

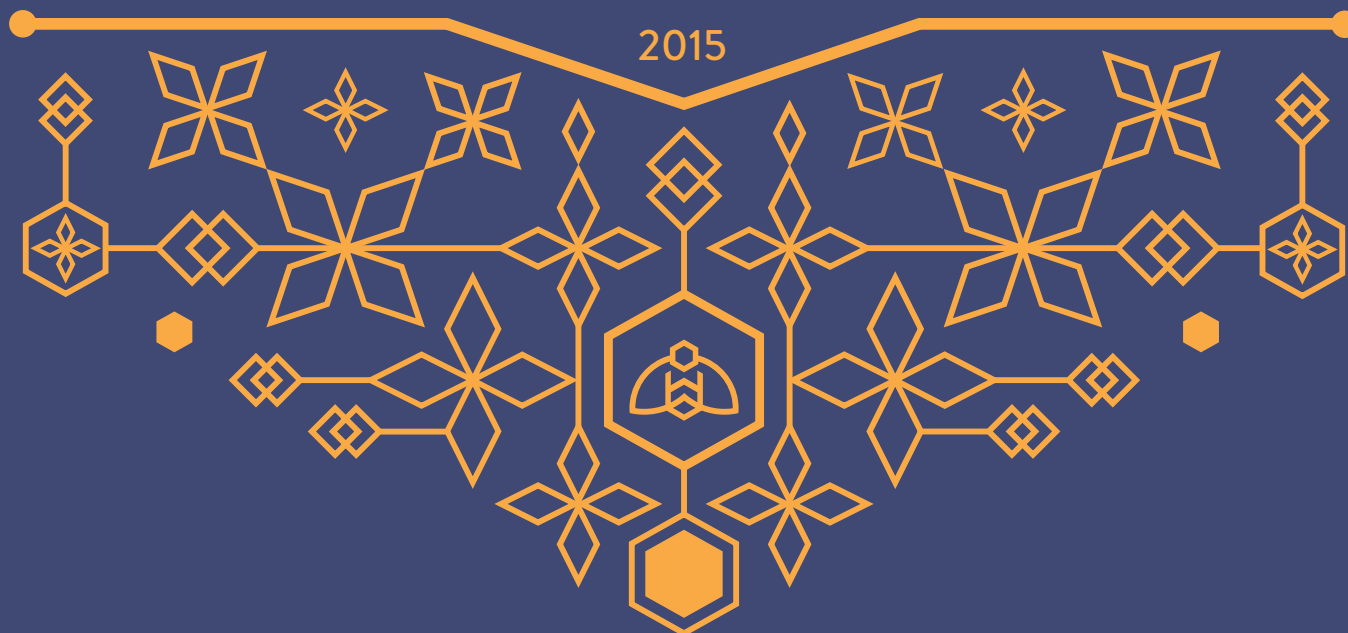


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BLUUM AT FIVE

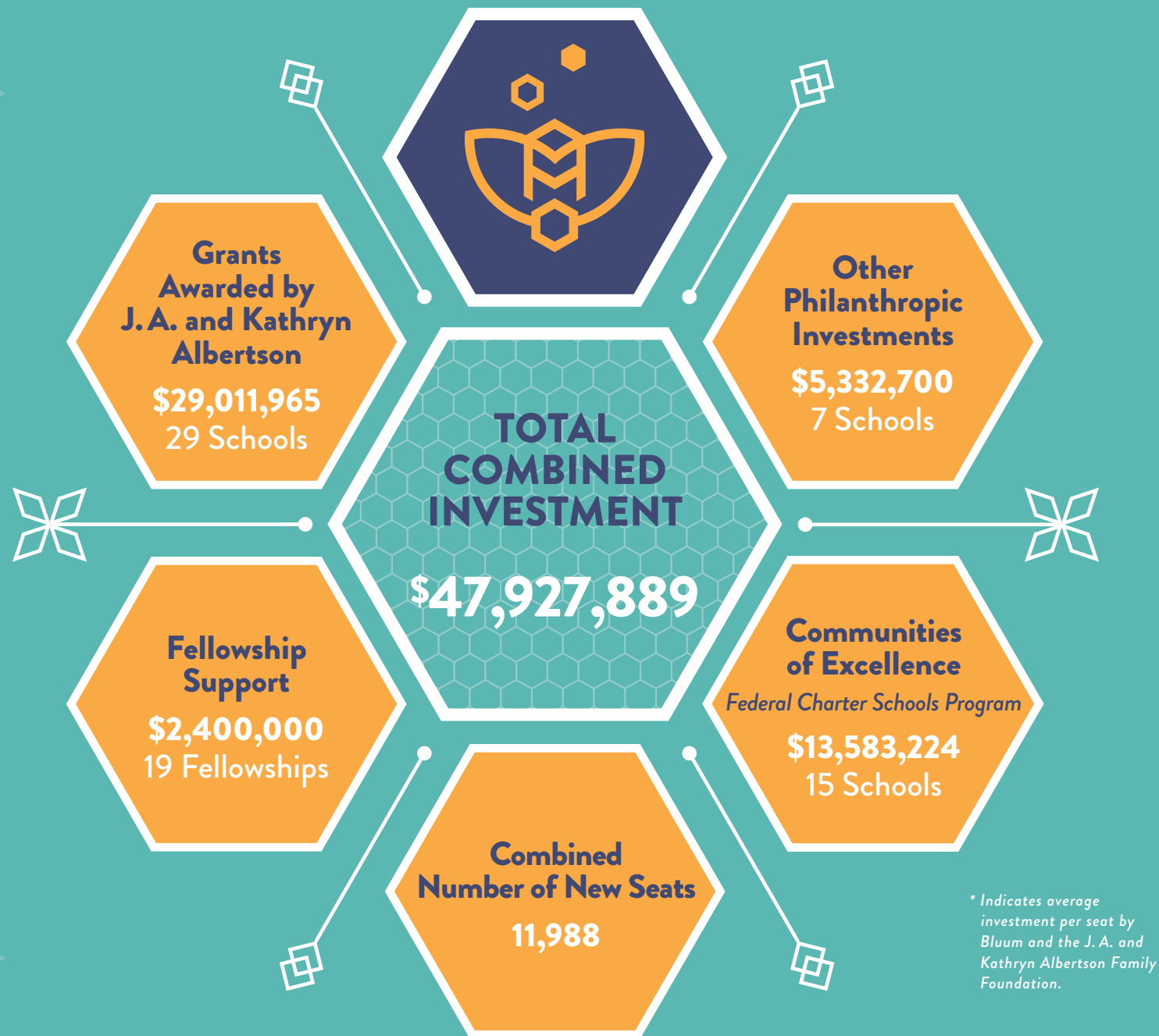
HELPING GOOD PEOPLE START GOOD SCHOOLS

2015



INVESTMENT SUMMARY

BLUUM AT FIVE: 2015–2020





WE BELIEVE

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

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BLUUM.ORG



HELPING GOOD PEOPLE START GOOD SCHOOLS:

BLUUM AT FIVE

by Alan Gottlieb

AFTER FIVE YEARS OF OPERATION, BLUUM—the Idaho nonprofit committed to developing innovative schools and supporting great leaders to run them—has left an indelible mark on the Gem State’s educational landscape.



Its work between 2015 and 2020 will deliver more than 10,600 new, high-quality seats for children in the network’s growing portfolio of 25 high-performing schools. Bluum’s working relationships with Building Hope and other financing organizations has also brought to Idaho state-of-the-art new facilities for many of its fledgling schools.

That alone represents a huge impact on Idaho education. But Bluum’s impact extends beyond the schools it has helped open. It’s not a stretch to say that Bluum has altered, for the better, the education trajectory of Idaho, a state that has struggled historically to provide an adequate education to the majority of its students. Bluum schools regularly outperform the state’s other public schools on most measures of academic success.

Because Bluum is agnostic about a school’s governance model, it has worked not only with charter schools, but with district-run schools and private schools as well. This agnosticism can and should serve as a model for education advocates in other states.

In addition, the Bluum staff’s deep experience in the charter school sector in Idaho and elsewhere has helped shape Idaho education policy over the past five years. The state’s evolution into one of the most choice-friendly states in the nation has helped Bluum attract top talent, both to staff the organization and to the schools it has helped

open and expand. Bluum’s reputation for helping develop homegrown school models, rather than importing charter management organizations from elsewhere, has also made Idaho attractive to in-state education entrepreneurs.

Although Bluum’s early efforts were funded with generous grants from Idaho’s J.A. and Kathryn Albertson Family Foundation, more recently it also attracted \$22.1 million in federal charter school program dollars, further expanding its reach. All told, Bluum has steered investments totaling almost \$40 million to schools spread across Idaho.

With its reputation firmly established, but much left to accomplish, where does Bluum go in the next five years? Beginning to answer that question is the main purpose of this report.

We interviewed 15 local and national educators and education advocates familiar with Bluum’s work to get their thoughts on where and how Bluum could have the greatest impact in 2021 and beyond. We also conducted a targeted survey, sent to local and national experts, and received about 50 responses. Not surprisingly, we received compelling, at times provocative answers from both the interviews and survey.

Key suggestions that emerged about Bluum’s work going forward, and which we will explore in this report, include:

- ✕ Continuing to promote new school development.



Bluum’s work between 2015 and 2020 will deliver more than 10,600 new, high-quality seats for children in the network’s growing portfolio of 25 high-performing schools.

“Bluum is interested in one main thing: They are trying to provide the best educational platform for any given kid because they want to produce exactly what district-run public schools want to produce: Students who can become contributing members of our society.”

Debbie Critchfield, President, Idaho State Board of Education

- ✕ Bringing in great school leaders from across the country.
- ✕ Promoting good state and local education policy by educating public officials about what is possible.
- ✕ Providing an array of services to existing Bluum schools, ranging from financial recordkeeping to professional development to succession planning to special education supports to governance development.
- ✕ Hiring “relationship managers” to create formal and informal learning networks among Bluum schools, and between Bluum schools and rural school districts.
- ✕ Increasing Bluum’s focus on rural schools, specifically rural districts that are open to innovation.
- ✕ Striving to develop strong relationships with open-minded school districts, particularly in rural areas of the state.
- ✕ Focusing on serving more diverse students, in particular low-income students, English language learners, and students of color.
- ✕ Building a Bluum reputational brand to enhance the organization’s national footprint, which in turn promotes talent recruitment.
- ✕ Exploring the possibility of getting into charter school authorizing work.

While Bluum has its detractors among the most ardent defenders of the educational status quo, one clear message that emerged from the interviews is that Bluum is widely respected and admired, both in Idaho and nationally. Its open, non-dogmatic approach to school improvement has won it a bipartisan collection of admirers.

“Bluum is not trying to knock district-run public schools out of operation, or say that there is no value in district-run schools,” said Debbie Critchfield, president of the Idaho State Board of Education. “Bluum is interested in one main thing: They are trying to provide the best educational platform for any given kid because they want to produce exactly what district-run public schools want to produce: Students who can become contributing members of our society.”

*St. Ignatius Catholic School
Meridian*







Gem Prep: Nampa
Nampa

BLUUM'S FIRST FIVE YEARS:

A SNAPSHOT

ALTHOUGH OFFICIALLY LAUNCHED AS AN INDEPENDENT NONPROFIT IN 2015,

its origin dates back to 2013, when the J.A. and Kathryn Albertson Family Foundation (JKAF) announced an audacious initiative called “20 in 10.” The initiative’s goal was to “close the gap between mediocrity and excellence in college and career readiness (in Idaho) by creating 20,000 new, high performing charter seats in 10 years.”



Earlier foundation efforts to support charter school growth in less systematic ways had not turned out well for JKAF, according to Jamie Jo Scott, the foundation's board chair.

“We had a long history of giving money to the charter school movement over the 15 years prior to “20 in 10” and Bluum,” Scott said. “We learned a lot about how to give money away really poorly.” The chartering process in Idaho lacked rigor and due diligence, and as a result, schools in some cases got authorized without solid financial or educational plans. They also often entered into untenable building leases. Some struggled to produce strong academic results.

The idea behind “20 in 10” was to get more strategic and systematic about vetting schools before investing in them, and then providing them with all the supports they needed to launch successfully and become sustainable.

Initially, Scott and JKAF envisioned recruiting both national and regional charter management organizations with proven track records, to bring their models to Idaho, and seeding the development of homegrown models. Funding non-network charters and the expansion of existing schools was also part of the initial plan.

Scott wanted to model the “20 in 10” initiative on the Charter School Growth Fund, a national organization that identifies the country’s best public charter schools, funds

their expansion, and helps to increase their impact. The first question was who should run this new organization.

Scott doesn’t remember who introduced her to Terry Ryan, but she quickly concluded that he would be a great fit to run the “20 in 10” initiative. Ryan at the time was living in Dayton, Ohio, where he was Vice-President for Ohio Programs and Policy at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, a national education think-tank and Ohio-based charter school authorizer.

“It became obvious to me that he’d be an amazing asset to bring to Idaho and oversee this effort,” Scott recalled. “It took a year to stalk him and convince him and his family to move to Idaho.”

Once Ryan landed in Boise in August 2013, he and the JKAF team began putting together their game plan over the next 18 months. The “20 in 10” effort was rebranded as Bluum in 2015, in part because, under Ryan’s influence, the campaign broadened from exclusively a charter school expansion effort to include any school—charter or district, public or private—that was committed to creating innovative solutions for its students.

“In Terry, Bluum has a strong leader who gets along with everyone and brings a lot of goodwill to the table,” said Nina Rees, president and CEO of the National Alliance



for Public Charter Schools. “Bluum has an attitude of ‘let’s influence change through positivity’ and funding the right things, rather than approaching everything through a political lens.”

Concurrent with Ryan’s hiring, JKAF contracted with Building Hope, a national nonprofit lender with deep expertise in helping schools develop their architectural plans, identify appropriate locations, secure project financing, and manage design and construction phases.

In 2015, Bluum supported the development and/or expansion of seven public charter schools, one private school, and the state’s first district-run innovation school. The schools promised to deliver more than 5,200 new seats and brought in \$11.2 million in grant funding from JKAF.

That same year, Bluum launched its Idaho New School Fellowship program, to recruit, develop, and place top talent in Idaho’s growing new school sector. This program also attracted national philanthropic funding to the Gem State and the support of partners like the KIPP Fisher Fellowship.

Bluum selected its first two fellows in 2015 from a pool of 44 applicants spanning 13 states. Amanda Cox and Brad Petersen, veteran educators, came onboard with a vision to create two schools, but quickly joined forces to develop and

launch Future Public School, a diverse, STEM-focused K-8 school in Garden City.

The fellowships program has been “a really good mechanism to get good people interested in launching or replicating a school,” Ryan said. “It has paid dividends for us.” It also provides Bluum with a way to “take risks without being all in,” he said: “A six-figure investment in a fellowship might yield a great new school, worth an investment of millions of dollars. Or it might produce a plan that never bears fruit, as has been the case a couple of times. Better to find that out, Ryan said, before parents, students and staff commit to something that ultimately fails.”

By 2017, Bluum’s network had expanded from nine schools to 13.

Three were new schools that together embodied Bluum’s theory of action. One of the new entries was a private, Catholic school; one was a public charter school (Brad and Amanda’s Future Public School, which opened in 2018 in a gleaming new facility), and one was a district innovation school in the Nampa school district. They shared a deep commitment to serving diverse student populations.

All three schools, the Bluum team believed, were potentially replicable, meaning that once they proved themselves, they could expand their footprint and serve more students and communities.



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In its 2017 annual report, Bluum explained its new schools philosophy this way:

“These are homegrown models and an important part of the story. Bluum is open to supporting national charter management organizations with proven track records that wish to operate in Idaho. Programs developed locally, whose founders have a deep understanding of the culture of our state and the needs of its children, are the best possible leaders for a new generation of excellent schools.”

It was also in 2017 that Bluum added two new fellows: veteran Caldwell School District educators Monica White and Matt Strong. They had a vision for a charter Career and Technical Education school that would fill a serious gap in their community: Creating a system of excellence for traditionally underserved students by partnering with local industry and businesses. Like Future Public School, Elevate Academy would open in a new building made possible by the collaboration of Bluum, Building Hope, and JKAF.

The daunting task of planning and opening a new school was eased somewhat by the fellowship opportunity. “The

biggest gift is the gift of time,” Monica White said. “What it has done is make the program so much stronger than it would have been if we’d done it as a second, nighttime job.”

In 2018, Bluum not only celebrated the opening of Future Public School. It also paved the way for the opening of Elevate Academy in 2019, and welcomed a new fellow, retired Air Force Colonel Stephen Lambert, who had plans to open a classical academy in 2019 in the town of Fruitland on the Oregon border. Treasure Valley Classical Academy, part of the national Barney Charter School Initiative, would operate out of a fully renovated, 90-year-old middle school building in the heart of town.

Bluum also supported the expansion of a successful International Baccalaureate school, Boise’s Sage International, into rural Middleton, with Forge International slated to open in a new building in 2019.

Perhaps the biggest news of 2018, however, came when Bluum, as part of the Idaho Communities of Excellence consortium, won a \$17.1 million federal Charter School Program grant. The grant, which extends through 2023 and was increased to \$22 million in 2019, allows Bluum to make competitive sub-grants to new and expanding charter schools across Idaho.

The successful application pledged that a total of at least 19 subgrantee schools would participate in the grant program over its five-year term. Nine would be start-up public charter schools, while five would be expansion and five would be replication schools.

“It’s great to have the funding, but the federal grant also places a whole new set of eyes onto the work and that is a very positive thing,” said Bluum board chair Toby Prehn.

By 2020, the federal grant had supercharged Bluum’s already impressive expansion. Bluum’s reach had grown to the extent that it supported 25 charter schools in all corners of the state. By the end of 2020,





Elevate Academy, Caldwell

15 subgrantee schools had received federal Charter School Program grant funding of \$13.58 million, and over the next five years are projected to serve 7,008 students.

Bloom-affiliated schools were gaining a national reputation for strong performance. “One of our favorite statistics from 2019 was from 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,” the organization’s 2019 annual report stated.

The fellowship program also expanded in 2019, and by the end of 2020 there are a total of 21 current and former fellows.

School leaders offered high praise for the Bloom team for its logistical, tactical, and moral support. Bloom’s back office

services for charter schools were described as a lifesaver by several heads of new schools. They singled out Bloom’s chief financial officer, Marc Carignan, for special praise.

“You have to have a strong support system to launch a new school or else it takes a whole lot more work,” said Anthony Haskett, whose MOSAICS Public School K-8 charter opened in Caldwell in 2020.

“When it comes to the back office services they have been providing, I have come to rely on Bloom for finances, budgets, cutting checks, keeping track of when things are due. There are all these nuances to running a school that a district office takes care of for district schools that charter leaders have to fulfill. Bloom lifts a huge burden off of us.”

Although 2020 was the strangest of years, Bloom continued its work at full speed. During the year, seven new schools joined Bloom’s portfolio, and will be opening in the

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Toby Prehn, Bloom Board Chair

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next couple of years. They ranged from the newest campus of charter network Gem Prep, in Meridian, to Kootenai Classical Academy in far northern Idaho.

Three schools opened in 2020: Island Park Elementary School in the small eastern Idaho town of Island Park; MOSAICS Public School in Caldwell; and the CSP grant-funded Hayden Canyon Charter School in Hayden.

Seven New School Fellows, and one School Finance Fellow, came onboard as well during 2020. These fellows are planning schools that will open across the state in the near future. Further, with financial support from JKAF, Bluum began piloting a \$1.5 million all-day kindergarten program across 17 partner schools.

Even a quick review of Bluum’s first five years makes it clear that the Idaho education landscape looks very different today than it would have had Bluum not come onto the scene. Continuing support from the federal CSP grant through 2023 means that Bluum’s ambitious growth will continue for another couple of years.

But what, beyond continuing to do its excellent work on new school development, support, and replication, can Bluum do to expand its reach and influence, and to make Idaho schools better for more kids?

That’s the question we will attempt to answer in the next section of this report.

“One of our favorite statistics from 2019 was from 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.”

— Bluum’s 2019 Annual Report



Gem Prep: Pocatello
Chubbuck

BLUUM'S NEXT FIVE YEARS:

PUSHING THE ENVELOPE

RESULTS FROM THE ONLINE SURVEY WE CONDUCTED FOR THIS REPORT SHOW THAT BLUUM has established a solid reputation from which to build among educators, education policymakers, and advocates, both locally and nationally. Survey respondents overwhelmingly (more than 80 percent) said Bluum has had a major impact on Idaho public education, and 98 percent of those respondents said the change has been positive.



Well over half of respondents described Bluum as an organization dedicated to creating thousands of seats in strong new schools, regardless of governance model. This shows that the Bluum message about governance agnosticism has broken through. The term most frequently used to describe Bluum's approach was "entrepreneurial."

We also asked people to describe Bluum's brand. Here, answers diverged more widely. Responses included "quality," "innovation," "solutions-based," "supportive of school leaders," "courageous," "driving school choice," and "creative."

The question that engaged survey respondents most was "what would you like to see Bluum accomplish in its next five years?" Based on answers to this question, we selected 15 people for follow-up interviews. From those interviews, 10 clear themes emerged.

BLUUM SHOULD DO MORE OF WHAT IT HAS DONE SO SUCCESSFULLY UP TO NOW.

Recruiting strong leaders, giving them time and resources to design great new schools or expand schools that work well, then helping them secure or build facilities and open new schools represents an enormous accomplishment. Bluum



should continue working with Building Hope and JKAF to make this its central focus. It's highly unusual for a state to have an organization with so much expertise and so many resources at its disposal. This strategy works especially well in Idaho because the state's student population continues to grow and with it demand for quality new school seats.

"More charters, and a greater variety of charters," is how former Idaho State Senator and Senate Education Committee Chairman Dean Mortimer described how Bluum should focus its efforts over the next five years. "I believe competition in education needs to come back and come to the forefront. No real change will occur until competition, entrepreneurialism and student and parent engagement are the focus."

But opening new schools for the sake of adding 20,000 new seats should no longer be the goal, said Toby Prehn, Bluum's board chair. "Five years ago we had a goal of building a certain number of seats in charter schools in a certain number of years. I wouldn't want to build the wrong school in the wrong place with the wrong management team to meet goals of seats by a date on the calendar. I would rather miss the goal but achieve the results," Prehn said.

"I believe competition in education needs to come back and come to the forefront. No real change will occur until competition, entrepreneurialism and student and parent engagement are the focus."

Dean Mortimer, Former Idaho State Senator & Senate Education Committee Chairman

BLUUM SHOULD EXPAND ITS SERVICES TO PROVIDE ONGOING ASSISTANCE TO EXISTING SCHOOLS.

Bluum has proved more than adept at identifying and recruiting talented people and supporting them while they plan and open schools. As those schools mature, Bluum needs to keep an eye on the ball and ensure that the schools remain high-quality over the long term. That was the consensus of several people interviewed.

There are several steps Bluum should take to support the long-term viability of the excellent schools it has helped create. Several people suggested that Bluum hire at least one ‘relationship manager’ who would stay in regular, close contact with established Bluum schools. These staff members would connect school leaders to resources able to provide ongoing technical assistance, training, and logistical support in a variety of areas.

“There is a whole other support services group that is really required when you are already an operating school,” said JKAF’s Scott. “Maybe you need help dealing with personnel issues or performance issues or college and career advising. Bluum is still really heavy on successful start-ups and back office support.”

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Toby Prehn, Bluum Board Chairman

Scott said Bluum shouldn’t “miss the fact that more than 20 of these schools are operational now and dealing with issues of running and growing a school.”

Equally important, the relationship manager would connect Bluum schools to one another. Roger Quarles, JKAF’s executive director, said that once Bluum’s initial financial and logistical support ends, there would be great value in formally promoting connections among its operating schools. “There needs to be an ongoing value-add to being part of the Bluum network,” Quarles said.

These staff connectors could also help open relationships between Bluum schools and rural districts, which face struggles common to all schools but often lack resources to find solutions. “Bluum has the benefit of being on the ground and having those connections around the state,” said Vanessa Fry, interim director of the Idaho Policy Institute at Boise State University.

“They could be a liaison and connect district schools to resources in a way that might feel less threatening than if it came from the Idaho Department of Education.”

Another service Bluum could provide to its established schools would be either to provide or pay for ongoing professional development for Bluum school leaders, staff, and board members. Unlike school districts, which offer professional development regularly (albeit often of middling quality), charter schools frequently are left to fend for themselves in this regard.

Also inviting non-Bluum charters into these opportunities would be a benefit to Idaho education, said Jason Bransford, CEO of Gem Innovation Schools, a successful Bluum-supported, Idaho-based charter school network. “The non-Bluum charters, many of them, are out there doing their own thing, like pirate ships. I don’t even know most of their leaders. They operate in a vacuum. I don’t see their people at conferences or on webinars. They are not getting the opportunity to learn from others. It’s not healthy for anyone.”



MOSAICS Public School, Caldwell

Finally, Bluum could provide a key service to its older schools by stepping in with assistance at key moments, particularly when a leadership change or board transition is imminent. Terrence Moore, a charter school veteran from Colorado now preparing to open the Kootenai Classical Academy with Bluum’s support, said charters that run on the energy and vision of founding leaders and boards often founder when those initial transitions occur.

“I don’t want to give Terry and the rest of them more work than they already have, but long-term, looking at their strategic goals, I’d think they would want to keep the great things they are doing in place. This is an area they might want to think about.”

BLUUM COULD CONSIDER BECOMING A CHARTER SCHOOL AUTHORIZER.

Bluum has proven adept at helping charter schools launch successfully. Could the next possible step be to have Bluum become an entity that also authorizes new charters?

This idea isn’t wholly within Bluum’s power to realize, of course. Under current Idaho law, only school districts, the Public Charter School Commission, and universities have chartering authority, so new legislation would have to expand authorizing to qualified nonprofits like Bluum. But, other states allow nonprofit authorizers and Ryan helped start one of the first nonprofit authorizers in the country with the Fordham Foundation in Ohio, and Greg Richmond knows as much about successful authorizing as anyone in the country.

Some people interviewed for this report advocated for this to be part of Bluum’s future. Debra Hedden-Nicely, a Bluum fellow who will open the Boise-based Cardinal Academy for pregnant and parenting teens next fall, had her school approved by the commission in December 2020. Because she and her co-founders had operated a similar school within the Boise district, which the district closed, they felt their only avenue for approval was through the commission.

“That seems very narrow to me. You just have that one shot at it,” Hedden-Nicely said. “It really comes down to the commission staff. That’s who looks at it closely. It just feels more public-schoolish than charter entrepreneurialism.”

BLUUM SHOULD PLACE MORE EMPHASIS ON RURAL SCHOOL DEVELOPMENT.

As its reach has expanded over the first five years, Bluum has made more inroads into rural communities. Bluum schools now range 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 on the Oregon border.

One of the organization’s stated goals in its 2019 annual report is “improving the quality of school options available to students in rural communities.” And two rural Bluum partner charters—Upper Carmen Public Charter and North Idaho STEM Charter Academy, were among the top 10 schools statewide on the Idaho Reading Indicator.

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But the needs of rural schools remain acute, and the remoteness of many Idaho communities coupled with low population density mean that in many cases there is limited capacity to open a new school. In some places, there simply aren't enough students. This means that as Bluum continues to expand, rural work might increasingly be dependent on forging strong relationships with rural districts.

“Seventy percent of Idaho is rural schools. There are no choices there,” said State Board of Education President Debbie Critchfield. “The solution obviously isn't to stand up a new charter school in a district with eight students. In those situations, the partnering piece is always the successful piece. In small, rural areas that don't have the resources or opportunities of more urban areas, partnering with an entity like Bluum would elevate everyone.”

Bluum could become a partner with such districts, using best practices gleaned from its successful charters to help rural, district-run schools innovate and improve. One idea floated by Bryan Hassel, co-president and founder of Public Impact, a national education consulting firm based in North Carolina, is for Bluum to help promote what he called “remote teacher leadership.”

Having strong teacher leaders has been proven to boost student achievement, but in some settings, in-person teacher leadership isn't feasible. “If you are the only math

North Idaho STEM Charter Academy, Rathdrum



teacher in a school in rural Idaho, there's no team and no team leadership,” Hassel said. “But if you had an excellent teacher in Twin Falls who led a team of four teachers in four different high schools around the state, they could have a couple of team meetings a week to go over content and go over data about student learning.”

Co-teaching virtually, modeling lessons, and doing observations could all be features of such a remote teacher leadership program run by Bluum, Hassel suggested.

Bluum's Ryan is enthusiastic about the potential for partnering with rural districts, though he is clear-eyed about the challenges involved. “We want to be more than just a charter school group, we've been clear about that,” he said. “I'd like to do more to expand the supports we are able to offer local communities so we are not just helping open charters.” In some cases that could mean working with community groups or community colleges, he said.

FOR RURAL AREAS, BLUUM COULD DEVELOP MICRO-VERSIONS OF ITS SUCCESSFUL MODELS TO EXPORT

One idea Ryan has pondered is taking Bluum's more successful school models and creating “micro-versions” that could be attached to existing rural schools, or even delivered remotely. He cited three examples of Bluum schools where this could work.

The first is Elevate Academy, the CTE school in Caldwell. Many smaller rural districts lack the capacity to offer a range of career and technical education classes because of a shortage of students, experienced teachers and equipment. But if Bluum could facilitate remote learning classes that rural kids could log into, that would solve at least part of the problem. For CTE specifically, access to equipment might be a tougher issue to tackle.

Another school program Ryan believes could work remotely could be International Baccalaureate, offered at the established Sage and newer sister school Forge International. “There are surely kids in rural Idaho who would love to get an IB diploma, but the classes just aren’t available to them.” But Ryan sees this as a readily solvable problem and something Bluum could tackle in the next five years.

The third model Ryan sees as readily transferable to remote learning for rural districts is the Barney Charter School Initiative classical academies. Barney looks for schools that can accommodate 720 students in grades K–12. While a school on that scale is impossible in some rural areas, some form of what Ryan called “micro-schooling” could be a viable option.

Bluum would have to explore a governance model for these schools. Ryan raised the possibility of a new structure that might require legislation. But he said Bluum was committed to exploring these possibilities.

Creating micro-schools tethered to Bluum would likely require significant investments in technology and connectivity for small rural districts, which would allow them to tap into the offerings of larger schools in more populated areas.

BLUUM SHOULD PLACE INCREASED EMPHASIS ON SERVING STUDENTS FACING CHALLENGES

As Bluum continues to assist in the opening of new schools, it should also continue intensifying its focus on underserved student populations like special education, English language learners, and low-income.

Schools like Elevate Academy, where 100 percent of the students are classified as at-risk and 90 percent are from low-income families, and Cardinal Academy, for pregnant and parenting teens, show that Bluum is committed to following this path.

“We want to work with preexisting, well-established organizations like the Salvation Army and the Idaho Youth Ranch to use charters as an innovation to serve young people in their communities for whom current educational arrangements aren’t working very well,” Ryan said.

BLUUM SHOULD DEVELOP A NATIONAL ‘REPUTATIONAL BRAND’

Jamie Scott and Roger Quarles of JKAF were emphatic on the need for Bluum to develop what they called a ‘reputational brand.’ What, exactly, does it mean to be a Bluum school or a Bluum fellow? How can those become household words, at least among educators looking to spread their wings?

Becoming known nationally for its entrepreneurial spirit and the opportunities it offers ambitious educators would help Bluum attract even more national talent to Idaho. “I have been pleasantly surprised by how strong the fellowship has been, and how much talent it has drawn in,” Scott said. “But I have questions about where we go from here. Is that pipeline in danger of drying up? How do we keep it flowing?”

She cited the Colorado-based Charter School Growth Fund as a model for Bluum to follow when it comes to developing a widely recognized brand. Scott said being



known as a Charter School Growth Fund school confers a lot of prestige onto schools—“a badge of honor,” as she described it. Bluum, similarly, needs to become a household name, at least among educators.

One way to build this brand is to formalize the fellowship program further, so that fellows feel they are going through a shared, structured experience with a cohort of peers.

Quarles framed the question this way: Once start-up and launch funding is spent and a Bluum school is up and running, “what then is the value add of being part of the Bluum network? What is the component that makes it a valuable resource beyond start-up funding?”

Quarles and Scott challenged Ryan and his team to grapple with those questions early in their next five years.

CONTINUE WORKING TO BUILD STRONG RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER EDUCATIONAL AND CHARTER ORGANIZATIONS

Young, brash, and cash-rich, Bluum is at times viewed by older organizations as the 800-pound gorilla squeezing them out and dominating the landscape. Ryan and his team have done their best to offset this with outreach and communication, but in some quarters resentment lingers.

“Because Bluum is active, well-funded and working diligently on accountability, the other groups feel a bit of natural animosity because they are struggling a bit more,” said Mortimer, the outgoing Senate Education Committee chair. “There needs to be more outreach and communication from Bluum, if not an attempt to be inclusive.”

KEEP UP THE ACTIVE ROLE OF INFORMING ELECTED OFFICIALS ABOUT CHARTER AND OTHER EDUCATION ISSUES

While Bluum, as a 501 (c)(3) nonprofit, cannot lobby, its education and outreach efforts to legislators have proved influential and helpful to the charter sector over the past

five years. Legislators and school leaders alike said they would like that work to continue.

“Every year it has been, ‘what can we do next that will offer a really big benefit for the schools?’” said Chris Yorgason, an attorney who has advocated for and worked with Idaho charter schools over the past 15 years. “The Bluum team is good at figuring out how far we can push and where we can push, and sometimes it’s a two- to three-year process, but it is helpful to have someone thinking strategically about these issues.”

Retiring Senator Mortimer said Bluum has been diligent about spending time with key legislators and keeping them informed. “They have been and should continue to be very involved,” Mortimer said.

CONSIDER EXPORTING THE BLUUM MODEL TO OTHER STATES

Bluum’s success in Idaho means expanding the model into other states merits consideration. Scaling up to this extent would, of course, pose a host of challenges. Idaho might be unique in that its small size and distinctly libertarian bent makes it an especially welcoming environment for an organization like Bluum. And there are few if any other states where one single funder wields the influence of a JKAF in Idaho. And, the work of Bluum benefits from the growing student population in the Gem State.

Still, said Nina Rees of the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, Bluum has the potential to follow in the footsteps of the Charter School Growth Fund and become a national, or at least multi-state player.

“Both organizations have done tremendous things and their model has worked, and they have the potential to grow their networks in multiple places,” Rees said. “It becomes a strategy for funding education that will ultimately serve low-income families. Bluum now has a track record that would allow it to take the playbook and replicate it.”

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Nina Rees, National Alliance for Public Charter Schools





Gem Prep: Meridian, Meridian



CONCLUSION:

ABUNDANT OPPORTUNITIES

IN JUST FIVE YEARS, Bluum has had a major and overwhelmingly positive impact on K–12 education in Idaho. The breadth and depth of its accomplishments in so short a time is remarkable. It’s hard to say with certainty whether its next five years can match the first five. But, as the previous section illustrates, people immersed in Gem State education have abundant ideas for how Bluum can branch out and continue to build its influence and impact.

The Covid-19 pandemic has laid bare public education’s weaknesses and fault lines like no other event in the past several decades. As technological change accelerates, schools have struggled to keep pace. Larger systems have proved incapable of pivoting quickly enough to serve many students.

This provides an enormous opportunity for an agile organization like Bluum to press its advantage and continue developing innovative schools with leaders who understand the new challenges and opportunities education faces now and for the foreseeable future. It also should help school districts become more open to the kind of outside assistance Bluum could provide, particularly in small, rural districts. If ever there was time to put a foot on the gas and continue full speed ahead, that time would be now.

“You’ve got to have the kind of energy of Terry and his team. They wake up, get to work right away, and they don’t stop,” said Steve Farkas, a New York-based research group that has worked with Bluum on several research projects.

“They fail now and then, get knocked down, get right back up again and keep going. That’s what it takes.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alan Gottlieb is a Colorado-based writer, editor, journalist, communications consultant, and nonprofit entrepreneur who owns Write.Edit.Think, LLC. He founded EdNews Colorado, which later merged with Gotham Schools to form Chalkbeat.



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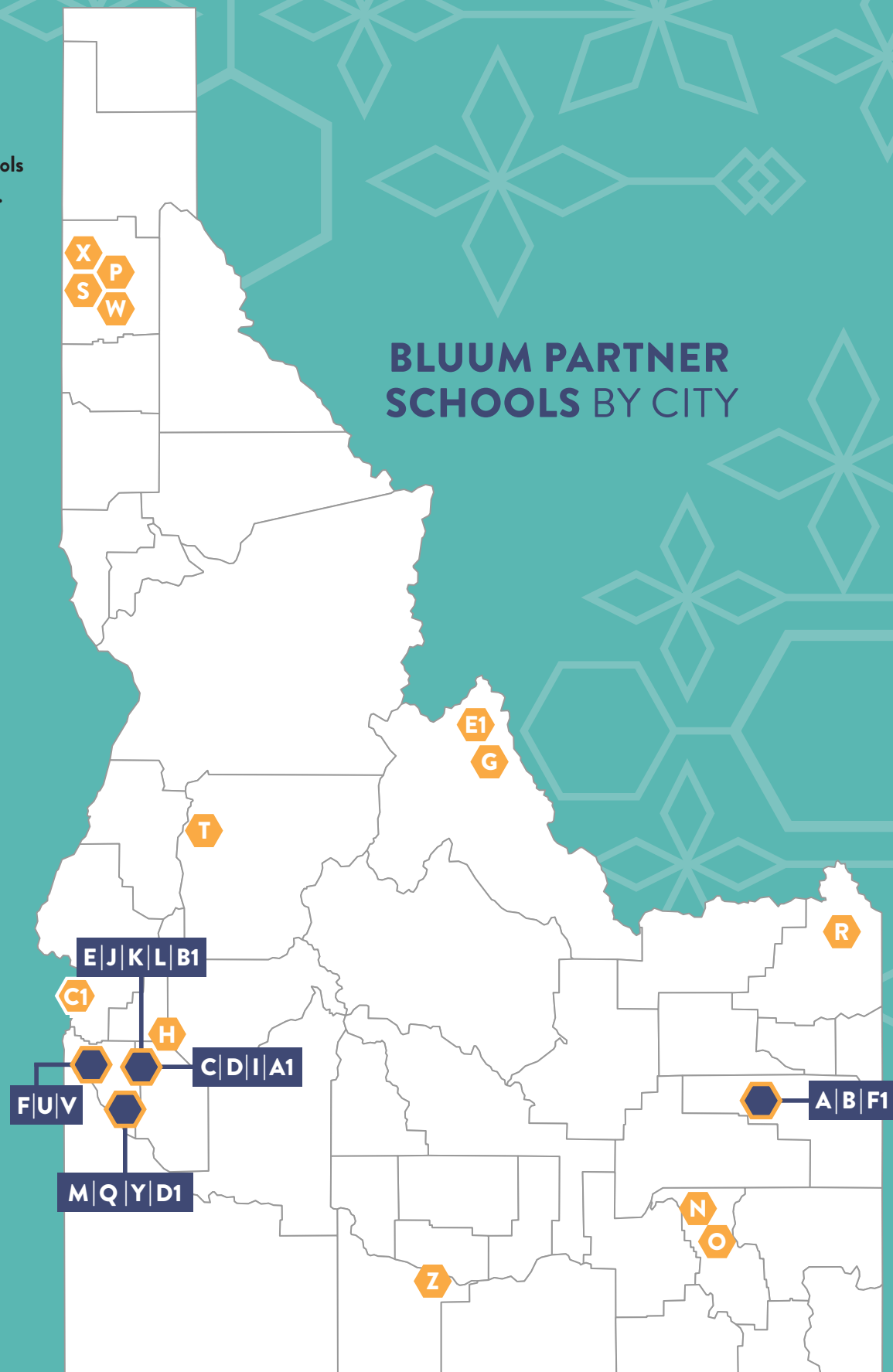
Renita Thukral
National Alliance for Public Charter Schools

INVESTMENTS IN IDAHO'S FUTURE

From the rolling farmland of the Palouse Prairie to the far reaches of forested mountains, Bluum has funded 32 schools in varied types of communities throughout our great state.

- A** Alturas International Academy, Idaho Falls
- B** Alturas Preparatory Academy, Idaho Falls
- C** Anser Charter School, Boise
- D** Cardinal Academy, Boise
(Deborah Hedden-Nicely & Emily Bergstrom Fellowship)
- E** Compass Public Charter School, Meridian
- F** Elevate Academy, Caldwell
- G** Fernwaters Charter School, Salmon
- H** Forge International School, Middleton
- I** Future Public School, Garden City
- J** Gem Prep: Nampa, Nampa
- K** Gem Prep: Meridian, Meridian
- L** Gem Prep: Meridian North, Meridian
- M** Gem Prep: Meridian South, Meridian
- N** Gem Prep: Pocatello, Chubbuck
- O** Grace Lutheran High School, Pocatello
- P** Hayden Canyon Charter School, Hayden
- Q** Idaho Arts Charter School, Nampa
- R** Island Park Elementary, Island Park
- S** Kootenai Classical Academy, Coeur d'Alene
(Terrence Moore Fellowship)
- T** McCall Community School, McCall
- U** MOSAICS Public School, Caldwell
- V** Elevate Academy Nampa, Nampa
(Jewels Carpenter & Phil Diplock Fellowship)
- W** Elevate Academy North, North Idaho
(Marita Diffenbaugh Fellowship)
- X** North Idaho STEM Charter Academy, Rathdrum
- Y** Pathways in Education, Nampa
- Z** RISE Charter School, Kimberly
(Kimberly School District)
- A1** Sage International School, Boise
- B1** St. Ignatius Catholic School, Meridian
- C1** Treasure Valley Classical Academy, Fruitland
- D1** Treasure Valley Leadership Academy, Nampa
- E1** Upper Carmen Charter School, Upper Carmen
- F1** White Pine Charter School, Ammon

BLUUM PARTNER SCHOOLS BY CITY





BLUUM

LET LEARNING GROW

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