

Union Against Putting Students First

Tough economic times and decreases in Idaho tax revenues are forcing legislators to either increase taxes or cut school budgets by up to \$80 million or more. Rather than make these dramatic cuts that will essentially gut the current system and put the entire education system at risk, Governor Otter and Tom Luna have proposed changes to Idaho's school system called Students Come First that will give Idaho children a much higher quality education than Idaho students currently receive.

Part of the reforms would include removing some of the power that the Union (Idaho Education Association) has had over the school system for the last 40 years. The Union is up in arms over this legislation which would do away with the concept of tenure, which essentially guarantees teachers lifetime employment regardless of how poorly they perform. Students Come First would also implement "pay-for-performance," which would allow the best teachers to make more money if their students make better academic growth during the school year.

The Union is working hard to defeat Students Come First and is flooding its members with misinformation apparently designed to frighten teachers and convince them to oppose this legislation. The Union is asking teachers to pass this misinformation to parents. Parents are then encouraged to call legislators to defeat the legislation. We believe that the best way to fight untrue myths is to provide the facts. These facts are supported by the legislation itself.

The following Union-created myths have been stated verbally by Union officials at PTO meetings, in Union literature or have appeared on the Union Facebook site.

MYTH: Teachers will have to take a 15% cut in pay to subsidize merit pay.

Fact: No teacher will receive a pay decrease! Over the next five years, the Students Come First plan will fully restore the instructional salary grid, which has been frozen for the past two years, giving teachers an immediate increase in salary. In future years, when the Legislature appropriates more funding for teacher salaries, 15% of that funding will go toward pay-for-performance bonuses and 85% of the appropriation will go toward funding the salary grid. No teacher salary will be based on pay-for-performance. Future salary increases will be based on the traditional steps and lanes method.

MYTH: Students Come First will not increase teacher pay.

Fact: In fact, the exact opposite is true. Under Students Come First the state will fully restore the instructional salary grid. This means teachers will receive an immediate pay increase. In addition, the state will implement a pay-for-performance plan to recognize and reward excellent teachers and administrators for working in hard-to-fill positions, and raising student academic improvement as a school. The average teacher will earn a \$2,000 annual bonus above their regular salary—some as much as \$8,000.

MYTH: Students will lose music, art, and shop classes if Students Come First passes.

Fact: By implementing Students Come First, local districts will be in a better financial position to save electives. If this plan isn't implemented, the Legislature must cut up to \$80 million or more from the public schools budget. Schools have already cut electives, such as music, art, and physical education, because of last year's budget cuts, and this is likely to continue if Students Come First is not implemented.

MYTH: Laptops will replace teachers.

Fact: Technology will not replace teachers. In fact, the Students Come First plan focuses on building highly effective teachers in every classroom and principals in every building, not replacing them. To do this, the state is giving Idaho teachers more technology to help create the 21st century classroom and to manage more students. The state will invest \$6,000 per classroom in technology, 20% of which will go toward professional development for teachers. In addition, the mobile computing devices will be used specifically to enhance a student's education experience while in the classroom with the teacher. These will serve as the students' new textbooks, word processor, and research tool, giving the student an exceptional learning experience while saving tens of millions of dollars in physical textbooks.

MYTH: All high school courses will now be taken online.

Fact: Not all courses will move online. Under Students Come First, the state will require that just four of the 46 credits a student must take to graduate are online. The vast majority of colleges and universities expect students to take online courses. Businesses expect employees to work and learn in an online environment. Idaho students need to be prepared to succeed in the digital world that awaits them.

MYTH: Online courses do not include a teacher and are not as effective as traditional courses.

Fact: All online courses will be taught by Idaho teachers. Right now, the Idaho Digital Learning Academy, for example, has more than 10,000 students taking courses directly from Idaho-certified teachers. This will continue under the Students Come First plan.

MYTH: Online courses will be taken in addition to a full course load during the school day.

Fact: Not true. The state will require every student to take 4 credits online in order to graduate, beginning with the Class of 2016. Those classes will be taken during the school day—not above and beyond the school day. The local school board would determine which courses are delivered online and how they are delivered.

MYTH: Students won't be accepted to college and universities if they take online courses in high school.

Fact: That's not true. Top universities across the country accept and welcome students who have taken online courses.

MYTH: Students Come First takes away local control.

Fact: The exact opposite is true. Students Come First gives local school boards, districts, and parents greater flexibility and control than they've ever had before. Local school boards—those elected to make education decisions in their local community—will continue to implement all educational objectives as is the practice today.

MYTH: Class sizes will grow by 4 or more students.

Fact: There will be no class size increase in grades 1–3. The Students Come First plan proposes a slight increase in the student-teacher ratio by between 1–2 students in grades 4–12 gradually over the next five years in order to save the state \$500 million. These increases will be necessary whether we continue with the old program or implement Students Come First. The state will fund a ratio of 19.8 students per teacher on average over the next 5 years. Ultimate decisions about staffing and class size remain with the local school board.

MYTH: Districts will no longer be required to bargain in "good faith" with their employees.

Fact: Students Come First does not change the requirement for school districts to negotiate in "good faith" with their employees. The requirement to negotiate in "good faith" remains in Idaho Code.

MYTH: Educational stakeholders were not included in the development of the plan.

Fact: State Superintendent Tom Luna worked with the Idaho Education Association as well as the Education Alliance of Idaho, the Idaho School Boards Association and several other Idaho stakeholder groups in developing Students Come First. Several of the ideas and recommendations from those organizations are included in this proposed legislation. As is often the case, no one organization received everything they asked for. Superintendent Luna and his staff worked with the leaders of the IEA and other stakeholder groups for more than a year to develop and reach agreement on the pay-for-performance plan that is now part of the Students Come First legislation.

MYTH: Students Come First will get rid of kindergarten.

Fact: The legislation recently introduced to change the funding mechanism for kindergarten is not part of Students Come First. It is a separate bill sponsored by Representative Thayne. The State Department of Education has not yet fully reviewed this legislation. However, we recognize that kindergarten remains an important choice for many parents in order to prepare their children for first grade. The Students Come First plan will help preserve kindergarten programs in Idaho schools.