-12 public schools for the first time in 2009. The teacher union's 13,000 members were "obviously angry—cuts had been made, and they were concerned," says Robin Nettinga, the Idaho Education Association's executive director and a former seventh grade English teacher.

Luna's lack of experience in education was "gravel in their craw" for members of the union, Nettinga says. Union members voted that they wanted Luna out and launched a campaign in favor of Luna's Democratic challenger. But Luna won re-election with 60.5 percent of the vote in 2010, as Republicans swept every state office.

As the recession worsened, school funding was cut again in 2010. And when the state faced a third straight year of cuts in 2011, Luna unveiled his plan. He'd long been an advocate of teacher merit pay, and had worked with the union earlier to



## A National Perspective

34

States that require student achievement be included in teacher evaluations

4

States with a 1-to-1 laptop ratio goal for high school students

7

States with an online class requirement to graduate

4<sup>th</sup>

Idaho's rank in percentage of school revenue that comes from the state, 2010-11

49<sup>th</sup>

Idaho's rank for per-pupil spending, 2007-08

6<sup>th</sup>

Idaho's rank in the highest number of students enrolled per number of teachers, 2010

39<sup>th</sup>

Idaho's rank in average teacher salaries, 2009-10

Sources: The International Association for K-12 Online Learning, U.S. Department of Education, U.S. Census Bureau, National Education Association, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress

develop a plan. But it failed in the Legislature, in part because it would have required additional money.

"The union said, 'We have no ideas. Raise taxes,'" Luna says. "We brought them to the table, and they had no more ideas." Nettinga denies that, and counters, "The answer is not to cut and cut and cut to the bone—that's not what's best for kids."

### Take Two of the Reform

The initial plan that met with such public opposition was restructured into three bills that, along with retooling the school funding formula, made changes to teacher contracts, set up a merit-pay plan requiring students' academic growth be included in teacher evaluations, and required the laptops and online classes.

"In my 10 years as a legislator, I have never seen such a spontaneous outpouring of public sentiment in opposition to a proposal as I've seen against Tom Luna's plan to eliminate experienced teachers and increase class sizes," says Senator Edgar Malepeai (D), the Senate's minority leader and a long-time teacher.

Opposition was fueled by articles

from the Associated Press and Boise's Idaho Statesman highlighting financial ties between for-profit online education companies and Luna's campaign for superintendent; 19 percent of his campaign funding in 2010 came from for-profit education businesses. Luna bristles over that criticism. "None of the people who donated to my campaign have benefited because of Students Come First," he says.

Amid rallies at the capitol and around the state, the first two bills passed the Senate after a tense five-hour debate. "I cannot see how the current system is sustainable," said Senator Russ Fulcher (R), who voted in favor of the reforms. "We need to change how we do our business."



Senator Russ Fulcher (R) Idaho

The push for technology ran into a little more trouble. The third bill, which included the laptops, online learning requirements and funding shifts, had cleared the education committee by one vote. But after a six-hour meeting with representatives of the teachers' union, school administrators and school boards, Goedde emerged with a long list of possible changes to the bill, and asked that it be sent back to his committee.

When the new bill emerged three weeks later, it left



Senator Edgar Malepeai (D) Idaho

the number of online courses required for graduation up to the state Board of Education and pushed back the phased-in purchase of the laptops by one year. It still allowed parents to enroll their children in online classes without the permission of their local school districts, paying for those classes through a funding formula that redirects part of the district's state funding to the online provider.

The House debate on the bill lasted more than four hours, as protesting Democrats forced the lengthy bill to be read in full. But the bill passed.

Tom Trail (R), who voted against it, said he received more than 600 emails, and "only two were in favor of it."



*Representative  
Tom Trail (R)  
Idaho*

Three months later, on a visit to Idaho, former Florida Governor Jeb Bush praised the reform as groundbreaking. "This is part of the funding formula, so it's not just an interesting peripheral—it's front and center. I don't think any state's done that in the country."

## Voters Will Decide

Everyone is gearing up for the referendum in November when voters will decide whether to repeal the laws. Luna and Otter formed a Political Action Committee, and Lanza's group and the union brought in the former deputy campaign manager of We Are Ohio, which successfully overturned an anti-collective bargaining law for public employees in that state. House Education Chairman Bob Nonini (R), a supporter of the reforms, advises against waiting around for the results. "We'll just move forward as if the referendums are not going to pass," he says.



*Representative  
Bob Nonini (R)  
Idaho*

In June, Luna's office announced the 32 school districts selected to receive the first laptops. A 39-member task force spent the summer studying how to carry out the technology initiative, and the state is working on contracts with vendors.

"Looking back, I certainly would have had a plan that I could have taken to the school boards association, the Idaho Education Association and the education stakeholders earlier on and gotten their input," says Goedde. "So I guess I would offer that advice. But I would temper that with the realization that some parts of the education community are very comfortable with the status quo."

"When you roll something like this out, you've got to expect that there's going to be a certain amount of criticism and concern." 🏠