ANNUAL REPORT 2019



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WE BELIEVE

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...that school choice helps families, children, and educators achieve more and do better.

WE ARE COMMITTED

...to ensuring that Idaho's children reach their fullest potential by cultivating great leaders and innovative schools.

ABOUT BLUUM

Bluum is a nonprofit organization helping Idaho become a national model for how to maximize learning opportunities for children and families.

Bluum empowers and supports educators who take risks and put children first by:

- Developing innovative leaders;
- Growing successful school models;

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- Sharing research and learning innovations;
- Providing school support and management help.

WE BELIEVE IN EDUCATION • • •

"We believe in education. There are so many different forms of education, and not one size fits all. It just doesn't. But that education is power; it creates self-worth. What we're celebrating today is what's good for families, what's good for students, for individuals, for children. That's what this is about."

Mr. Garret L. Nancolas Mayor, Caldwell, Idaho

From Remarks at Elevate Academy's Ribbon Cutting



Elevate Academy, Caldwell, Idaho



Terry Ryan, CEO

INTRODUCTION

Bluum's work to create, grow and support high-quality schools across Idaho, especially for our most educationally disadvantaged and rural students, expanded significantly in 2019. In working to keep pace with the overall population growth of Idaho and to help meet the need for great school options, we continued building on our ongoing partnership with the J.A. and Kathryn Albertson Family Foundation to help the Gem State become America's best state for education and school choice. Our work was accelerated with the launch of Idaho's Communities of Excellence federal CSP grant program.

In 2019, Idaho's Communities of Excellence consortium of Bluum, the Idaho Public Charter School Commission, the Idaho State Board of Education, the J.A. and Kathryn Albertson Family

Foundation, and Building Hope announced two rounds of grant funding totaling about \$10.38 million. These federal grant dollars were allocated to 11 public charter schools through a competitive third-party review grant process. Collectively, over the next 5 years, these schools will enroll 5,275 students—nearly half of whom attend school in a rural community.

The work accomplished in 2019 could not have happened without a long list of collaborators and partners, some of whom are mentioned above. As this report will document, Bluum worked with an outstanding

and growing list of educators and school leaders across Idaho. At the end of 2019, there were 25 schools that Bluum has worked directly with since 2014 as J. A. and Kathryn Albertson Family Foundation and/or federal CSP grant recipients. Most of the schools are public charter schools, but two were private schools and one school is a district Innovation School. These schools operate from as far north as Rathdrum, to Salmon, to eastern Idaho and Island Park, Idaho Falls and Pocatello, across the Treasure Valley and out to Fruitland.

In addition to the federal CSP grant support of \$10.38 million allocated through 2019, Bluum has worked with the J. A. and Kathryn Albertson Family Foundation to provide \$21 million in direct grant support to partner schools since 2014, while other philanthropic partners (e.g. Charter School Growth Fund, New Schools Venture Fund and Louis Calder Foundation) have provided an additional \$4.6 million in grant support. The Idaho New School Fellowship, our pipeline for the talent needed to launch or expand great schools, has provided 13 fellowships through 2019.

We are fortunate to work with such an outstanding group of schools, educators, community leaders, state policy makers, lawmakers, funders and other allies to grow Idaho's new school sector. We are encouraged by the early academic results we've seen from our partner schools (see pages 10–11), and most encouraging has been the results we've seen with needier and rural students in our partner schools. One of our favorite statistics from 2019 was from

FEDERAL CSP GRANT FUNDING

NEW SCHOOLS SEATS FOR



the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data that showed if Idaho's public charter schools were in their "own state," they would be the number-one ranked state in America on 8th grade math and number two on the 8th grade reading NAEP assessment.

We are also encouraged by the efforts of our school partners to make their schools open and available to all Idaho families and students. In September, the Idaho Press ran a story entitled "Treasure Valley charter schools look to recruit Latino students." The story highlighted the work of Idaho New School Fellow Anthony Haskett, who will open MOSAICS Public School in August 2020, to make his school appealing and relevant to his community's growing Hispanic student population. Haskett told the Idaho Press that he had been attending migrant head-start parent meetings to get his school's name out there and to remind parents that Idaho charter schools are tuition-free public schools and open to all families. Haskett shared that two of his six board members speak Spanish.

Anthony captured the purpose of our work together with so many new school partners when he said:

"As a charter sector you are starting to see a movement to be much more inclusive of the communities we serve. I think that is very helpful as a school, to make sure opportunities are available to all students; we are not exclusive. We want to be out in the community."



Ground breaking ceremony for MOSAICS Public School in Caldwell, Idaho.

"As a charter sector you are starting to see a movement to be much more inclusive of the communities we serve."



NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR

STATEWIDE IMPACT

SCHOOLS

COMMUNITIES

INVESTMENT SUMMARY

Grants
Awarded by
J. A. and Kathryn
Albertson
\$21,031,965

22 Schools

Fellowship Support \$1,610,000 13 Fellowships

Other Philanthropic Investments \$4,632,700

\$38,457,889

TOTAL

COMBINED INVESTMENT

Combined Number of New Seats

8,609

Communities of Excellence
Federal Charter Schools Program

\$10,383,22411 Schools

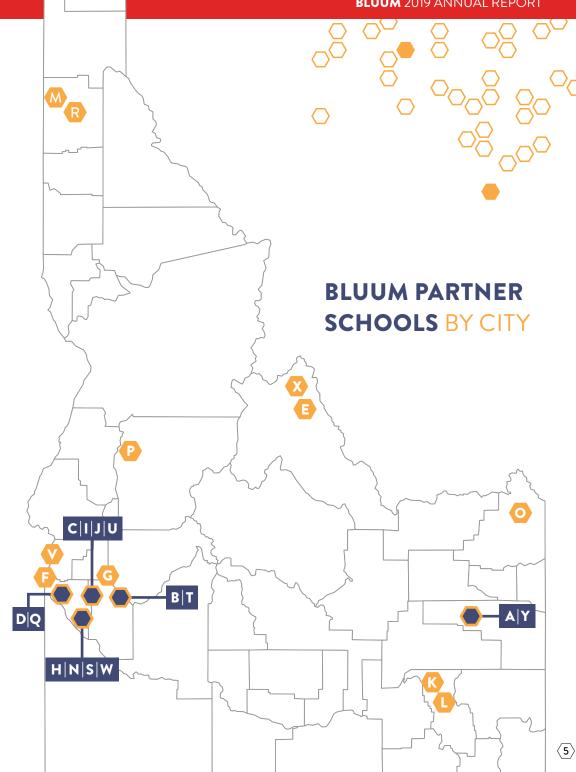
* Indicates average investment per seat by Bluum and the J. A. and Kathryn Albertson Family Foundation.



INVESTMENTS IN IDAHO'S FUTURE • • •

From the rolling farmland of the Palouse Prairie to the far reaches of forested mountains, Bluum has funded 25 schools in varied types of communities throughout our great state.

- Alturas International Academy, Idaho Falls
- Anser Charter School, Boise
- Compass Public Charter School, Meridian
- Elevate Academy, Caldwell
- Fernwaters Charter School, Salmon
- Forge International School, Middleton
- Future Public School, Garden City
- Gem Prep: Nampa, Nampa
- Gem Prep: Meridian, Meridian
- Gem Prep: Meridian North, Meridian
- Gem Prep: Pocatello, Chubbuck
- Grace Lutheran High School, Pocatello
- Hayden Canyon Charter School, Hayden
- Idaho Arts Charter School, Nampa
- Island Park Charter School, Island Park
- McCall Community School, McCall
- MOSAICS Public School, Caldwell
- North Idaho STEM Charter Academy, Rathdrum
- Pathways in Education, Nampa
- Sage International School, Boise
- St. Ignatius Catholic School, Meridian
- Treasure Valley Classical Academy, Fruitland
- Treasure Valley Leadership Academy, Nampa
- Upper Carmen Charter School, Upper Carmen
- White Pine Charter School, Ammon



INVESTMENT BY SCHOOL

	J.A. AND I	J. A. AND KATHRYN ALBERTSON FAMILY FOUNDATION SUPPORT			FEDERAL CSP SUPPORT	
	Grant Year	School Type	Planned New Seats	Grant Amounts	CSP-Only Seats	CSP Grant
Alturas International Academy, Idaho Falls	2016	Public Charter	538	\$1,000,000		
Anser Charter School, Boise	2019	Public Charter		\$120,000		
Compass Public Charter School, Meridian	2015/2018	Public Charter	702	\$1,648,220		\$800,000
Elevate Academy, Caldwell	2018	Public Charter	487	\$1,250,000		\$1,250,000
Fernwaters Charter School, Salmon	2019	Public Charter			57	\$ 133,224
Forge International School, Middleton	2018	Public Charter	653	\$ 1,601,000		\$1,250,000
Future Public School, Garden City	2017	Public Charter	576	\$1,860,000		\$1,250,000
Gem Prep: Pocatello	2015	Public Charter	595	\$ 1,533,834		
Gem Prep: Nampa	2015	Public Charter	596	\$ 1,533,833		
Gem Prep: Meridian	2015	Public Charter	595	\$ 1,533,833		\$1,250,000
Gem Prep: Meridian North	2019	Public Charter		\$ 125,000	574	\$800,000
Grace Lutheran High School, Pocatello	2016	Private	300	\$ 250,000		
Hayden Canyon Charter School, Hayden	2019	Public Charter			434	\$800,000
Idaho Arts Charter School, Nampa	2015	Public Charter	582	\$ 1,546,230		
Island Park Charter School, Island Park	2019	Public Charter		\$ 50,000		
McCall Community School, McCall	2019	Public Charter		\$ 280,000		
MOSAICS Public School, Caldwell	2019	Public Charter	540	\$ 2,017,000		\$ 800,000
North Idaho STEM Charter Academy, Rathdrum	2014	Public Charter	372	\$ 450,000		
Pathways in Education, Nampa	2016	Public Charter	300	\$ 775,000		
Sage International School, Boise	2014	Public Charter	530	\$1,000,000		
St. Ignatius Catholic School, Meridian	2017	Private	488	\$1,200,000		
Treasure Valley Classical Academy, Fruitland	2018	Public Charter	510	\$ 1,745,000		\$1,250,000
Treasure Valley Leadership Academy, Nampa	2016	District Innovation	200	\$1,000,000		
Upper Carmen Charter School, Salmon	2015	Public Charter	45	\$ 123,015		
White Pine Charter School, Ammon	2019	Public Charter			354	\$ 800,000
00 0 00		TOTAL NEW SEATS:	8,609	\$ 22,641,965*	1,419	\$10,383,224

- Grant funding from the J.A. and Kathryn Albertson Family Foundation.
- Grant funding from both the J.A. and Kathryn Albertson Family Foundation and Communities of Excellence Federal Charter Schools Program Grant.
- Communities of Excellence Federal Charter Schools Program Grant.

*Includes Fellowship Support.



OTHER	TOTAL SUPPORT
Other Investments	
	\$1,000,000
	\$120,000
	\$ 2,448,220
	\$ 2,500,000
	\$ 133,224
	\$ 2,851,000
\$1,045,700	\$ 4,155,700
\$ 725,000	\$ 3,508,834
\$ 1,217,000	\$ 3,550,833
\$ 585,000	\$ 2,118,833
	\$ 925,000
	\$ 250,000
	\$800,000
	\$ 1,546,230
	\$ 50,000
\$ 65,000	\$ 345,000
	\$ 2,817,000
	\$ 450,000
	\$ 775,000
\$ 675,000	\$ 1,675,000
	\$1,200,000
\$ 320,000	\$ 3,315,000
	\$1,000,000
	\$ 123,015
	\$800,000
\$ 4,632,700	\$ 38,457,889



Gem Prep: Pocatello, a Bluum Partner School.

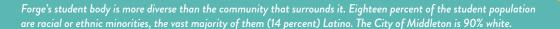
FORGE INTERNATIONAL

"THE COMMUNITY IS VERY SUPPORTIVE OF

what we are doing, offering an inclusive, empowering educational environment where kids feel it is safe to take risks in their learning. We want them to be curious, ask tough questions of the world around them, and challenge themselves to find answers to questions and solutions to problems."

Micah Doramus Head of School Middleton, Idaho







STUDENT PERFORMANCE

Bluum's growing portfolio of partner schools are closing the academic gap for Idaho's neediest students, while expanding the number of new school seats in Idaho. The table below compares the performance of students in Bluum partner schools to state averages.

STUDENTS IN BLUUM
PARTNER SCHOOLS
OUTPERFORMED THE
STATE AVERAGE IN
MATH PROFICIENCY
BY AT LEAST 13%

ALL STUDENTS	2017–18		2018–19	
Performance of All Bluum Partner Schools' Students & All Students Statewide	Partner Schools	All State Public Schools	Partner Schools	All State Public Schools
Proficient ELA	67%	55%	69%	57%
Proficient Math	58%	45%	58%	45%
Making Adequate Growth ELA	73%	65%	75%	65%
Making Adequate Growth Math	63%	54%	68%	54%

MINORITY STUDENTS
IN BLUUM PARTNER
SCHOOLS
OUTPERFORMED THE
STATE AVERAGE IN
MATH PROFICIENCY
BY AT LEAST 16%

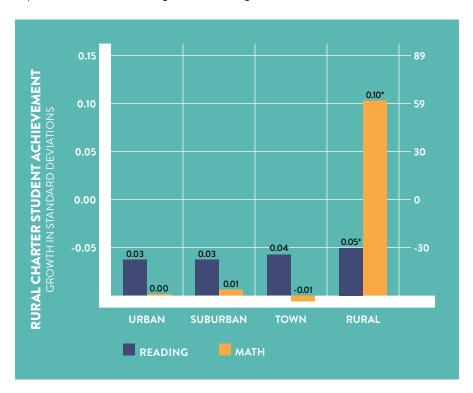
• • • MINORITY STUDENTS	2017–18		2018–19	
Performance of "Minority Students" by All Bluum Partner Schools' Students & All Students Statewide	Partner Schools	All State Public Schools	Partner Schools	All State Public Schools
Proficient ELA	57%	40%	57%	41%
Proficient Math	48%	29%	46%	30%
Making Adequate Growth ELA	68%	55%	68%	56%
Making Adequate Growth Math	53%	41%	58%	43%

DISADVANTAGED
STUDENTS IN BLUUM
PARTNER SCHOOLS
OUTPERFORMED THE
STATE AVERAGE IN ELA
PROFICIENCY BY AT
LEAST 16%

● ● ECONOMICALLY DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS	201	7–18	2018–19	
Performance of Economically Disadvantaged Students by All Bluum Partner Schools' Students & All Students Statewide	Partner Schools	All State Public Schools	Partner Schools	All State Public Schools
Proficient ELA	60%	42%	61%	43%
Proficient Math	50%	32%	48%	33%
Making Adequate Growth ELA	69%	56%	70%	57%
Making Adequate Growth Math	55%	44%	61%	45%

RURAL CHARTER SCHOOLS DELIVER ACADEMICALLY

Bluum's strategy is committed to improving the quality of school options available to students in rural communities. We believe rural charter schools done well can be a powerful tool for rural communities to create schools that fit the unique needs of their families and children. In Idaho, rural charter schools deliver academically for their students. A 2019 study by Stanford University's Center for Research on Education's Outcomes (CREDO) found that while Idaho's charter school students on average experience additional learning, the benefit is greatest for students in rural charters.



¹Idaho State Department of Education, ISAT Results 2019.



CHARTERS SUCCEED IN READING

Nine of the 10 highest scores on the Fall 2019 Idaho Reading Indicator were posted by charter schools, and two of those are rural charters.³

Rural Charter School

²CREDO 2019 Charter School Performance.

³ Idaho State Department of Education, IRI District Rankings.



COMMUNITIES OF EXCELLENCE

A consortium of partners, led by Bluum, has come together around Idaho's Communities of Excellence Federal Charter Schools Program (CSP) to lead the expansion of high-quality charter schools across our state. The program represents \$22 million in funds, available over 5 years, to create opportunities for Idaho students to attend excellent public charter schools. Idaho's Communities of Excellence project has three objectives to carry out within Idaho:

- Increase the number of quality charter school seats by 8,650 students, especially for our most educationally disadvantaged and rural students, through start-up, replication and expansion;
- Support the Idaho Public Charter School Commission (PCSC) in expanding its quality authorizing efforts while disseminating and supporting best practices for charter schools and other authorizers statewide; and
- Evaluate and disseminate widely the successes and lessons of high-quality charter schools to impact the broader education system.

CREATE OPPORTUNITIES • • •

These federal dollars will go a long way to ensuring more Idaho families have the opportunity to send their child to a high-performing public school of their choice. Under the terms of Idaho's CSP grant, at least 90 percent of the federal CSP award (\$20.28 million) is distributed through competitive subgrants to eligible charter school subgrantees. At least seven percent (\$1.57 million) is to be utilized for state level and school level technical assistance, professional development, program evaluation and dissemination of lessons learned. Three percent (\$674,000) is utilized by Bluum for the purpose of administering the program over five years.

RESEARCH, EVALUATE, AND DISSEMINATE • • •

Bluum is committed to sharing lessons learned from working with our partner schools. Toward this end, Bluum engaged the Idaho Policy Institute at Boise State University to track and analyze student achievement and demographic data at Idaho charters awarded funds through Idaho's Communities of Excellence.

To address achievement gaps at charters, the Idaho Policy Institute will track standardized math and English language arts scores at grant recipient schools, according to the contract's scope of work. University researchers will measure student

performance against various academic achievement "targets" assigned to each subgroup. For the 2018–2019 reporting period, achievement data for students attending Idaho public schools, will meet or exceed the targeted achievement for all Idaho schools, as measured by Idaho State Department of Education data for the ISAT (Idaho Standard Achievement Test). Researchers will similarly track academic growth targets in math and ELA.

BSU researchers, in partnership with the New York-based FDR Group, will also track teacher, community, parent and student perceptions of the "quality of their school vis-a-vis their prior school experience," as well as "school and staff perceptions of the successes, improvements and challenges."

SUPPORT SCHOOL SUCCESS • • •

In 2019, Bluum and its partners hosted 12 events in 6 different cities aimed at providing technical assistance to aspiring applicants and existing charter and district schools alike. Idaho's working consortium of partners includes expertise in:

- · charter school authorizing
- · facilities development and financing
- grantmaking and grant management
- vetting educational models

- · charter school finance and operations
- · school leader recruitment and development
- school governance
- · public policy and charter law

Bluum also provides both aspiring and awarded applicants with personalized school-level technical assistance.

Quality governance is crucial to charter school success, which is why Bluum has partnered with the Idaho Public Charter School Commission and creative agency SOVRN to produce a series of videos and provide resources aimed at educating existing and potential charter board members. The series will cover five key concepts crucial to maximizing excellent governance.

Bluum is committed to working with Idaho public school districts that want to authorize and support public charter schools in their jurisdictions. In partnership with the Idaho State Board of Education and the Colorado Association of Charter School Authorizers, Bluum hosted a workshop in September entitled "Can Districts and Charter Schools Work Together to Better Serve Students?"





TREASURE VALLEY CLASSICAL ACADEMY

"WE'VE BEEN HONORED BY THE OPPORTUNITY

to restore the Olde School and bring back such an important part of our community in Fruitland. The support from the Bluum team allowed us to move ahead with confidence knowing that we would open our doors with something our community would be proud of."

Ret. Colonel Stephen Lambert Principal, TVCA, Fruitland, Idaho



THE TREASURE VALLEY CLASSICAL ACADEMY VISION:

To form future citizens who uphold the ideals of our country's founding and promote the continuation of our American experiment—through a classical great books curriculum designed to engage students in the highest matters and the deepest questions of truth, justice, virtue, and beauty.

PROFILES OF BLUUM 2019

NEW SCHOOL PARTNERS

By Alan Gottlieb, Co-founder of Chalkbeat & Education News Colorado

CALDWELL, Idaho – At 17, he's old to be a high school sophomore, but academically, Axel lags far behind his classmates. School for him has been a series of frustrations and disappointments. Axel has been kicked out of several schools, and more than once he's come close to dropping out.

Because Axel struggles to read, traditional classes don't engage him. Sitting in class trying to focus seems like a waste of time. He loves working with his hands, and that's what he'd rather be doing.

But now, enrolled in a new career and technical education (CTE) public charter school in this town of about 55,000 people 30 miles west of Boise, he's feeling hopeful about school for the first time he can remember.

In his previous schools, Axel was denied access to his favorite classes—electives—because he was so far behind in his core academic subjects. "At Caldwell High, they kept me out of the auto shop because they wanted me to focus on my math and English skills," Axel said. "They gave me extra English and math. I told them I don't like pencil and paper work, but they didn't listen."

At Elevate Academy, a new public charter school, leaders Matt Strong and Monica White, long-time administrators in the Caldwell School District who quit their jobs to launch a charter school, have created a model that allows students to apply core academic concepts to hands-on learning. "We are going to adjust Axel's schedule so that he is living out in the shops," Strong said. "And we'll hire a reading specialist to help him with his reading skills."

Strong is confident that Elevate Academy, which when fully enrolled in 2021 will serve 460 students in grades 6–12, can get the Axels of the world through high school and on the path to gainful employment and productive citizenry.

The school opened in August 2019, and illustrates how different school models, especially when spread into areas often short on educational options, can be a life-changer for some traditionally underserved students.

Elevate Academy is one of three starkly different public charter schools that opened this year in rural areas of southwestern Idaho. The other two schools are Forge International in Middleton, a K–12 International Baccalaureate school, and Treasure Valley Classical Academy, a K–12 school in rural Fruitland with a rigorous, great books-inspired curriculum.

While adding these three new choices to the Idaho education mix has enriched opportunities for students, all three schools faced adversity and opposition as they worked to open this year. In some cases, local school districts fought against the schools opening, saying they would duplicate services already in place

"The student body is

100 percent at-risk by

Idaho's definition of
the term. The school
is 90 percent free and
reduced lunch with 79
percent of students
identifying themselves
at Hispanic or Latino."

and drain resources from cash-strapped district schools. Construction delays (Idaho is one of the nation's fastest growing states), also hampered the two new school buildings—Forge and Elevate. And renovations to the classical academy's historic downtown Fruitland school building forced a week's delay in the school's opening.

Nevertheless, the three new schools illustrate that in Idaho at least, the charter school sector continues to grow, evolve and serve a diverse group of students. And despite the opposition from predictable quarters, all three schools have won widespread community support.

ELEVATE ACADEMY • • •

CALDWELL

Elevate Academy offers students core academics as well as opportunities to specialize in welding and manufacturing, construction management, culinary arts, graphic arts, health professions (nursing), criminal justice, firefighting (land and structure), and business/marketing. Set apart from the new classroom building, a cavernous shop is stocked with state-of-the-art equipment, where students will spend major chunks of their days developing in-demand workplace skills and habits.

The student body is 100 percent at-risk by Idaho's definition of the term. That means meeting at least three of 13 state-set criteria, including low GPA, high absenteeism, serious medical or personal issues, involvement in the judicial system, or a student who is a parent or pregnant. The school is 90 percent free and

reduced lunch with 79 percent of students identifying themselves at Hispanic or Latino. About one in five students have an Individual Education Plan (IEP) that they brought to Elevate from their previous schools.

Elevate is a mastery-based school with students progressing through their studies at their own pace unbounded by traditional seat-time requirements. Scheduling at Elevate reflects this mastery approach, and is one of the school's unique features. Students are responsible for setting their own schedules, which change every day based on their individual needs and interests. The idea, White said, is to teach students self-regulation, an essential, basic workplace skill that many students, and high school graduates lack.

"There are no bells. They have to move when it's time for them to move according to their schedule," White said. While this has been tough on kids and teachers alike, especially in the early weeks of school, "we'll get there, even if it's in baby steps."

Like Axel, many Elevate students struggled in their previous schools. Others, however, were high-achievers. Based on assessments of the first group of Elevate students given in September, students ranged from the first to the 93rd percentile, though 70 percent reside in the bottom quartile.

One might think that a school district would welcome with open arms a school eager to take some of its most challenging students off its hands. But that hasn't been the case in Caldwell.

In June 2018, when White and Strong presented their charter application to the Idaho Public Charter School



Katie Martinez, a student in Elevate's welding and fabrication track, has to master the grinder before moving up to welding.



Coral Valero gets familiar with tools of the trade in Elevate's construction classroom.

Commission, the Caldwell School District Board of Trustees and superintendent voiced full-throated opposition to their school.

"...we have serious concerns about the impact that another alternative school would have on our district and our community," the board wrote in a June 5 letter to the commission." Elevate, they continued, would be "an unnecessary expense to the tax payers (sic) of Idaho," because its offered services would amount to a "duplication of services already provided" by Caldwell and neighboring districts.

The school "will not only divide community partners and resources, but will put additional strain on our ability to recruit highly-qualified educators for these already identified "hard-to-fill" positions," the trustees' letter said.

Despite the district opposition, the charter commission voted unanimously to grant Elevate's charter.

District opposition was unfortunate but predictable, said Greg Burkhart, president of Rule Steel, a Caldwell steel fabrication company that partners closely with Elevate Academy. Some traditional educators, whether consciously or not, look down on educational approaches that aren't geared to sending kids to four-year colleges, he said.

"Unfortunately, people in systems sometimes forget that times change," Burkhart said. "They don't take time to think that 'maybe the way we're doing this isn't working for all kids.' What happens is those people can get close-minded and see something new as a threat to their livelihood. But we need what this school offers as well as what district schools offer. We can't afford to be narrow-minded."

District officials might not want to acknowledge it, but Elevate Academy is already playing an important role in the community, Burkhart said. His company, which supplied the structural steel for the school building, will host interns and apprentices from Elevate.

"Kids can get out of high school and be kind of lost, and if they're not headed for college, they can feel the only choices are gangs and drugs, or a dead-end job," Burkart said. Elevate graduates will immediately be qualified for jobs at companies like Rule steel, where in their first year out of high school, they can earn more than \$40,000 and a full benefits package.

"It helps some kids avoid that period of panic when they get out of high school, and get them into jobs that make them feel good and productive and able to live the American dream," Burkhart said.

FORGE INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL • • •

MIDDLETON

As soon as he heard about the K–12 International Baccalaureate charter school opening just eight miles from his house, Ivan Sanchez knew he wanted his three oldest boys to go there. They had been attending a nearby Catholic school, which he and they loved, but Sanchez thought it was important to choose a school that would broaden their horizons.

"I felt they weren't getting the stimulation of seeing the world outside their little bubble," Sanchez said. "At Forge International School, the learning is really hands-on, and they are determined to have a very successful culture and a strong staff. My boys are going to enjoy this school and thrive in it."

IB schools exist to help people cross the boundaries that separate languages, countries, and culture. Their mission is to develop "active, compassionate and lifelong learners," by fostering a distinct set of attributes embodied in the internationally recognized IB learner profile.

Forge's student body is more diverse than the community that surrounds it. Eighteen percent of the student population are racial or ethnic minorities, the vast majority of them (14 percent) Latino. The city of Middleton is 90 percent white, according to the most recent, 2017 estimate from the U.S. Census.

Micah Doramus, Forge's head of school, grew up in the nearby town of Greenleaf (pop. 846). He was steeped in the IB

philosophy during several years at Sage International, Forge's Boise-based sister school, including three as principal. Sage has been in operation over a decade and enrolls more than 1,000 K-12 students while maintaining a 500-student waitlist. Sage is regularly one of Idaho's highest performing public schools. It annually ranks in the top-20 schools on the state assessments in both math and English Language Arts (ELA).

What will help Forge stand out from other schools in the area is its emphasis on project-based, hands-on learning, Doramus said. "IB is a framework that values inquiry-based learning that encourages kids to solve problems in the community around them."

An IB school should be highly localized in its approach, Doramus said, noting that there are IB schools around the world, including in Israel and Arab countries. "You can't get more diverse politically and culturally than a scenario like that," he said.

While IB schools proliferate in more urban and coastal areas of the U.S., they're relatively rare in the rural Mountain West. Forge is just the fifth school in Idaho with IB affiliation, and along with Sage is the only public IB charter school. The board of Sage had long discussed opening an IB school in rural Middleton, 25 miles northwest of Boise. "The thought was to put both IB and charter education where none of that had previously existed," Doramus said.

One reason for the scarcity of IB schools in Idaho might be the conspiracy-theorist take on IB that circulates on some far-right websites and talk shows. Doramus said he has seen websites that portray it as left-leaning, even communist, with a world government agenda. None of that is remotely true. "International
Baccalaureate schools
exist to help people
cross the boundaries
that separate
languages, countries,
and culture. Their
mission is to develop
'active, compassionate
and lifelong learners.'"

But those inaccurate portrayals made student recruitment in conservative Middleton challenging.

Still when the school opened with kindergarten through fifth grade in early September, 264 of its 276 seats were filled. That's because, Doramus said, plenty of parents were open minded, and when they learned about the school's approach to education, they were excited to enroll their kids.

Perhaps the main attraction for some families is that students start learning Spanish in kindergarten. "Families have been eager for their kids to have some of that cultural language exposure and diversity," Doramus said.

A unique feature of Forge is that the classrooms (which Doramus calls learning spaces) belong to the students,

not the teachers. This means that a kindergarten class will remain in the same physical space through third or fourth grade, and the teacher will move to a different classroom for the following year's kindergarten class. The students get to decorate their space, choose, to some extent, what goes on the walls, and how the room is arranged.

"When kids come back to school from summer break, they come home to the same classroom they left in the spring. It feels like home, and it empowers the kids," Doramus said.

Forge faced challenges prior to opening, and although the school is now open, it's still an uphill climb. It had to delay its opening by three weeks because construction was behind schedule from the outset. The decision to delay the



Students and staff at Forge International School celebrated World Kindness Day by gathering together for a Kindness Dance.

opening was made last December, giving parents plenty of time to plan their children's school options.

Forge will also have to do intensive fundraising to finish the physical plant. The high school has yet to be built, and the school to date lacks a playground. But Doramus is optimistic that funding will fall into place.

"The community is very supportive of what we're doing, offering an inclusive, empowering educational environment where kids feel it is safe to take risks in their learning," Doramus said. "We want them to be curious, ask tough questions of the world around them, and challenge themselves to find answers to questions and solutions to problems."

TREASURE VALLEY CLASSICAL ACADEMY • • •

FRUITLAND

Kim Piotrowski was home-schooling her then-fourth grade daughter when she heard about the Treasure Valley Classical Academy (TVCA) that would be opening the following year in the hamlet of Fruitland.

Piotrowski was familiar with the Barney Charter School Initiative (BCSI), which supports the launch of K-12 charter schools across the country. Barney is a program of the private Hillsdale College in Michigan. Founded in 1844 by abolitionists known as Free Will Baptists, it has a liberal arts curriculum based on the Western heritage as a product of both Greco-Roman culture and the Judeo-Christian tradition. Hillsdale requires every student, regardless of major, to complete a core curriculum that includes courses on the Great Books, U.S. Constitution, biology, chemistry and physics. These same traditions and values animate the Barney Charter School Initiative and the work of their 24 public charter school partners across the country.

The Barney initiative's website says its partner schools "will train the minds and improve the hearts of young people through a rigorous, classical education in the liberal arts and sciences, with instruction in the principles of moral character and civic virtue."

That was right up Piotrowski's alley. She was willing to stop home-schooling if she could get her daughter into TVCA. There was just one problem: the family lives in the town of Marsing, Idaho, which is 40 miles south of Fruitland.

No problem. Piotrowski was so enthused about the school that she bought a house in Fruitland. Then she landed the job of receptionist at the school. She and her daughter return to Marsing on the weekends.

"I feel blessed on all sides," she said. "My daughter loves the school and so do I."

Talk to any number of TVCA parents and one comes away with a similar sense of devotion to the school and its mission. That may be in part because Fruitland is nestled in a deeply conservative part of Idaho. Many of the parents had been home-schooling their children because they were wary of the values being imparted to their children by traditional public schools.

"We will train the minds and improve the hearts of young people through a rigorous, classical education in the liberal arts and sciences...with instruction in principals of moral character and civic virtue."

TVCA opened this fall with 310 students in grades K-6. The school will add a grade each year until it's K-12 and enrolling up to 702 students. Its inaugural student population is significantly more diverse than the town of Fruitland. Three-quarters of the school's students are white, 11 percent are mixed race, and 5 percent are Latino. About 30 percent qualify for federally subsidized lunches, which is often used as a proxy for low-income status.

Its home is a long-vacant middle school in the heart of town. Built in 1928, the brick-and-masonry school building

seems perfectly suited to house a school where students are immersed in a classical education. A \$4.2 million renovation took longer than expected and forced the school to delay its August opening by a week.

Given its approach and philosophy, it might seem that TVCA is designed for a small segment of society, but Piotrowski, as well as school Principal Stephen Lambert, insist anyone can thrive in their school.

"This is good for all human beings. This is how human formation ought to happen," said Lambert, who came to



The Treasure Valley Classical Academy First Choir honored veterans in their community on Veteran's Day by singing "The Star Spangled Banner."

Fruitland after running another successful Barney charter school in Atlanta, and before that serving in the Air Force for a quarter-century and retiring as a colonel. "Our country needs this to develop citizens of virtue and knowledge. This education is empowering, and if you work hard at it, then you will have the choice to do anything you want with your life."

TVCA's Barney-designed curriculum is identical to that of Lambert's prior school, Atlanta Classical Academy, which graduated its first class of seniors in 2019. All 34 of the Atlanta school's graduating seniors were offered admission to post-secondary four-year institutions, many of them highly selective.

What, in Lambert's view, is a classical education? It's rigorous, it's academic, and it's broad, as opposed to the specialized offerings of many school programs these days.

Lambert is confident that many of his graduates will be admitted to highly-selective colleges and universities. But, he stressed, that's not the main objective of the Treasure Valley Classical Academy. "This academic curriculum will prepare them to be very competitive. Is that our objective? No, it is not. Our objective is to build human beings, it is not to be a college factory."

Walking the halls of the meticulously renovated building, with its high ceilings, wood floors and soaring banks of windows, feels in some ways like stepping into a time machine and going back 60 years. Students in uniforms (girls in plaid skirts and white blouses, boys in button-down or polo shirts and slacks) walk silently through the halls in straight lines. Classrooms—including kindergarten—feature individual desks in neat rows.

Inspirational quotations from historical figures festoon the hallways, and the school's vision statement is prominently visible throughout the school:

Our vision is to form future citizens who uphold the ideals of our country's founding and promote the continuation of our American experiment—through a classical, great books curriculum designed to engage students in the highest matters and the deepest questions of truth, justice, virtue, and beauty.

Academically, the school focuses on great books in literature (fourth-graders were reading "Robin Hood" one September morning; books like "The Secret Garden" and "To Kill a Mockingbird" stocked the shelves in the teacher resource room); primary source documents in history; "text-centered, teacher-led instruction fostering pre-Socratic inquiry and discussion;" Spanish, as well as Latin for all seventh through ninth-graders.

Parent Sheena Lankford has four children at the school, boys in sixth and third grade, girls in fifth and first grade. Like many TVCA parents, she and her husband homeschooled their children before TVCA opened. She has not regretted the decision.

"It is important to us to build a good education, but even more important to us for them to have good character," Lankford said. "This school really embodies that."

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ENDNOTES

- 1. Based on publicly available State Department of Education data: https://www.sde.idaho.gov/communications/frequently-requested-data.html
- 2. CREDO: 2019 Charter School Performance, Center for Research on Education Outcomes, Stanford University, Stanford, CA. Page 11. http://www.bluum.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Idaho_report_01282019_Final.pdf
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"THROUGH BLUUM'S IDAHO SCHOOL LEADERSHIP FELLOWSHIP,

I've received technical support in finance, facilities, federal programs and many other facets of charter school management. These resources are critical in helping me plan the steps needed to grow Anser and meet our mission to reach more underserved students with our EL Education model. The Fellowship has also connected me with other schools and their leaders in a way that has built my support network and brought a variety of perspectives and expertise to our planning. These opportunities to connect with others and deepen my learning have made me a stronger leader at a critical time in the life of my school."

Heather Dennis
Organizational Director
Anser Charter School





