



BLUUM

A Decade Of Educational
Transformation In Idaho

2015-2025

10

LET LEARNING GROW



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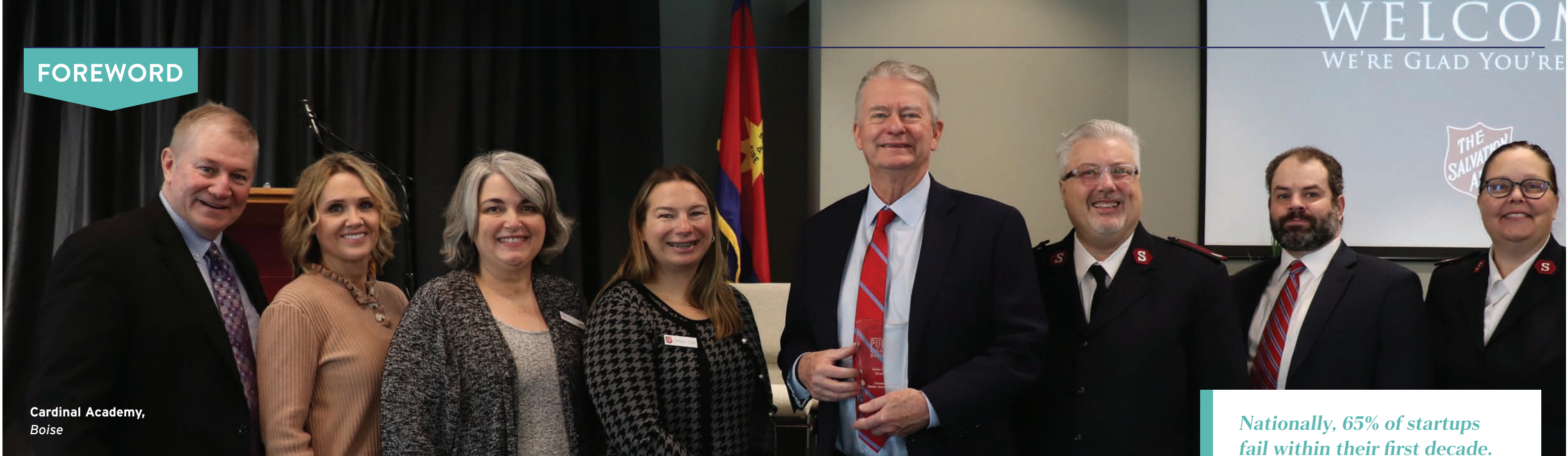
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Cardinal Academy,
Boise

Nationally, 65% of startups fail within their first decade. We've not only beat the odds—we've built something that lasts.

Bluum has made it to ten years. How did we get here? To help tell that story, we asked veteran journalist Alan Gottlieb to chronicle our journey. He does a remarkable job through interviews with more than 30 individuals across Idaho and the country—people who have worked alongside us and seen our growth firsthand. Alan identifies ten key themes that explain how Bluum not only survived but thrived.

It's a milestone worth acknowledging. Nationally, 65% of startups fail within their first decade. We've not only beat the odds—we've built something that lasts.

Still, as Bluum's CEO, I rarely find myself thinking, "Everything's going great." I spend a lot of time focused on what's working, but even more time worrying about what isn't. Challenges are constant and ever-evolving:

- Attracting and retaining top talent—both on the Bluum team and in our partner schools.
- Maintaining a culture of excellence, collaboration, and adaptability in a shifting education landscape.
- Navigating rising costs and complex financing for school facilities.

- Managing external shocks—economic, political, legal, and regulatory.
- Avoiding complacency. Ensuring we don't just settle into "good enough."
- Knowing what to say no to—and having the discipline to follow through.

Alan doesn't mention this, but I will: luck—and timing—played a role in our success. But luck alone isn't enough.

A major reason we're still here is the extraordinary partnership we've had with the J.A. and Kathryn Albertson Family Foundation (JKAF). Their support has gone far beyond funding. They've been our strategic partners, sounding board, and example—modeling loyalty and clarity of purpose. Bluum could not have achieved what it has without their vision and belief in our mission.

Idaho has also been fertile ground for our work. Coming from Dayton, Ohio, I've seen how much harder it is to open and grow schools in shrinking communities. Idaho's growth—both population and economic—has

opened doors. And this state's cultural and political embrace of school choice has created an environment where innovation can take root.

Support from our state leaders has been consistent and bipartisan. From the governor's office to our congressional delegation, Idaho's public charter sector has benefited from political will, philanthropic investment, and national partners. Charter School Growth Fund, the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, local funders, developers, and committed community members have all made vital contributions—donating everything from land and steel to time and expertise.

We've made mistakes. In the beginning, we invested energy into recruiting national charter networks to Idaho. Again and again, they told us that our per-pupil funding and small market size made it unfeasible. So, we pivoted. We grew our own talent, our own networks—and it worked.

By necessity, we built something unique. National research has since validated that single-state charter networks often outperform those spread across multiple states. That's been our experience, too.

Above all, we've been fortunate to work with incredible educators across Idaho. Our school partners are the true heroes of this story. They are mission-driven professionals who want to be empowered, respected, and held accountable for results. They know not everyone is built for this work—and that culture, values, and commitment matter.

In celebrating ten years, I'm proud of what we've done—but even more focused on what lies ahead. We're still building. Still learning. Still striving to serve Idaho's students and families in ways that are meaningful, measurable, and enduring.

Terry Ryan, Bluum CEO

Introduction

By Alan Gottlieb

In the broad landscape of school choice, few organizations have achieved such meaningful impact with so little fanfare as Bluum.

Born from the J.A. and Kathryn Albertson Family Foundation's (JKAF) ambitious "20 in 10" initiative Bluum has, over the past decade, revolutionized Idaho's educational ecosystem, creating more new high-quality school seats than all 117 Idaho school districts combined.

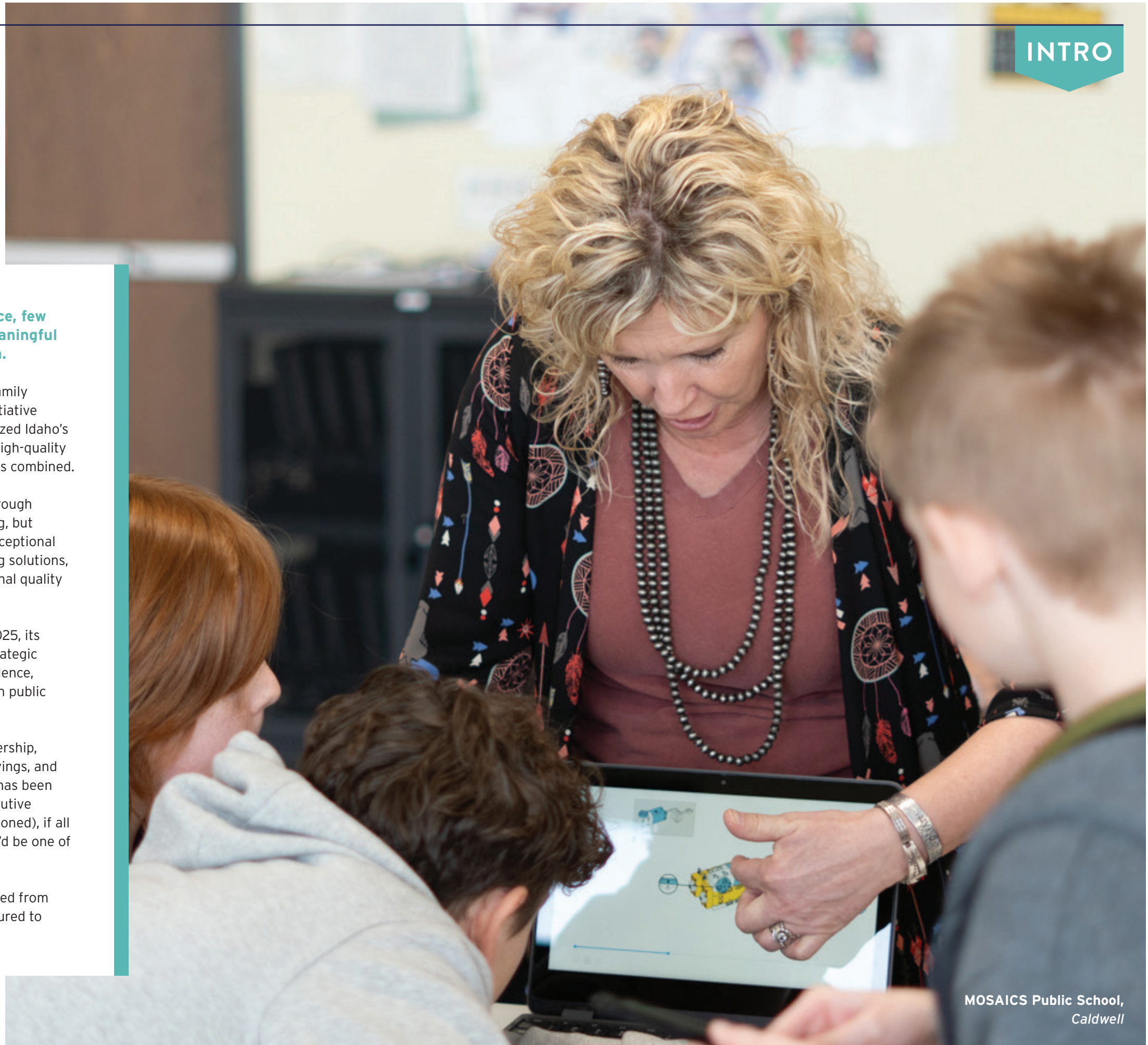
This transformation wasn't accomplished through ideological crusades or political maneuvering, but through a deliberate approach combining exceptional leadership development, innovative financing solutions, and an unwavering commitment to educational quality across a variety of school models.

As Bluum celebrates 10 years of impact in 2025, its story offers a powerful case study in how strategic philanthropy, coupled with operational excellence, can fundamentally reshape what's possible in public education.

"From a variety of standpoints - school leadership, academics, operational performance, tax savings, and then financial health - Bluum's track record has been exemplary," said Roger Quarles, JKAF's executive director. "Based on a study (Bluum commissioned), if all of our schools were one school district, they'd be one of the top performing districts in the country."

Bluum identified 10 themes, or lessons gleaned from its decade of operation. This report is structured to examine each of those themes in detail.

INTRO



MOSAICS Public School,
Caldwell



Idaho State Capitol,
Boise

Bluum, A Mission-Driven Organization, Has Had Significant Impact On Idaho Public Education

When JKAF launched its ambitious “20 in 10” initiative in 2013, few could have predicted the transformation in Idaho’s educational landscape that would follow. The initiative, which evolved into Bluum in 2015, set out with what seemed at the time like an audacious goal: create 20,000 new, high-quality charter school seats within a decade. Ten years later, Bluum has not only met but exceeded that goal.

“Ten years in, between schools that are operating and schools in the hopper, we’re up to around 40 schools, and we’re close to 20,000 students in those schools,” Quarles said. “So we’ve exceeded the goal, though we have created a lot of new demand as well. There are still many students on waiting lists for these schools.”

“The creation of so many new schools and seats has served the state well,” said Debbie Critchfield, Idaho’s Superintendent of Public Instruction.

“One of the core values of education in our state has been around parents making choices,” Critchfield said. “The growth and expansion of charter options around the state really matches that value of parents finding the right educational delivery and right educational setting for their child.”

Bluum’s mission-driven approach has produced strong results across the state, ranging from the Treasure Valley to remote rural communities. Bluum has stewarded over \$100 million in investments in Idaho education, including nearly \$60 million in grants from JKAF and more than \$32 million in federal Charter School Program grant funding. (see Graph 1)

INVESTMENT SUMMARY

2015-JUNE 2025

TOTAL COMBINED INVESTMENT

\$106,777,342

Grants awarded by
J.A. and Kathryn Albertson
Family Foundation

\$55,921,654
38 Schools

Fellowship Support

\$4,366,800
34 Fellowships

Combined Number
of New Seats

19,545

Other Philanthropic
Investments

\$18,685,842
19 Schools

Federal Charter Schools
Program Grant

\$32,969,806
38 Schools

A Healthy Charter Ecosystem

"Idaho has one of the healthiest charter sectors in the country, and I think that is owing to Bluum and JKAF," said Marcia Aaron, a Bluum board member and partner for the Charter School Growth Fund (CSGF), which partners with Bluum on various initiatives.

"They're only supporting schools that they think can deliver really high outcomes for kids. They make sure that when those groups are launching new schools, that they make sense not only academically, but financially."

Bluum's systematic approach to school development has been a key differentiator. "We have a very rigorous process for trying to identify school leaders and business plans that will be successful," said Toby Prehn, a board member at both Bluum and JKAF. "It's exactly what we do in my business life."

Beyond brick and mortar, Bluum has helped reshape the conversation around educational

choice in Idaho. When charter schools first emerged in the state, the relationship with traditional districts was often adversarial. Today, that's changed, at least incrementally.

"One of the things that Bluum has done well, and that has been evolving over time, is the relationship between public charter schools and traditional schools," Critchfield said. "In Bluum's first couple of years, it was highly adversarial and very competitive. And now they're coexisting in a friendlier way."

Critchfield said she believed this evolution stemmed from Bluum's emphasis on quality and standards. "They've established themselves as having a reputation for promoting quality choices," she said. "Yes, choice is the thing that we're all looking for, but built into that, they've established themselves as having a reputation for quality."

"Idaho has one of the healthiest charter sectors in the country, and I think that is owing to Bluum and JKAF."



Idaho Novus Classical Academy,
Avimor



MOSAICS Public School,
Caldwell

Bluum has done a really good job of encouraging homegrown folks, rather than chasing a lot of out-of-state operators to come to Idaho.

This focus on quality is coupled with Bluum’s preference for homegrown talent and models rather than importing established networks from elsewhere. “Bluum has done a really good job of encouraging homegrown folks, rather than chasing a lot of out-of-state operators to come to Idaho,” Aaron said. This approach has allowed for the development of innovative models specifically designed to meet Idaho’s unique needs.

Bluum-supported schools have consistently outperformed state averages on standardized tests. “If you look at the NAEP (the National Assessment of Educational Progress) scores, you see the progress that Idaho has made,” said Aaron. “I think that a good part of that is because we have such a strong, diverse group of charter schools that are really trying to drive high-quality outcomes.”

As Bluum celebrates its 10th anniversary and looks toward the future, challenges remain, ranging from the rising cost of building and financing schools to meeting ongoing demand for great schools. Talent -- leadership and teaching -- is also a perennial pain point for Idaho’s growing charter school sector especially in more rural and remote communities. Yet, Bluum’s track record, aligned with its partner schools, suggests it will continue finding innovative solutions to create high-quality charter school seats for Idaho’s children. From Bonners Ferry to the Treasure Valley to Idaho Falls, Bluum’s mission-driven approach has fundamentally reshaped the state’s educational landscape, one quality school at a time (see Graph 2).

Keeping the quality high over time will be a challenge Bluum will face in the coming years, said Roger Quarles, JKAF’s executive director.

“One key question for me is, what are the ongoing supports to prevent us from having 40 mediocre schools in the next 10 years?” he said. “That isn’t what we set Bluum up to do, so it’s what does Bluum 2.0 look like, or even Bluum 3.0?”

Alan Reed, chair of the Idaho Public Charter School Commission and a commissioner for 18 years, suggested Bluum could broaden its focus beyond the high-performing schools it helped create to help struggling charter schools improve. “It would be nice if Bluum could help lower schools come up to the point to where their own schools are,” he said.

BLUUM PARTNER SCHOOLS

BY COMMUNITY

2015-2025

From the rolling farmland of the Palouse Praries to the far reaches of forested mountains, Bluum has supported 46 schools since 2015 in varied communities throughout our great state.

NORTHERN

- 1 North Idaho STEM Charter Academy, *Rathdrum*
- 2 Hayden Canyon Charter School, *Hayden*
- 3 Elevate Academy North, *Post Falls*
- 4 Pinecrest Academy Lewiston, *Lewiston*
- 5 North Idaho Classical Academy, *Bonnars Ferry*
Opening 2026

CENTRAL

- 6 Upper Carmen Charter School, *Carmen**
- 7 Fernwaters Charter School, *Salmon*
- 8 RISE Charter School, *Kimberly*
- 9 Pinecrest Academy, *Twin Falls*
- 10 Gem Prep: Twin Falls, *Twin Falls*
- 11 Elevate Academy, *Twin Falls* › Opening 2026
- 12 Hollister Charter School, *Hollister* › Opening 2026

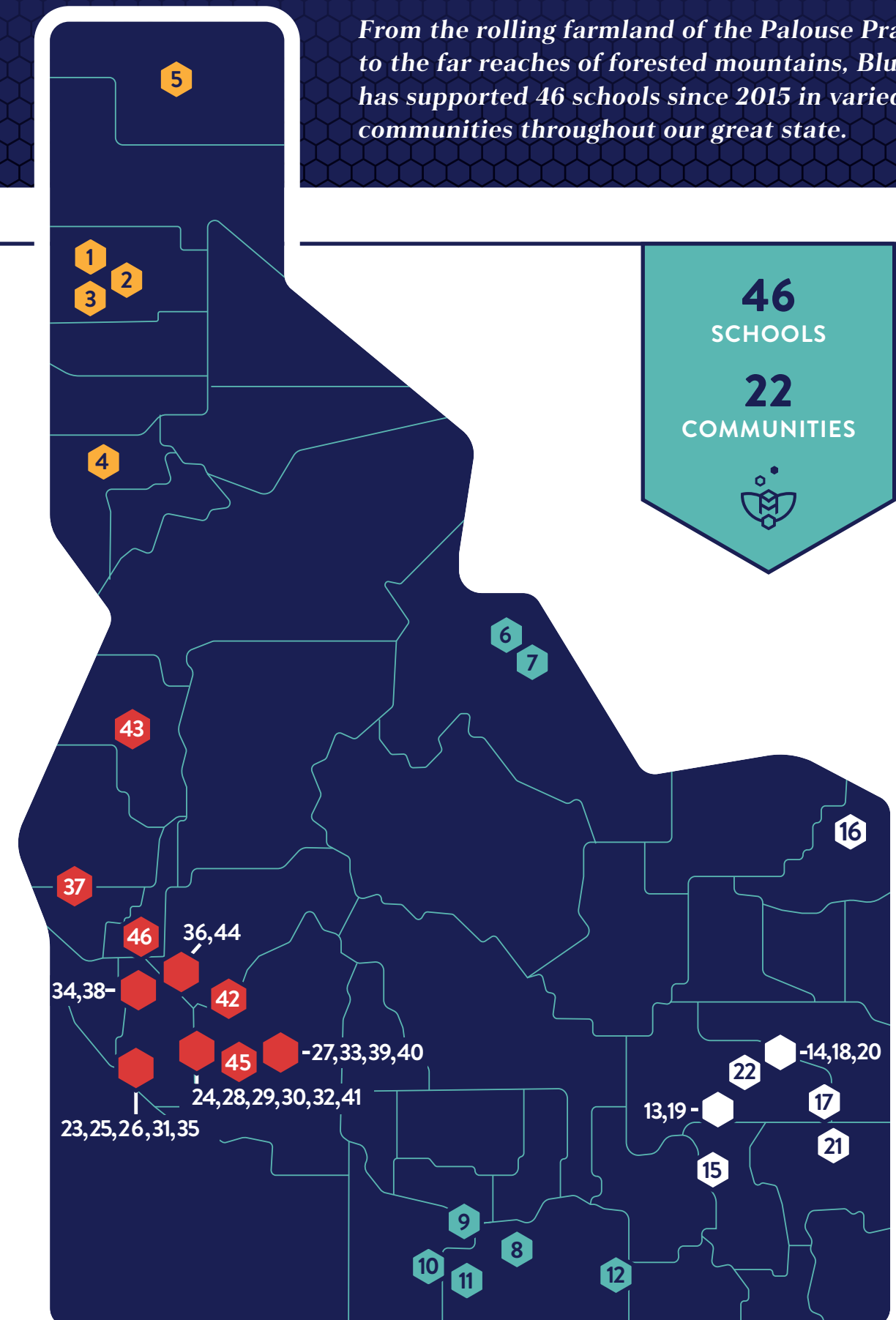
SOUTHEAST

- 13 Gem Prep: Pocatello, *Chubbuck*
- 14 Alturas International School, *Idaho Falls*
- 15 Grace Lutheran High School, *Pocatello*
- 16 Island Park Charter School, *Island Park*
- 17 White Pine Charter School, *Ammon*
- 18 Alturas Preparatory Academy, *Idaho Falls*
- 19 The Academy (Connor), *Chubbuck*
- 20 Elevate Academy East Idaho, *Idaho Falls*
- 21 Gem Prep: Ammon, *Ammon* › Opening 2026
- 22 Alturas Academy, *Rigby* › Opening 2026

SOUTHWEST

- 23 Idaho Arts Charter School, *Nampa*
- 24 Compass Public Charter School, *Meridian*
- 25 Gem Prep: Nampa, *Nampa*
- 26 Treasure Valley Leadership Academy, *Nampa**
- 27 Sage International School, *Boise*
- 28 Gem Prep: Meridian, *Meridian*
- 29 Gem Prep: Meridian North, *Meridian*
- 30 Gem Prep: Meridian South, *Meridian*
- 31 Pathways in Education, *Nampa*
- 32 St. Ignatius Catholic School, *Meridian*
- 33 Future Public School, *Garden City*
- 34 Elevate Academy, *Caldwell*
- 35 Elevate Academy Nampa, *Nampa*
- 36 Sage International School, *Middleton*
- 37 Treasure Valley Classical Academy, *Fruitland*
- 38 MOSAICS Public School, *Caldwell*
- 39 Anser Charter School, *Garden City*
- 40 Cardinal Academy, *Boise*
- 41 Doral Academy, *Meridian*
- 42 Idaho Novus Classical Academy, *Avimor*
- 43 Mountain Community School, *Tamarack*
- 44 Promise Academy, *Middleton*
- 45 Pathways in Education, *Meridian*
- 46 Valor Classical Academy, *Kuna* › Opening 2026

* Closed after 2023-2024 school year



Leadership Drives Everything

Joe Albertson “believed in the importance of leadership and in results.” These ideas flow through Bluum’s work. If one idea runs consistent throughout Bluum’s decade of educational innovation in Idaho, it is that outstanding leadership forms the foundation of excellent schools. This belief has shaped how Bluum identifies, invests in, and supports school leaders across the state.

Investing in Leaders, Not Just Schools

From its earliest days, Bluum recognized that identifying and nurturing exceptional leaders represented its most strategic investment. Rather than simply providing funding to schools, the organization created a deliberate leadership development pipeline.

“Every single opportunity for all 30-35 of these schools has started with a leader that Bluum has brought to the table,” said Jason Bransford, CEO of Gem Innovation Schools, the state’s largest and oldest charter school network.

This approach of identifying leadership talent up front, often two years before a school opens, has become a hallmark of Bluum’s strategy, particularly with school fellowship programs that provide leaders time to immerse themselves in communities before launching schools.

“When you can bring a school leader in two years ahead of time, and they can be on the ground, and they can work with founding groups, and they can message to the communities and explain this school model... what you create is momentum for leaders to be successful,” Steve Lambert, CEO of the American Classical Schools of Idaho network, said. “It gives confidence to leaders coming in that we’re not just a fly-by-night idea; that we have the gravitas to say, ‘come here, we have the financial and logistical support.’”

Creating A Community of Leaders

Beyond individual fellowships, Bluum has cultivated a strong network of school leaders who support one another. This community has become a source of shared wisdom and mutual encouragement.

"Having that community around me has made leading a lot more fun. And I feel like I've been a more effective leader through my association with Bluum, and all the good people associated with it," said Andy Johnson, former Executive Director at Sage International School and a former Army Ranger.

This community extends beyond formal leadership development programs into day-to-day support systems. Amanda Cox, Founder and Executive Director of Future Public School, described a line of communication between herself and two other Bluum-supported school leaders: "We basically have a daily text message thread, bouncing ideas off of each other, just kind of venting at times, problem solving. Those connections wouldn't have been true without the support of Bluum."

Monica White, CEO of Elevate Academy, echoed this sentiment. "You get to this level, and leadership can often be lonely and isolating. Bluum makes it not isolated," White said. "The collective wisdom they bring has helped me grow as a leader and run things much better than I would have without them."

Setting A Higher Bar for School Design

School leaders said Bluum consistently pushes them to rethink what's possible. This commitment to innovation has helped schools break free from conventional educational approaches.

"One of the biggest impacts was the nudge to design the school in an innovative way," said Andi Kane, Head of School at the private St. Ignatius Catholic School. St. Ignatius is not a public charter school, but it is part of the Bluum family of schools. "Knowing I was hired to start a Catholic school,

there's a very cookie cutter model out there for what that looks like, and I was prepared to do that... but Bluum, by funding that project...said, 'We'll give you a grant, but we want you to look at thinking outside the box,'" remembered Kane.

For Kane, this has meant implementing flexible seating, personalized learning, standards-based grading, and mixed-age groupings, innovations uncommon in traditional Catholic schools. "I look back on it and I'm like, 'Oh my gosh, I can't even imagine. We would be such a different school if we hadn't done all those things,'" she said.

Expanding Horizons Through Exposure

A consistent theme across interviews was Bluum's commitment to exposing Idaho's school leaders to exceptional educational models from around the country. These carefully curated visits have expanded school leaders' sense of what's possible.

"That first year, when we were designing the school, they helped fund me going to see schools around the country," Kane said. "We went to four different cities. And each visit we saw several different schools, totally different models; everything from in Portland, where you had kids basically doing school in a garden the whole time, to project-based learning schools."

Jason Bransford of Gem Prep had a similar experience: "With [Bluum's] support, we got access to tap the minds of some really brilliant people around the country," he said.

School leaders said Bluum consistently pushes them to rethink what's possible. This commitment to innovation has helped schools break free from conventional educational approaches.



Alturas International Academy,
Idaho Falls



School founders described receiving assistance with facilities financing, back-office operations, community engagement, and more. This enables leaders to focus on instructional excellence.

MOSAICS Public School,
Caldwell

Developing Leaders at Every Level

Bluum’s leadership development focuses beyond just school founders or network CEOs. The organization has created a multi-layered approach that builds capacity throughout leadership teams.

“There are opportunities, not just for myself to continue building skills as a school leader, but also team members,” Amanda Cox said. “I think about our special education director... our school principal, Heather, just the opportunities she’s also been able to be a part of.”

Andy Johnson described Bluum’s comprehensive approach: “They do some school leader specific PD, which we’ve now done for several years. About once a month, we get together for six to eight hours, and we go through some specific, high-leverage stuff we can do with our staffs,” he said.

Creating An Ecosystem of Support

What distinguishes Bluum’s approach is how leadership development connects to a comprehensive system of support. School founders described receiving assistance with facilities financing, back-office operations, community engagement, and more. This enables leaders to focus on instructional excellence. (See the Theme Eight section for a deeper dive on this topic).

Gem Prep’s Jason Bransford said Bluum’s integrated support system makes a big difference: “Terry (Ryan) always passing along articles and saying, ‘You guys ought to read this,’ or ‘You guys ought to think about this’... He’s also pushed to create an ecosystem in Idaho, and this includes laws, funding mechanisms, and a range of supports that allow us to do the work that we’re doing with minimal barriers in our way.”

Impact: Schools That Wouldn’t Exist

School leaders said many of Idaho’s most innovative schools wouldn’t exist without the Bluum’s leadership investments.

“We wouldn’t exist without their guidance and their developing us as leaders,” said Monica White of Elevate Academy. The network now serves about 1,600 students across four schools, with plans to grow to eight schools serving 4,000 students.

Amanda Cox had a similar take about Future Public School: “I fully know that without the support of Bluum and the network of other school leaders that we’ve built and fostered over the years, Future would not still exist.”

Bluum As A Funding Intermediary

In the world of public education, innovative ideas often wither without sustainable funding.

Bluum's evolution from a modest, pass-through grantmaker to a sophisticated funding intermediary represents one of its most significant contributions to Idaho's educational transformation. By creatively combining philanthropic resources, federal grants, and state support, Bluum has generated unprecedented leverage for charter school development across Idaho.

From direct grants to sustainable systems

When JKAF first began supporting charter schools in Idaho, the foundation's approach was straightforward but limited in impact.

"Early on in our charter school work we gave any group that was interested in starting a charter school \$250,000 with no guidance, little support. That didn't really pan out," said Roger Quarles, Executive Director of JKAF. "They just couldn't get off the ground."

This experience prompted a strategic pivot toward a more comprehensive approach, leading to Bluum's formation and a focus on combining leadership development with sophisticated financing models.

"My one word to describe what has happened since we made that pivot would be 'remarkable,'" Quarles said. "I don't know what else to say, other than I'm just so impressed with what they've been able to do."

"The key things we realized early on was we needed Terry, who was a real leader in the space, and we needed a guy like (CFO) Marc Carignan, who really understood finance," Quarles said.

Leveraging federal Charter School Program grants

A centerpiece of Bluum’s funding strategy has been its success in securing and effectively administering federal Charter School Program (CSP) grants. Idaho became only the second state where a non-profit statewide entity received these grants. Since then, non-profits in several other states have been inspired to follow suit, and Bluum has provided many of these states support along the way.

In addition to securing the CSP grants, Bluum established model systems for administering them effectively. Royce Van Tassell, Executive Director of the Utah Association of Public Charter Schools, described how this expertise has been shared with his organization.

“We had consulted extensively with the Bluum application to make sure that we weren’t stepping on any landmines unnecessarily, and to make sure that again, we were doing something that was simultaneously going to be effective without creating unnecessary work or hazard,” Van Tassell said.

He said he particularly valued Bluum’s practical solutions to administrative challenges. “[Bluum] was incredibly helpful in their willingness to share both their expertise as well as make available some of the software solutions to collect and track all of the various artifacts necessary to demonstrate that the various costs and expenses were appropriately managed,” he said.

Creating affordable facilities solutions

Perhaps Bluum’s most innovative contribution has been working with partners to develop solutions to the perennial challenge of charter school facilities financing. By combining Program Related Investments (PRIs) from JKAF, a CSP credit enhancement program, a state-backed revolving loan fund, and a state moral obligation program, Bluum has helped to create a system that makes quality facilities financially viable for

charter schools. This in a state with the lowest per pupil funding in the nation. (See the Theme Six section for more detail on Bluum’s facilities financing approach).

“We have a board member who likes to say, ‘if you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together,’” Quarles said. “Terry’s awareness around our ability to provide PRI to Building Hope, our ability to provide funding for school fellows, the state commission’s willingness to participate and support charter schools, all coming together was the catalyst for the CSP money coming to Idaho.”

This combination of funding sources has allowed charter schools to grow without the impact on property taxes that traditional district facility financing requires. “Idaho has had a pretty good growth spurt over the last 10 years. We have been able to accommodate a big percentage of that growth in charter school seats at no cost to the local property taxpayer,” Quarles said.

Supporting the full growth cycle

Bluum’s financial model is particularly effective because it supports schools through their full growth cycle, from initial planning to sustainable operations. The funding mechanisms evolve as schools mature.

“When you have growth and the demand that we have... the cost of land increases, the cost of construction increases, and the cost of financing is increasing. It’s getting harder to put the deals together through capital stacks,” Quarles said. “That’s where we have an advantage, that we’ve got more people willing to put their resources behind the work to still make it manageable today.”

Bluum’s “patient capital” approach allows schools to develop at their own pace, while also ensuring accountability and sound financial management. For Quarles, the financial and academic health of Bluum-supported schools demonstrates the success of this approach.



“Academically, if you look at the performance of our network, it is substantially outpacing traditional schools and other schools of choice, even in the private school sector,” Quarles said. “Operationally from a leadership standpoint, the majority of the school founders are still leading their schools, and financially, they are all sound.”

Challenges and opportunities ahead

Despite Bluum’s impressive track record, leaders identified several challenges and opportunities for the funding intermediary role moving forward.

One key challenge is the sustainability of the momentum Bluum has generated as population continues to boom while land and construction costs continue to climb.

“We set out to eliminate a waiting list, and I believe the waiting list has gotten substantially larger since we started the ‘20 in 10 Initiative,’” Quarles said. “It might have to be 40 in 20. I don’t know what it’s going to have to be.”

Through its evolution as a funding intermediary, Bluum has demonstrated that effective educational reform requires not just ideas and leadership, but sophisticated financial mechanisms that create sustainability.

“I’m kind of surprised that we’ve been able to keep up this pace over the last 10 years,” Quarles said. “The work is remarkable.”

Agnostic About School Models

Bluum prides itself on its deliberate, governance-agnostic approach to school development. Unlike many education-related organizations, Bluum doesn't push a narrow vision of what schooling should look like. Its portfolio includes classical academies, career and technical education schools like Elevate Academy, college-preparatory models like Gem Prep, International Baccalaureate programs like Sage International, and progressive approaches like Future Public School.

"They're politically agnostic," Aaron said. "And I think that helps a lot in a state like Idaho, that we don't have only charters that are left-leaning or charters that are right-leaning. We've got that broad mix which meets the needs of the state."

This diversity of models is intentional and strategic. "We're education model-agnostic. We're not saying here's how to run your charter school," said Toby Prehn, a board member at both Bluum and JKAF.

"What we're saying is these things are incredibly important to us, student performance, whatever the metrics are, and it's different for an Elevate Academy than it is for a Classical Academy. But once we have determined the important metrics, then it's up to the school leader to figure out how to deliver those results."

The value of offering a variety of models

In Idaho's educational landscape, Bluum-supported schools span a wide spectrum, from progressive models focusing on project-based learning and social justice to classical academies emphasizing traditional curriculum, patriotism, and character development. This diversity reflects Bluum's foundational belief that families deserve meaningful educational options.

"Being an organization so deeply rooted in family choice, I think that is one thing that makes Bluum so effective," said Amanda Cox, Founder and Executive Director of Future Public School located in Boise, one of the more educationally progressive schools in Bluum's portfolio.

Jason Bransford, CEO of Gem Innovation schools, which focus on college prep, seconds Cox's sentiment. "Terry regularly gets all the CEOs

together. We're different kinds of schools, but we talk about the things that we're wrestling with and the lessons we're learning, and we're able to collaborate and learn from one another quite a bit," he said.

Cox said the gathering of school leaders feels like a safe space, where differences in educational philosophy matter less than the shared commitment to excellence in performance.

"I think we all stand in our truth of this is what we believe. There are things we can align on, and then things across that continuum that feel very different," she said. "Bluum as an organization focuses on what we all have in common, and a deep belief that everyone doing this work does truly wake up in the morning believing in kids and families and having the best intent to support them."

Bluum has focused on pushing quality and innovation within each school's chosen model. Gem Prep, for example, has developed innovative

Bluum as an organization focuses on what we all have in common, and a deep belief that everyone doing this work does truly wake up in the morning believing in kids and families and having the best intent to support them.

hybrid learning models that combine online and in-person instruction, while also pioneering "learning societies" that support homeschool families.

One of Gem Prep's newest innovations is "the Boise Basketball Learning Society for girls who want to play Division 1 college basketball," Bransford said. "You do school for part of the day, basketball part of the day, and you toggle back and forth between the two."

Challenges of model agnosticism

While supporting a variety of models offers tremendous benefits, it also presents unique challenges for assessing and comparing schools with fundamentally different approaches and student populations.

Cox identified this as an area for growth. "When we're looking at academic data or other metrics of each individual school, it's like we're aligning those metrics to one North Star," she said. "But we're not always considering that some schools have totally different frameworks and philosophies of what education should be. Sometimes it feels like, if we're comparing schools in their success and growth and measurements, it's like apples to oranges, because our schools are so different."

Strategic coordination for expansion

Another challenge in supporting diverse educational models is ensuring that expansion plans remain strategic rather than competitive. As the number of Bluum-supported schools has grown, the organization has fostered increased coordination among school networks.

"Bluum has helped with conversations among several of us who are growing charter networks and making sure that we are constantly talking to one another about where we are growing and how we are growing, so that we're not harming one another's efforts," Bransford said. "We're doing better than we used to do on that. It used to be that we were kind of throwing darts in the dark and weren't quite sure if we were going to step on one another's toes."

This coordinated approach that includes sophisticated market analyses by groups like Eschbacher Consulting out of Denver and Public Impact out of North Carolina helps ensure that each school can develop in ways that match community needs without undermining other quality options. Bluum has also sponsored regular parent surveys to see what parents are saying about their schools and what they want to see more of as well as less of.

Looking forward: Refining excellence across models

As Bluum looks to its next decade, school leaders see opportunities to further refine how the organization supports a variety of educational models while pushing for continuous improvement across all of them.

Through its commitment to educational diversity, Bluum has created a charter school ecosystem in Idaho that offers families meaningful choices while maintaining high standards across all models. This balanced approach - supporting distinctiveness while fostering collaboration - represents one of Bluum's most significant contributions to Idaho's educational landscape.



Elevate Academy,
Caldwell

Bluum And Its National Influence

While Bluum's primary mission focuses on transforming education in Idaho, its influence has increasingly extended well beyond state borders.

As Bluum has refined its approach to charter school development, authorizing, and financing, education leaders nationwide have taken notice, making Idaho an unexpected laboratory for educational innovation.

An emerging national model

What began as a state-specific initiative has evolved into something far more influential. Idaho's growing importance in the charter school landscape has surprised even experienced national observers.

"Idaho is among the most important charter school states in the country, if not the most," said Jed Wallace, former president of the California Charter Schools Association and an influential national charter school advocate.

"We've just had this chance, this perfect window to do work in Idaho. The window was a little bit later than other places where some lessons learned could be absorbed, and the political context was conducive and receptive. The state's growing enrollment situation helped as well," Wallace said.

Jim Goenner, President and CEO of the National Charter School Institute, said the partnership between Bluum and JKAF makes Idaho a uniquely rich environment, and one that bears replicating.



Idaho Novus Classical Academy,
Avimor

[Bloom was] one of the early state support organizations to actually apply and receive the federal CSP grant (second in the nation, after Oklahoma). They've been a model for a lot of others. Culture-wise, they're eager to help support others. I think they see it as part of their charge with the grant to help disseminate best practices.

"In some ways, philanthropy is a powerful lever for change. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't, and sometimes it makes even a greater mess of things," Goenner said. "One of the things that's really unique about Bloom and the relationship with the Albertson foundation is how they have found a way to leverage the philanthropy with Bloom and the CSP grant money to have really a disproportionate impact."

Starlee Coleman, President and CEO of the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, said many other state organizations look up to Bloom as an exemplar.

"The National Alliance has a community of practice for charter support organizations that have CSP grants. Terry and his team have very much, emerged as leaders in that community," Coleman

said. "People look to them for how they sorted out problems, how they're being creative, how they're maximizing the resources that they have."

Exporting Charter School Program grant expertise

One of Bloom's most concrete national contributions has been helping other states navigate the complex process of applying for and administering federal Charter School Program grants.

"They were one of the early state support organizations to actually apply and receive the federal CSP grant (second in the nation, after Oklahoma)," Goenner said. "They've been a model for a lot of others. Culture-wise, they're eager to help support others. I think they see it as part of

their charge with the grant to help disseminate best practices."

This expertise transfer has been particularly important to several states seeking to build their charter sectors. Goenner continued: "They've really been proactive in trying to support other state organizations in applying and strategizing, applying, receiving, managing and reporting on the federal grant, all of which are big pieces."

Goenner said that states like Utah, Montana, New Mexico, and others have directly benefited from Bloom's guidance: "CSP isn't new. The CSP not being with state departments of education and being with state support organizations is new. And managing a federal grant of that magnitude is a lot of work, both programmatically, but also

management and administration, reporting to the federal government and being ready for audits.”

Matt Pahl, Executive Director of Public Charter Schools of New Mexico, which received a \$52.8 million CSP grant in 2023, said Bluum’s counsel has been instrumental in helping the organization manage the daunting grant requirements.

““Bluum has been a critical touchstone for us as we launch our own grant,” Pahl said. “They seem quite invested in spreading their best practices and have great collaborators on their team. Their help and thought partnership streamlined our implementation. Thank you, Bluum!”

Strengthening authorizing practices

Through its partnership with authorizers, Bluum has helped improve charter school quality control systems, creating models that can be replicated elsewhere.

“When you think about incubating quality schools, there are things they can do that an authorizer can’t do,” Goenner said. “Conversely, there are things an authorizer can do that the state support group can’t do. So, creating the synergy between those two is a powerful component. We’re on the cusp of learning how powerful that can be going forward.”

Goenner said this partnership model between support organizations and authorizers has influenced his work with authorizers in other states.

Balancing advocacy and support

As Bluum has matured, its relationship with advocacy has evolved, offering lessons for other state-based organizations. The recent development of the Idaho Charter School Association as a full-blown advocacy organization, with a new, dynamic executive director in Nanette Merrill is encouraging to charter supporters across the country.

“I’ve been pushing [Terry] on advocacy structure and I’m giving credit to Bluum for recognizing that sector needs that additional advocacy presence,” Jed Wallace said.

This shift represents a natural evolution for charter support organizations as they mature, Wallace said. “The key question for advocacy excellence in Idaho is going to be the degree to which the ICOSA genuinely becomes an independent, sustainable entity. Our experience is in many places where the charter school advocacy remains in the basement of another organization... it will just result in a wounded organization.”

Challenges for the future

While Bluum’s national influence continues to grow, interviews revealed several challenges that will shape its future impact.

Goenner identified emerging policy questions around school choice, in Idaho specifically and nationally through the expansion of school choice to include things like universal school choice, education savings accounts and tax credit programs like the one Idaho passed in 2025. “How do Terry and Bluum navigate excellent chartering within that broader context of change? For so many years, charters were the school choice path, but now there’s multiple school choice paths,” he said.

When you think about incubating quality schools, there are things they can do that an authorizer can’t do. Conversely, there are things an authorizer can do that the state support group can’t do. So, creating the synergy between those two is a powerful component.



Gem Prep: Nampa,
Nampa

Policy And Advocacy: A Force For Systemic Change

While supporting school leaders, funding innovative educational models, and partnering to create innovative facility financing solutions has been central to Bluum's mission, the organization has also emerged as a significant voice in shaping Idaho's educational policy landscape through its deeds and its words. In this work with the Idaho Charter School Network (a 501c4 organization), Bluum has developed strong relationships with lawmakers, influencing debates around legislation, and championing practical solutions to Idaho's education challenges, Bluum, in partnership with the ICSN, has helped create the conditions that allow charter schools to thrive in Idaho.

Elevating the conversation beyond choice alone

One of Bluum's most significant contributions has been shifting the policy conversation around charter schools from abstract arguments about "school choice" to concrete discussions about educational quality and student outcomes.

"When we first started this, the only voice in policy for charter school advocacy was...focused on volume and money, not on kids and quality," said Emily McClure, an education lobbyist with the Idaho Charter School Network. "What bringing ICSN and Bluum in did was shift the conversation from money and volume and choice for choice's sake to empowering communities to open schools that they thought would be beneficial to their communities."

A focus on quality and outcomes represented a significant evolution in how lawmakers approached charter schools, said Blake Youde, McClure's lobbying partner.



Future Public School,
Garden City

"In school choice, there are two camps," Youde said. "There are those who just think there should be choice for the sake of having choice, no matter what. And then there are those who think that school choice comes with an obligation to provide high quality programs. What Bluum has done through the federal grant, through its fellowships, through the work in finance... they took that camp of 'with choice comes a responsibility,' and elevated it."

Building legislative relationships

A consistent theme across interviews was Bluum's ability to build strong working relationships with lawmakers, a critical ingredient to policy influence.

Senator David Lent, chair of the Idaho Senate Education Committee, said Bluum works more effectively with the legislature than almost any other education organization, providing educational materials and context, since as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit it is prohibited from lobbying.

"Bluum works with the legislature probably more than any other education group... I talk with Terry and others that are from Bluum on a fairly

regular basis. I don't get that from folks in other groups," Lent said.

Ryan and other Bluum staff understand the value of building relationships with policymakers, Lent said. "If you can develop relationships with the policymakers, it really goes a long way toward helping to further their agenda."

State Representative Wendy Horman also noted the steady transformation in legislators' thinking about charter schools, largely due to Bluum's evidence-based approach.

"They've made it safe to support school choice because of how successful their schools are," Horman said. "They have converted legislators who may not have been fans of school choice originally, to see the good that different types of schools [offer]—that the one-size model doesn't work for every child."

Streamlining charter school authorization

Beyond advocating for quality public charter schools, Bluum has used its federal CSP grant

resources to support Best Practices for Charter School Authorizers. This work falls under "Absolutely Priority 1" in the federal grant guidelines funding the CSP program. Meaning Congress authorized state entities like Bluum to use federal CSP funds to help public charter school authorizers improve. In Idaho this means supporting efforts to improve the systems and processes that govern charter schools, particularly the important work of the Idaho Public Charter School Commission.

Alan Reed, Idaho Public Charter School Commission chair, described how Bluum helped transform the commission's approach to evaluating new charter applications through its support of Jim Goenner and the National Charter School Institute.

"Jim helped us streamline our meetings and to understand what was important and not get caught up in the thick and thin of things," Reed said. "We started producing information that was easy for the commissioners to digest."

Flexibility in staffing and governance

Bluum, in partnership with the Idaho Charter School Network, has also successfully championed for policy changes that give charter schools more flexibility in staffing and school operations, critical freedoms that allow for educational innovation.

"Over the course of many years, we've shifted things away from the traditional teacher certification and administrator certification models, in part because there's no evidence showing a tie between certification and student outcomes," ICSN

lobbyist McClure said. Schools can now write their own teacher contracts, and administrators "don't have to be traditionally certified, as long as they met a certain set of criteria."

According to McClure, these reforms have begun influencing traditional district schools as well. "We've seen now the traditional districts wanting to do similar things," she said.

Standing for quality in a changing landscape

While Bluum has helped create favorable conditions for charter schools, Idaho's educational landscape continues to evolve. Recent developments, including the 2025 passage of a \$50 million tax credit program in Idaho for parent choice, present new opportunities and challenges for maintaining a focus on educational quality.

McClure observed a concerning trend away from outcomes-based accountability in some segments of Idaho's education policy world. "We know one legislator, a very close friend who for many years has been with us on this concept of student outcomes. She told us this year, 'I don't really care about outcomes anymore,'" McClure said.

Through strategic relationship-building, evidence-based advocacy, and innovative policy solutions, Bluum has helped create an environment where Idaho's charter schools can thrive. "I think they've been a significant influence, especially helping us broaden the perspective on how charter schools can reach and serve different student populations," State Sen David Lent said.

Bluum works more effectively with the legislature than almost any other education organization, providing educational materials and context, since as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, it is prohibited from lobbying.

Facilities Financing And School Finances: Building The Foundation For Educational Innovation

In the world of charter school development, one challenge looms larger than most: How to finance and build or renovate a suitable facility. For many charter schools across the country, this obstacle can mean the difference between thriving and merely surviving or, in some cases, not opening at all. Spending a disproportionate amount of a school budget on facilities can be a death knell. This is true in Idaho and across the country.

Bluum, in partnership with Building Hope and other facility financing partners, transformed this landscape in Idaho by creating what experts described as the most comprehensive charter school facilities financing ecosystem in the nation.

Representative Wendy Horman pointed to this work as a signature achievement. “The charter school facility, the credit enhancement plan that we have here in Idaho... has really revolutionized the way that charters are able to get facilities and pay for facilities,” Horman said. “They have that partnership with Building Hope. And we’ve leveraged the state’s credit in a way that is very, very low risk, but also allows more money at lower interest rates. It’s saved millions of dollars for charter schools to put into the classroom rather than into the facility.”

McClure said this financing innovation has attracted attention well beyond education. “The really creative, unique financing... starting schools with the revolving loan fund when they’re starting and then moving them to the credit enhancement when they’re more mature... has made a huge impact to the point where lots of people now are asking how we did it, and could they follow it and model it inside Idaho, not in education, and then outside Idaho for other charter schools and states.”



Elevate Academy East Idaho,
Idaho Falls

“The charter school facility, the credit enhancement plan that we have here in Idaho... has really revolutionized the way that charters are able to get facilities and pay for facilities.”

Over the past decade, this impact has been visible across the state, where new charter schools consistently opened in purpose-built facilities rather than makeshift space, in stark contrast to the pattern in most states where charters typically start in strip malls or retrofitted buildings.

Wes Olson, a Managing Director with Raymond James who worked on nearly 20 Idaho charter school financings since 2020, called Idaho “the best charter school facility financing landscape in the country. No question. Bluum has played a big role

in developing the most efficient startup financing mechanisms available. That can be the difference between the school opening or not, especially since interest rates have come up since 2022.”

Creating a financial ecosystem

The foundation of this financing ecosystem rested on multiple complementary programs that Bluum helped develop and implement with key partners.

According to Matthew Joseph, Senior Policy Advisor at ExcelinEd, most states had either long-term financing solutions or startup solutions, but rarely both. “Idaho is unique... they have crafted policies that combine those two stages,” Joseph said.

This dual-stage approach began with a revolving loan fund for startup schools and transitioned to a moral obligation (aka credit enhancement) bond

program for established schools. The revolving loan fund provided low or no-interest financing during a school’s vulnerable early years, while the moral obligation program enabled established schools to secure long-term bonds at advantageous rates once they’d built a track record.

“In other states, if we finance a startup, you can expect to pay six to 10 percent, depending on the market,” Olson said. “With the tools that they’ve put in place in Idaho – the revolving loan fund, the subordinate debt from Building Hope that’s funded in partnership with JKAF – we are getting financings done even in this environment at a blended 3 to 4 percent interest rate.”

Joe Bruno, founding head of Building Hope and now a Bluum board member, said JKAF committed \$35 million over time to establish a revolving financing fund, managed by Building Hope. “Our

program would be to just calculate what it would take for a school to get to the level of enrollment to be able to go out and get their own financing,” Bruno said. “Once a school pays back the revolving fund, once they get external financing, we can recycle the money.”

Beyond traditional financing

What made Idaho’s approach particularly effective was how it integrated multiple funding streams to reduce costs at each stage of development.

The moral obligation enhancement program, modeled after similar programs in Colorado and other states, allowed the state to back charter school bonds, lowering interest rates without significant risk to taxpayers. The state essentially guaranteed repayment if a school defaulted, which reduced perceived risk for investors.

"There tends to be a kind of market failure with charters, that the market is treating something as riskier than it really is because of their lack of familiarity with it," Joseph said. "What states like Idaho are doing is saying, 'OK, you go to the bond market, and if there's a default, we'll guarantee the bond.' Those investors feel much more confident. They'll lower their interest rate by a huge amount, even a couple of percentage points."

This rate reduction could save a school hundreds of thousands of dollars annually, money that stays in classrooms rather than going to debt service.

But Idaho's charter school financing model, crafted initially by Building Hope and over time modified in partnership with Bluum, extended beyond just government-backed programs. The effort assembled a comprehensive network of partners, including JKAF, Building Hope, the Charter School Growth Fund, and traditional lenders, creating a financing stack that dramatically reduced costs for new schools.

"Charter School Growth Fund's involvement is unbelievable," Olson said. "We're doing two deals right now where Charter School Growth Fund is a senior lender at startup, and they have a product that is 0% during construction and 1% after."

Marcia Aaron of the Charter School Growth Fund described her organization's role on facilities financing in Idaho as "helping charter bridge the gap to when they can then do the long-term takeout."

The human element

Behind the complex financial mechanisms are key individuals who make the system work. Bluum's team, particularly CFO Marc Carignan, received extensive praise from financial partners.

"Marc is just the right guy, and he's dedicated," Bruno said. "He's the best professional that I know that understands charter schools in all aspects when it comes to financials of anybody I've met."

This financial expertise was complemented by Bluum's fellowship program, which developed school leaders years before their schools opened. This development pipeline created stronger school models, which in turn reduced financial risk.

"It's not just the financing, it's the quality of facilities that they can have year one," Olson said. "It drums up community support. It expands their impact on their communities with higher enrollment levels."

The Impact: More resources in classrooms

The real value of this financing ecosystem isn't just in brick-and-mortar buildings; it's also in the educational resources these financial savings make possible.

"The money schools would have been paying for facilities would have had to be taken from their operating budgets," Joseph said. "Not having to do that meant they were able to provide more teachers, or services like in an IB program, or at Elevate Academy where they're serving 100 percent at-risk kids with a CTE model, they need equipment that they couldn't afford otherwise."

Most remarkably, this is happening in a state that in 2024 maintained the lowest per-pupil expenditure in the nation, ranking 51st when including the District of Columbia. Every dollar saved on facilities was a dollar that could support teachers, curriculum, and student services.

Challenges and the path forward

Despite its successes, Bluum's facilities financing model faces ongoing challenges. Rising construction costs and interest rates constantly drive-up costs, potentially straining even this efficient system. "It's like whack-a-mole," said Ryan. "We solve one set of problems and others just take their place."

"The cost to build schools, has gone up dramatically, and the cost to finance schools has gone up because interest rates have gone up 300 to 400 basis points," said Toby Prehn, Bluum's board chair.

Real estate availability also presents a bottleneck. "If there would be a way to identify and buy properties in advance," Olson said, that might help address delays in school openings caused by real estate issues.

Bruno pointed to another area for potential improvement: "I think we could probably do more in rural communities," he said.

As Bluum looks toward its next decade, maintaining and expanding this financing ecosystem will be crucial to sustaining its impact. But the foundation

it has worked to build, combining innovative financing tools, strong partnerships, and dedicated expertise, offers a model that many charter school leaders across the country look at with envy.

"I wish I could create Bluum and put them in every state that we work in," Olson said. "I wish we could have a national Bluum."

The real value of this financing ecosystem isn't just in brick-and-mortar buildings; it's also in the educational resources these financial savings make possible.



Elevate Academy,
Nampa

Data-Driven Decision-Making: The Science Behind Bluum's Success

In an era when educational policy can be driven more by ideology than evidence, Bluum's decade of success has been built on a foundation of rigorous data analysis. From demographic studies to parent surveys to academic outcome tracking, the organization has consistently let information guide its strategy. This practice has been central to its effectiveness.

"Bluum generally uses data universally. They don't open schools in places where there's not a demand, where population is not growing, where there's not a populational kind of justification," said Steve Farkas, a veteran New York-based education researcher who has conducted numerous public survey studies for Bluum, JKAF and the Idaho Education News. "They already know what the difficulties are in rural schools."

This data-driven approach pervades everything Bluum does, from determining where new schools should be located to assessing how existing schools are performing. The organization has cultivated relationships with national researchers and data experts, commissioning studies that inform both their own work and the broader educational landscape in Idaho.

Mapping community needs

In recent years, Bluum has partnered with Denver-based education consultant Brian Eschbacher, who has conducted a comprehensive, annual landscape analysis of Idaho's educational demographics. This analysis, which examined population growth, school enrollment patterns, and academic quality across the state, has helped identify areas with the greatest need for additional high-quality school options.



Cardinal Academy,
Boise

Eschbacher produced similar annual studies in his previous works as executive director of planning and enrollment for the 90,000-student Denver Public Schools.

“The reports are intended to point operators in the right direction of where to go to open a new school and give them that kind of quantitative fact-based side of it,” Eschbacher said. “Then they have to layer on the qualitative, family and community engagement side of it. If you have that kind of art and science and you put it together, I think you probably have something pretty good to work from.”

The detailed mapping exercise revealed patterns that might not otherwise have been apparent, such as the rapid population growth west of Boise in the Kuna community, where developers planned to build 11,000 single-family homes over the next decade.

Using this data, Bluum began working with developers to secure land for future school sites, timing new school openings to coincide with population growth. This creates what Eschbacher called a “flywheel” effect, where developers dedicate land for schools, Bluum helps coordinate

the timing and authorization, and the community benefits from planned school development that keeps pace with housing growth.

This proactive approach stood in stark contrast to the challenges faced by traditional school districts, which Eschbacher noted often struggle to pass bonds for new facilities, especially in a fiscally conservative state like Idaho.

Listening to community voices

Beyond quantitative studies, Bluum has invested in qualitative research to understand the communities it serves. Farkas has conducted numerous focus groups with parents, teachers, and community members across Idaho, helping Bluum understand nuances that numbers alone couldn’t capture.

Particularly notable was work with Hispanic families, a growing demographic in Idaho that had often been overlooked in educational planning.

“Very little was known about them in terms of their attitudes. They’re not like New York City Hispanics or Hispanics in California. They’re very

different,” Farkas said. “Hearing the voices of these parents and what their goals were for their kids was important to Bluum.”

These focus groups revealed that Hispanic parents, like other parents in Idaho, wanted their children to succeed academically, but they also placed particular emphasis on trade education and maintaining Spanish language skills.

“These focus groups opened up Bluum to those voices in a way no other organization in Idaho had attempted,” Farkas said. Hispanics now comprise 13 percent of Idaho’s population, and 18 percent of public-school children in the state are Hispanic. “But no one talked to them, and Bluum did, through us. And that was meaningful.”

This research helped Bluum recognize opportunities to support educational models that would resonate with Hispanic families, such as the career-technical Elevate Academies, which proved particularly popular in focus groups.

Evaluating school performance

Perhaps most importantly, Bluum’s data approach extends to evaluating the schools it supports. The organization has built evaluation components into its federal Charter School Program (CSP) grant, collecting both hard performance data and perceptual data from teachers, parents, and school leaders.

“As the schools were opening, we conducted, in the first CSP grant, a series of focus groups with the teachers and the parents from that school, as well as interviews with the school leaders. And then a couple of years later, we did a follow-up survey,” Farkas said.

These evaluations served multiple purposes. They kept communities engaged and demonstrated that Bluum was listening to concerns. They provided valuable feedback to school leaders about areas for improvement. And they generated evidence for external evaluators about the effectiveness of the schools Bluum supported.

“In a couple of schools, we saw that leadership grade ratings had gone down or were low compared to other schools,” Farkas said. “Terry probably knew these things already, but confirming it allowed them to work on changes where they needed to be made.”

A collaborative approach to data

What distinguishes Bluum’s data approach, according to Eschbacher and Farkas, is how the organization shares information rather than hoarding it. Eschbacher noted that unlike some similar organizations in other states, Bluum actively works to get data into the hands of school operators and community members.

“One of the things that they did really well was try to socialize it as much as possible,” Eschbacher said. “They connected me with multiple charter leaders before I even started, to say, ‘Look, we want you to get to know them. Hear from them what’s on their mind. Hear from them what they see on the ground.’”

This approach reflects Bluum’s belief that better information leads to better decisions, and that the collective wisdom of educators, families, and communities is essential to creating successful schools.

[Bluum] has cultivated relationships with national researchers and data experts, commissioning studies that inform both their own work and the broader educational landscape in Idaho.

“They didn’t need to become experts in all these census population details,” Eschbacher said. “It’s getting the information out to school operators so they could ask questions and process it.”

Bluum has also produced data-rich reports as a service to public educators and policymakers across the state. Education Secretary Critchfield said she relies regularly on Bluum’s Idaho Education by the Numbers. “I think this is one of the most powerful pieces of information around education in the state,” Critchfield said. “I carry this around when I’m asked to go and speak. They do a great job explaining the state’s educational landscape.”

The impact of data-driven decisions

The results of this data-driven approach speak for themselves. Bluum-supported schools have consistently opened in areas where they were needed, served the populations they intended to serve, and performed at high levels academically.

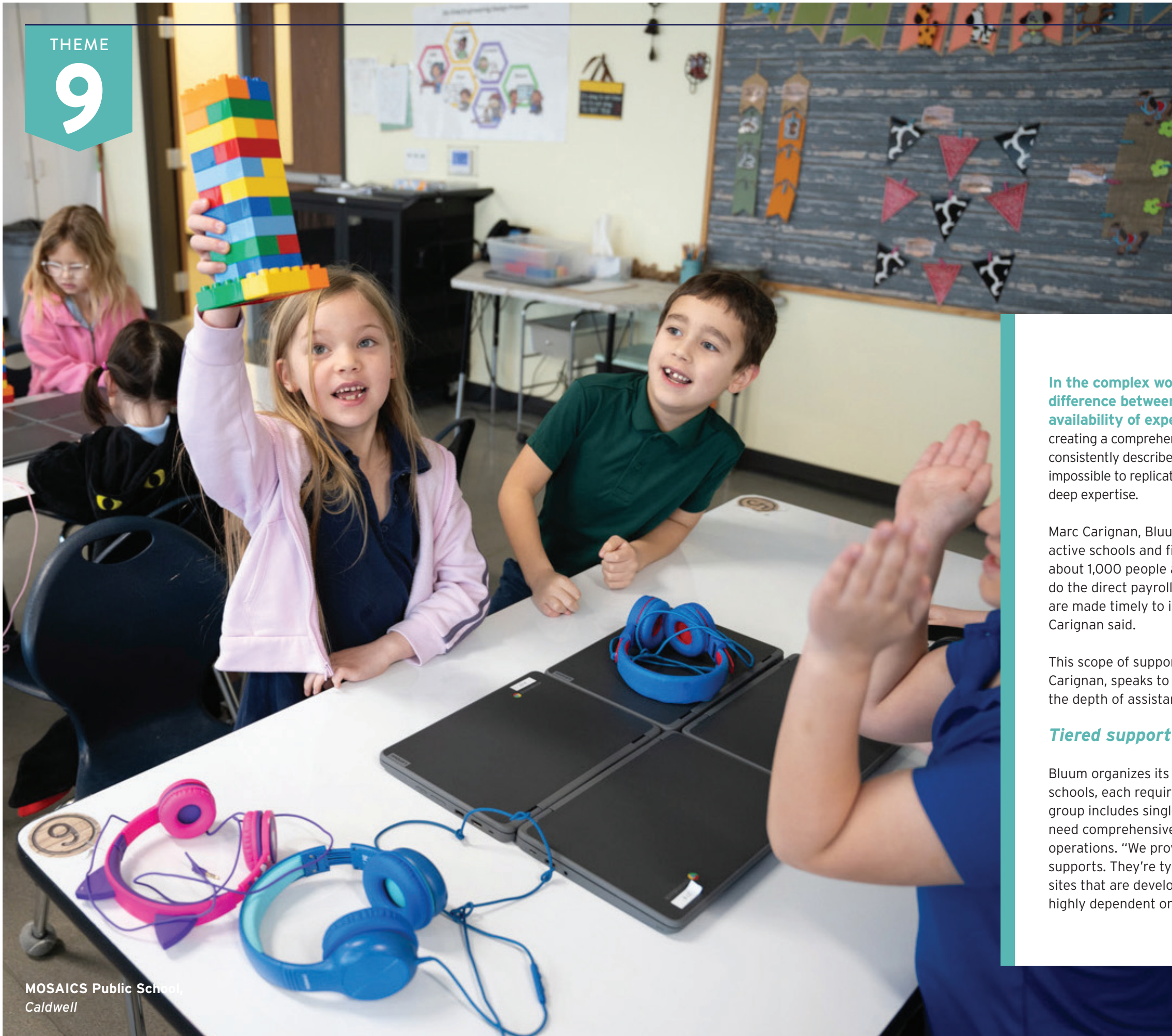
“Bluum has been a lot more successful than other nonprofits in affecting the education landscape,” Farkas said. “If you do a state-by-state comparison across the country, I don’t think you’d find an organization that has been as successful as Bluum.”

Farkas and Eschbacher attributed this success in part to the organization’s commitment to letting evidence, rather than ideology, guide its decision-making. By asking the right questions and seeking honest answers, whether from demographic analyses, academic assessments, or community feedback, Bluum has built a model that continues to demonstrate the power of data in educational improvement.

“You’ve got to have the kind of energy Terry and his team have,” Farkas said. “They wake up, get to work right away, and they don’t stop. They fail now and then, get knocked down, get right back up again and keep going. That’s what it takes.”



Gem Prep: Meridian,
Meridian



Bluum As A School Support Organization: Comprehensive Support For Charter Success

In the complex world of charter school development, the difference between success and failure can hinge on the availability of expert support. Bluum has distinguished itself by creating a comprehensive support ecosystem that school leaders consistently described as indispensable to their success, and nearly impossible to replicate without the organization's resources and deep expertise.

Marc Carignan, Bluum's CFO, oversees operations supporting 11 active schools and five schools in development. "We're paying about 1,000 people a month right now across the schools that we do the direct payroll for and then make sure that all the payments are made timely to insurance providers and other vendors," Carignan said.

This scope of support, provided by just five staff members plus Carignan, speaks to both the efficiency of Bluum's systems and the depth of assistance they provide.

Tiered support model

Bluum organizes its support around three distinct categories of schools, each requiring different levels of assistance. The first group includes single-site schools or emerging networks that need comprehensive support, from pre-launch through daily operations. "We provide full back-office support, a lot of other supports. They're typically single-site schools, or they're single sites that are developing into multi-site schools, but they're still highly dependent on our support," Carignan said.

All of this support is funded 100 percent by JKAF. Schools are not charged for this support or any support they receive from Bluum. Through the generosity of JKAF, Bluum is a free good to its partner schools. This funder/school support relationship is unique and not common in other states or cities.

The second group of partners comprises established networks like Gem Prep, Elevate Academy, and American Classical Schools of Idaho, which have developed their own internal systems but still require some support. The third group includes schools receiving only federal Charter School Program funds. They receive minimal financial management support from Bluum.

Fellowship: The foundation year

The support process begins with Bluum's Idaho New School Fellowship program, a yearlong, or in some cases a two-year long, intensive preparation that helps aspiring school leaders navigate the complex path from concept to charter approval.

"The fellowship is about giving them time to work with us to figure all this out," Carignan said. "The goal at the end of the fellowship is for the fellow or fellows to have written their charter, received their charter approval from their authorizer, identified where they're going to build a school, started the process of initiating contracts for land, started the process of procurement to determine who's going to build the building."

During this crucial year, fellows work closely with Bluum to develop sustainable budgeting models, navigate financing options, and ensure their educational vision aligns with financial reality.

Bluum has distinguished itself by creating a comprehensive support ecosystem that school leaders consistently described as indispensable to their success, and nearly impossible to replicate without the organization's resources and deep expertise.

The organization's rigorous evaluation process sometimes means saying no when the numbers don't work.

Carignan cited one fellowship where the fellow wanted to open a school in a remote rural area. "We did all the budgeting, we did all the analysis, and we basically said we can't figure this out. Mathematically, it doesn't work," Carignan said, highlighting Bluum's commitment to sustainability over expansion.

According to Terry Ryan, Bluum's fellowship is batting about .600. Four in ten fellows either didn't open a school or left soon after opening a school and had to be replaced. Ryan sees this as further testament to the genius of JKAF accepting failure as a key part of their support for Bluum. "Better they fail up front than when they have made promises and commitments to students, families and funders they can't meet," Ryan said.

Comprehensive back-office operations

For schools requiring full support, Bluum provides what amounts to a complete administrative infrastructure that would otherwise be prohibitively expensive for single-site schools.

The support encompasses:

- Monthly payroll processing and benefits administration
- State and federal compliance reporting
- Financial statement preparation and audit coordination
- Strategic thinking, school facilities and finances
- Special education support coordination
- Marketing assistance



MOSAICS Public School,
Caldwell

Schools must submit data to the state seven times annually, with each submission involving approximately 300 different fields of data covering student enrollment, attendance, staff information, and financial data. Bluum helps schools navigate these technical requirements while maintaining focus on education.

Beyond financial management

Bluum's support extends well beyond financial transactions to include strategic guidance and problem-solving. Ronda Baines, instrumental in establishing Treasure Valley Classical Academy in the small town of Fruitland, described how Bluum's involvement transformed what seemed like an impossible project into reality.

"We didn't realize that Bluum existed. We didn't know what resources were available to us... We would not have that building if Bluum had not come into our lives," Baines said, referring to the historic

school building they acquired for just \$250,000 and renovated with Bluum and Building Hope's assistance.

The support often includes creative solutions to complex challenges. When Elevate Academy needed a CFO but couldn't afford to hire one immediately, Bluum arranged a finance fellowship that allowed them to develop internal expertise. This innovative approach helped Elevate build capacity while maintaining the high-level support they needed.

In 2025, Bluum is sponsoring two Special Education fellows to work with school partners. Special education is another serious pain point for Idaho's public charter schools. Bluum now has a team of four special education experts supporting schools across Idaho led by veteran special educator Jennifer Ribordy.

Efficiency through experience

Carignan's pre-Bluum background in manufacturing and enterprise management helped shaped the

organization's approach to systematizing complex processes and creating efficiencies.

"When you benchmark us against for-profit back-office support organizations... their ratio is about one staff per client. We're doing it at about .5," Carignan said. This efficiency comes from deep understanding of Idaho's educational system, technology investments, and systematic approaches to common challenges.

The value proposition

As noted previously, Bluum provides these services at no cost to partner schools. This approach allows schools to invest their limited resources directly into education rather than administrative overhead. School leaders consistently described this support

as a major difference between success and failure.

As Idaho's charter school sector continues to grow, Bluum's role as a support organization demonstrates how comprehensive assistance, when properly structured and efficiently delivered, can enable educational innovation that might otherwise fail due to administrative complexity and expense alone.

More than one friend of Bluum has asked about the organization's succession plan. "There's got to be a succession plan in 10 years... They've created a very successful organization that a lot of schools rely on heavily, whether it's just for moral support or for back-office support, or whatever it is. What does Bluum do when key internal players move on?" ICSN lobbyist Blake Youde asked.

As Idaho's charter school sector continues to grow, Bluum's role as a support organization demonstrates how comprehensive assistance, when properly structured and efficiently delivered, can enable educational innovation that might otherwise fail due to administrative complexity and expense alone.



MOSAICS Public School,
Caldwell



Compass Public Charter School,
Meridian

Expanding Beyond Idaho

While Bluum's primary focus remains firmly rooted in Idaho, the organization has increasingly extended its expertise and influence to other states grappling with charter school development challenges.

Notably, Bluum staff have assisted other charter support organizations that have received federal CSP grants. There is a tremendous amount of paperwork to navigate and stringent requirements for reporting and financial accounting that can seem overwhelming to an organization confronting these obstacles for the first time.

Another, more unique outreach effort to another state has been Bluum's extensive support of Montana's efforts to establish its own charter school sector.

Trish Schreiber, who has been instrumental in leading Montana's charter school initiative, described Bluum's role as transformative in her state's efforts to implement its newly passed charter school law which is still tied up in legal challenges.

Bluum's involvement in helping Montana pass a charter law dates back to 2021. During that year's legislative session, local charter advocates reached out to the neighboring states for advice. Terry Ryan traveled to Montana and testified as proponents for the law.

Crisis management and legislative support

Bluum's assistance proved particularly crucial when Montana's charter law faced legal challenges following its passage. The state secured only a partial injunction, allowing preparation for charter implementation while prohibiting the issuance of charter contracts. This created an unusual opportunity for development.

"The charter commission could get formed and start preparing the state for chartering based on our law, but they couldn't go as far as issuing a charter contract," Schreiber said. This silver lining allowed Montana's volunteer-driven commission to lay essential groundwork. Bluum assisted on these efforts.

Ryan and Carignan provided on-site expertise, meeting with Montana's Office of Public Instruction to translate Idaho's funding model into Montana's context. Using real numbers, they developed detailed financial projections for different types of schools across various geographic settings.

"Bluum made some Excel spreadsheets about what different schools would look like, depending on their rurality or isolation, and then what kind of funding they would be getting from the state eventually," Schreiber noted.

This work proved invaluable. About seven founding boards emerged, actively preparing to apply for charters once permitted by law. The public information sessions - which included Idaho charter school leaders spending a day in the Montana state capital - provided by Bluum helped educate Montanans about charter schools, a novel concept in a state that had never authorized charters.

Mentorship at multiple levels

Beyond immediate technical assistance, Bluum has provided personal mentorship that extends Schreiber's own professional development.

Ryan helped connect her to national networks, including the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools' State Leadership Council meetings.

"The leadership council is the CEOs of the various charter support organizations across the country, and Terry is part of that," Schreiber said. "Terry picked up the phone and talked to the head of NAPCS and said, 'You guys need to let Trish come to these meetings, because she's got to keep her eye on the ball.'"

This access has proven transformative for Montana's inexperienced charter leadership. "There's no information here, and a lot of people don't even know what a charter school is," Schreiber said.

State-level system-building

Perhaps most significantly, Bluum has advocated for Montana to develop its own charter support organization (CSO) rather than simply duplicating Idaho's model.

"One of the first things that we realized was that Montana needs to start its own Bluum... and that's something that we still haven't been able to get going," Schreiber said. "But I hope when we eventually get a CSO going here, that it will look a lot like Bluum."

Bluum has shown that selective mentorship, strategic guidance, and technical support can help other states develop their own paths to charter school success.

Montana, however, lacks a major funding partner like JKAF, which could make the challenge steeper. But both Ryan and Jamie Jo Scott of the Albertson Foundation have offered to bring Montana's newly hired executive director to Idaho for intensive training, Schreiber said.

The challenge of scalability

Schreiber's observation about what Bluum might improve captured the fundamental tension the organization faces: Demand for its model exceeds its capacity - and desire - to replicate it.

"I wish they were willing to come into Montana and start a Bluum here, or in Wyoming, where they

have a new charter law too," Schreiber said. "It would be great if they could just replicate."

The Montana experience demonstrates how Bluum's decade of expertise can catalyze charter development in states starting from scratch. While direct replication may not be feasible, Bluum has shown that selective mentorship, strategic guidance, and technical support can help other states develop their own paths to charter school success.

As Schreiber noted about Idaho's charter sector under Bluum's guidance: "They have such good results from their schools. They're a model to everyone."



**Idaho Arts Charter School,
Nampa**

CONCLUSION

Treasure Valley Classical Academy,
Fruitland

A Blueprint For Educational Transformation

After a decade of innovation and steady growth, Bluum has fundamentally reshaped Idaho's educational landscape.

What began as an ambitious philanthropic initiative has evolved into a sophisticated ecosystem that combines leadership development, financial ingenuity, policy advocacy, and comprehensive support systems. All unified by an unwavering commitment to educational quality and student outcomes informed by data.

The organization's impact extends well beyond the almost 20,000 students its partner schools

serve. By demonstrating that charter schools can operate at high levels across diverse educational models and geographic contexts, Bluum has influenced conversations about educational quality throughout Idaho.

Its data-driven approach to school development, coupled with its reputation for excellence, has changed how lawmakers, traditional districts, and communities view educational innovation. Bluum demonstrates that school choice, when designed to improve student achievement, works. Idaho is a demonstration model of this fact at the state level just like Indianapolis, Washington DC, and New Orleans are at the city level.

As the organization looks toward its next decade, the challenges are substantial, from rising construction costs to leadership succession planning to maintaining quality at scale. Yet Bluum's proven

ability to navigate complex educational, financial, and political terrain suggests it will continue finding innovative solutions that place Idaho's children and their success at the center of its work.

Perhaps Bluum's most enduring contribution beyond the schools it has helped create is the mindset it has cultivated; one that views educational innovation as a catalyst for community transformation rather than a competitive threat.

"Education isn't just about putting bodies in seats. It's about creating learning environments where every child discovers their potential, where families find the right fit, and where communities thrive" education secretary Critchfield said.

"What Bluum has proven in Idaho is that when we focus on quality over ideology, when we invest in leaders over buildings, and when we make decisions

Bluum demonstrates that school choice, when designed to improve student achievement, works.

based on data rather than dogma, we can transform not just schools, but entire educational ecosystems.

"That's a legacy that will outlast any single institution."

Idaho Governor Brad Little seconded Critchfield's sentiments, "Idaho is a leader in education freedom, in large part because of our support for charter schools," Little said. "The team at Bluum has propelled Idaho forward in the expansion of high-quality charter schools in our state, leading to more schooling options for Idaho families and better outcomes for our students."

A young girl with dark skin, wearing a pink hijab and a light-colored long-sleeved shirt, is smiling and holding up a circular sticker. The sticker features a simple line drawing of a robot with a heart on its chest. In the background, a red heart is visible on a wall.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This report could not have been written were it not for the generosity of time provided by those interviewed in this report and listed below. Thanks to one and all for your comments, perspective and insights. Truly appreciate the honesty and thoughtfulness. Thanks to the excellent work of Bluum's Director of Communications Sarah Meskin in moving this project along through its various steps of evolution. Thanks to the JKAF team for their steady support that makes this work possible. Thanks also to the U.S. Department of Education's federal Charter School Program, which has been an invaluable resource for our work with public charter schools in Idaho.

- **Debbie Critchfield**, Idaho Superintendent of Public Instruction
- **Todd Ziebarth**, Senior Vice President for State Advocacy and Support, National Alliance of Public Charter Schools
- **Toby Prehn**, Executive Chairman, A10 Capital
- **Marcia Aaron**, Partner, Charter School Growth Fund
- **Jason Bransford**, CEO, Gem Innovation Schools
- **Terry Ryan**, CEO, Bluum
- **Amanda Cox**, Executive Director and Founder, Future Public School
- **Monica White**, CEO and Co-Founder, Elevate Academy Network
- **Andi Kane**, Executive Director, St. Ignatius Catholic School
- **Andy Johnson**, Executive Director, Sage International Network
- **Steve Lambert**, CEO and Founder, American Classical Schools of Idaho
- **Roger Quarles**, Executive Director, JA & Kathryn Albertsons Family Foundation
- **Royce VanTassel**, Executive Director, Utah Association of Public Charter Schools
- **Marc Carignan**, CFO, Bluum
- **Michelle Ball**, Executive Director and Founder, Alturas Academy Network
- **Ronda Baines**, Director of Development and Outreach, American Classical Schools of Idaho
- **Trish Schrieber**, Founder and CEO, Schriber Educational Services
- **Mathew Joseph**, Senior Policy Advisor, ExcelinEd
- **Wes Olsen**, Managing Director, Raymond James
- **Joe Bruno**, Board of Directors, Building Hope
- **Brian Eschbacher**, Founder and CEO, Eschbacher Consulting
- **Steve Farkas**, Co-Founder, FDR Group
- **Jim Goenner**, President and CEO, National Charter Schools Institute
- **Jed Wallace**, Founder and CEO, CharterFolk
- **Wendy Horman**, Representative, Idaho Legislature
- **David Lent**, Senator and Chair of Education Committee, Idaho Legislature
- **Alan Reed**, Chairman, Idaho Public Charter School Commission
- **Starlee Coleman**, CEO, National Alliance of Public Charter Schools
- **Matt Pahl**, Executive Director, Public Charter Schools of New Mexico
- **Emily McClure**, Principal, McClure Policy PLLC
- **Blake Youde**, Lobbyist, Youde & Associates LLC
- **Governor Brad Little**, Idaho Governor



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