

POLICY BRIEF

Let's provide a better future for Idaho's kids



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June 10, 2019

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Overview

Since our republic “depends mainly upon the intelligence of the people,” the Idaho Constitution states, “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.”¹

Giving students a thorough education is a lofty promise and a worthy goal. However, student performance at Idaho schools has stagnated, meaning Idaho’s promise remains unfulfilled.

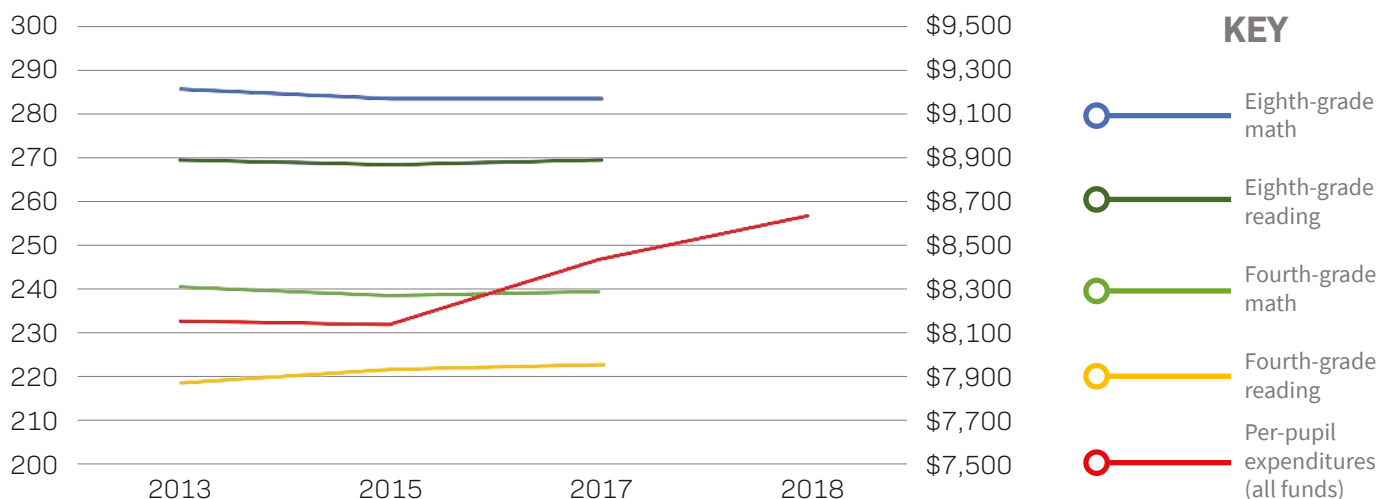
Task forces, blue-ribbon government panels, and well-intentioned legislators have tried time and again to fix Idaho’s underwhelming education system, but without sustained results to show for their efforts.

Take Gov. Butch Otter’s 2013 education taskforce. Lawmakers and officials served up more taxpayers dollars as something close to a silver bullet, repeating their predictable solution: More funding means better schools.

Accordingly, for the 2012-13 school year, the K-12 system spent more than \$2.38 billion (combining local, state, and federal dollars). In the 2017-18 school year, schools were granted more than \$2.81 billion to educate Idaho’s kids.² All told, that’s more than a \$400 million increase in five school years.

But success isn’t measured by how many resources are spent on a project: One evaluates by the results achieved. As the chart below confirms, during the 2012-2018 time period, increased spending per student has no bearing on actual student achievement and test scores.³

Spending vs. results since 2013



Test scores taken from National Assessment of Educational Progress
All dollar figures have been adjusted for inflation
NAEP data is released every other year. 2019 data will be available later this year.

Where is the money going?

To be sure, Idaho’s schools are growing. Yet a review of state budget documents reveals that only about 6 percent of the per-pupil spending increase is driven by enrollment.⁴

While student enrollment increased 6.7 percent between the 2012-13 and 2017-18 school years, the number of administrators has grown by nearly double that, or 12.3 percent. In the same period, overall staff headcount has increased by 8.3 percent.

Some \$45 million more per year is covering district administration, school administration, and business operations—a 26.2 percent hike between 2012-13 and 2017-18.⁵ Schools spend too much of their increased funding on administrative positions and bureaucratic bloat, while students have little to show for it.

Administration, teachers, & students

	2013	2015	2017	2018	GROWTH
Administrators, including principals	1,267	1,329	1,400	1,423	12.3%
Classroom teachers	16,637	17,081	17,701	18,068	8.6%
Other professionals	1,316	1,324	1,355	1,400	6.4%
Non-certified	16,957	17,510	17,870	18,285	7.8%
Total staff count	36,177	37,244	38,326	39,176	8.3%
Student enrollment	264,462	271,774	279,519	282,187	6.7%

A reason for concern

The deficit of good results for students (and lack of innovative improvements to Idaho’s public school system) means it’s time to ask a crucial question: Is Idaho’s goal to perpetuate and protect our current school system, or is our ultimate goal to give our children the best education possible?

Each student spends roughly 15,000 hours in school, crucial hours intended to equip them with the curiosity, confidence, and skills to seize their futures. Idahoans pay hard-earned money year after year—in increasing amounts—to educate Idaho’s students, but Idaho’s public school system simply isn’t getting the job done.

Policymakers, businesses, concerned Idahoans, and parents shouldn’t be satisfied to simply increase school spending once more and expect better education to follow.

Rather, we should embrace innovative approaches to education in our modern world. This is an opportunity to consider options such as expanding school choice, reducing barriers to teaching and attract great teachers, and expand self-directed, skills-based education (like apprenticeships and entrepreneurship) to equip students to conquer the challenges that await them.

Endnotes

1. “Idaho State Constitution.” Idaho State Constitution. Article IX, Section 1.
2. Financial Summaries, Idaho School Districts and Charter Schools, July 1, 2012 to June 30, 2013 through July 1, 2017 to June 30, 2018. “All Funds Statewide Total” tab used
3. NAEP 2017 Mathematics and Reading Results, Paul D. Kleinert, PhD, NAEP coordinator, Assessment and Accountability
4. Financial Summaries, Idaho School Districts and Charter Schools, July 1, 2012 to June 30, 2013 through July 1, 2017 to June 30, 2018. “All Funds Statewide Total,” and “Statistics” tabs used.
5. Ibid.

