



 Idaho Business Coalition
for Education Excellence

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**IBCEE Testimony
Senate Education Committee
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Mr. Chairman and members of the Senate Education Committee:

My name is Christine Donnell and I am the executive director of the Business Coalition for Education Excellence. I appreciate the opportunity to give you my perspective and thoughts regarding Superintendent Luna's Students Come First Education Reform Plan.

As a forty year educator in the state of Idaho, I have lived through a variety of challenging times in regard to funding, when we had to scrutinize every item in the budget to make cuts. I can remember in 1980 when our superintendent at the time, gathered all the administrators together and told us we had to find a way to cut a million dollars out of the district budget. Well in 1980, 31 years ago, a million dollars was as horrible then as cutting 10 million or more is today in the district.

And there were times when we were able to enjoy a little "breathing room" in terms of meeting the basic requirements and were able to institute new and innovative programs. Being an administrator in the Meridian School District, we particularly faced challenges in growth of students and staff.

But regardless of those challenges we enjoyed the excitement of finding ways to capitalize on the increased funding that the growth insured.

Class size was always the focus of our budgeting decisions, as well as providing the services to our students and teachers. Some years were certainly easier and others were tougher in making employee decisions, but our student achievement results hardly fluctuated a bit. The majority of teachers are dedicated to providing the best service to their students regardless of how many are in their classrooms. They take what they are given and work harder. Is it easy? No. But great teachers care about all their students and should certainly be compensated.

We can pull up any number of research studies that weigh in on whether class size affects student achievement and find arguments on both sides. We are not going to come to an agreeable resolution. It is truly an emotional issue as well as a management issue. Under the Students Come First plan to fund the needed technology and restore salary levels, we need to get past the argument and the emotion. I appreciated a comment that Dr. Linda Clark, Superintendent of Joint School District #2, made about this issue as she explained the impact on her district. She said perhaps this is the time when we do away with the traditional class structure and deal with increased class sizes in a totally different manner.

Now after 3 years with the Business Coalition, I have a bit of a broader focus and realize, just as you do, that our public school system is not the only one that is impacted by this economy and the ensuing funding challenges. Industries across the board are asking their employees to do more with less. As you know, there have been massive layoffs, restructuring, scaling back and in some cases, closing the business. We are not going to do away with the public school system, but we must find efficiencies, make better use of existing resources and cut out anything that isn't absolutely necessary. And most importantly, find ways to do things differently.

I am reminded of a remark by one of our IBCEE members who said if a farmer gets more acres to farm, then he has to get a bigger, better tractor and the equipment to do the job but still has to put in more time in order to reap the bounty of the land. Well, just maybe it is time to recognize that the tools we have to produce the results we want are in part what the reform plan is proposing. Let's make use of the technology, online classes, blended learning that uses the technology and resources available to enhance instruction, distance learning opportunities that we already have, and increase these teaching techniques with the funding solution offered by Superintendent Luna that will help our "farmers" plow the extra acres".

I know that it is much more complicated than that, but I keep asking myself, if we do not take this opportunity to really transform the system in the ways that are not the norm, then when will we? Many are saying just wait until we have more revenue. And then what will change? We just continue with the "status quo", doing what we have always done? Even if the budget shortfall is greater than what was projected, how will it help to just slash and cut the current system more than it already is?

IBCEE wants to facilitate the dialogue as we begin to implement whatever the final legislation may be. The Education Alliance of Idaho is poised to do just that. There are different parts of the plan that I personally do not agree with and other parts that I do, but it is your job to make those decisions.

This is an opportunity to become really uncomfortable, actually feel pain, to stretch our thinking, to be creative and strategic, and begin, and I do say begin, to design a completely different system that will produce the results in student achievement and student behaviors that we need to be a global competitive power. It is time for you legislators, even though it will most certainly be hard, to support these reform measures and position our state to have a school system that truly is the best in the nation and that will only come about with a very close look at how we do our job now and how we can do our job better, and yes, with less. Thank you and I would stand for questions.