



EARNED AUTONOMY FOR IDAHO CHARTER SCHOOLS

How Idaho Can Unlock Greater Performance and
Innovation in Its Strongest Charter Schools







Foreword

By Terry Ryan

For more than a decade, Idaho has engaged in recurring conversations about moving its school funding system away from a command-and-control structure—driven primarily by the state’s career ladder—toward a system that funds students. In 2013, Governor Butch Otter’s education task force recommended shifting to enrollment-based funding. In early 2019, the Legislature’s Interim Committee issued its *Public School Funding Formula* report, urging in its Executive Summary that Idaho adopt a funding formula that would move “Idaho’s current resource allocation model to one that is centered on students.” The committee further noted, “In a ‘student-centered’ formula, the money follows the student. Districts and charter schools will be afforded additional flexibility in a funding model that focuses on student outcomes and accountability, instead of prescribed funding inputs.”

The Interim Committee’s work was driven largely by the recognition that Idaho’s school funding formula had become outdated. Adopted in 1994, the formula no longer reflected how students learn or how schools operate. As the Education Commission of the States (ECS) reported in 2019, Idaho’s “current funding formula did not contemplate a variety of different learning modalities, the increasing mobility of students, and the state’s move toward mastery-based education.” At the time, there was widespread agreement that Idaho’s funding system needed to be updated. In a survey of 700 Idaho stakeholders conducted by ECS—half of whom were educators—95 percent of respondents reported that the existing funding formula did not work well for Idaho.

Despite this overwhelming support for a shift toward student-based funding, the effort stalled later in 2019 when various stakeholder groups chose to reaffirm the salary-based apportionment model. In doing so, they prioritized certainty in funding over flexibility in spending.

Fast forward to 2026, and Idaho has significantly increased its investment in public education. According to Governor Brad Little’s office, spending on K–12 education has increased by 80 percent since he took office in 2019, through fiscal year 2025. Yet over that same period, statewide student achievement in mathematics and English language arts—at both the fourth- and eighth-grade levels—has remained largely flat.

We have doubled down on a static system, and not surprisingly, the results have not changed. At Bluum, we believe that flexibility in spending is a precondition for improving student learning. Local administrators and teachers are closest to students, understand their needs best, and should be empowered to direct resources accordingly. That flexibility must be matched with accountability for student outcomes. In short: trust but verify results.

Idaho’s growing and relatively high-performing public charter school sector is well-positioned to demonstrate the impact of granting school leaders greater freedom to allocate resources in ways that successful educators believe will most effectively improve student achievement. We refer to this concept as *earned autonomy*. How this approach can work in practice is the reason Bluum partnered with our friends at ExcelinEd to produce this report. We are deeply grateful to school finance expert Matthew Joseph and the ExcelinEd team for their work in developing this research for Idaho.

It is past time to demonstrate how operational freedom for school leaders can translate into stronger school and student outcomes. Idaho’s highest-performing public charter schools are uniquely positioned to show that real dollars can be spent flexibly, with an emphasis on results rather than on predetermined and inflexible programs or activities. Now is the time to be bold—and our public charter schools are designed to lead Idaho in innovation.

Executive Summary

Many charter schools do not want to use the same traditional instructional model that was developed in the industrial era. However, Idaho's funding formula, as applied to charter schools, creates significant resistance to staffing structures and compensation systems that differ from the traditional approach preferred by the state. Idaho's charter schools are innovating, but they are struggling to keep pace with rapid technological change. Charter school leaders say they could do much more if they did not have to push so hard against state restrictions.

Many states have restrictions on salaries and staffing for *traditional public schools*. However, Idaho is the only state that has such substantial restrictions on how charter schools pay their teachers and design their instructional models. Other states not only provide charter schools with increased flexibility, but they also give special recognition for high-performing charter schools.

Research shows that when schools have more flexibility over teacher compensation and staffing, there is a *huge* positive impact on student outcomes. This is especially true in an era of rapidly changing technology and during periods of fiscal constraint. The evidence also emphasizes that greater flexibility must be matched with increased responsibility for results. Idaho is well ahead of many other states in this regard, as the state charter schools are already held accountable to an extraordinary degree.

To empower charter schools to use available resources effectively and capitalize on innovation, Idaho does not need to overhaul its current funding system. Rather, the state can acknowledge that charter schools require fewer restrictions—particularly around teacher compensation and staffing structures—because they are held to higher levels of accountability for results.

Introduction

This issue brief examines how Idaho's school funding system and related policies affect the ability of the state's charter schools to innovate and use their resources as effectively as possible. It also places Idaho's approach in the context of best practices from across the country.

The Current System

Teacher Compensation

Idaho is one of a handful of states that continues to rely on a resource-based school funding formula.¹ Under this system, charter schools—like traditional school districts—receive funding through “support units,” which are further divided into “staff allowances” for instructional, administrative, and classified staff.² In contrast, the vast majority of states have adopted student-centered funding models. These models allocate funding based primarily on the number of students a school serves, with additional “weights” to account for students with greater needs. States have increasingly moved toward student-centered funding because it is more transparent, provides greater flexibility to districts and schools, empowers parents, and is generally viewed as fairer.³

Idaho's system goes beyond a typical resource-based formula. The amount of funding a charter school receives is also tied to where its teachers fall on the state's career ladder, as shown in Table I. The career ladder consists of three “rungs,” each containing multiple cells based on years of service. This structure favors teachers with more experience, additional state endorsements, and post-baccalaureate coursework or degrees.

A charter school may hire a teacher who does not meet the specific characteristics preferred by the state—for example, a teacher with an outstanding track record who began their career in the private sector, has fewer years of experience, or does not hold an advanced

1 - See Education Commission of the States, [K-12 Funding 2024, Primary Funding Model](#).

2 - Rural Opportunities Consortium of Idaho (ROCI), [Overview of State Funding for Public Education in Idaho](#) (2016).

3 - For example, Tennessee switched from resource-based to student-centered funding in 2022. See Tennessee Department of Education, [Tennessee Investment in Student Achievement \(TISA\) Formula: ExcelinEd, Student-Centered State Funding: A How-to Guide for State Policymakers](#) (2020).

Table 1**2025-26 Idaho Career Ladder**

	Cell 1	Cell 2	Cell 3	Cell 4	Cell 5
Residency Rung	\$50,252	\$51,302	\$52,352		
Professional Rung	\$53,402	\$55,239	\$57,007	\$58,914	\$60,752
Advanced Professional Rung	\$64,472	\$66,527	\$68,627	\$70,727	\$72,827
Baccalaureate + 24 credits	+\$2,000	+\$2,000	+\$2,000	+\$2,000	+\$2,000
Baccalaureate + Master's Degree	+\$3,500	+\$3,500	+\$3,500	+\$3,500	+\$3,500

degree. However, the school would not receive the additional funding associated with those state-preferred characteristics, making it more difficult to offer a competitive salary.

In addition, schools generate increased funding as teachers advance along the state's career ladder, which depend on the state's extensive teacher evaluation system. This can be particularly difficult for out-of-state teachers, as well as those coming from non-public schools or the private sector, to obtain.⁴ Schools must submit substantial documentation for each teacher, and teachers must complete specific activities, earn credentials, and often pursue additional degrees to move up the ladder—typically with the expectation of corresponding compensation increases. Charter schools are also required to pay teachers at least the minimum salary associated with each rung of the career ladder.

This creates significant pressure to adhere to the state's career ladder, with all its specific requirements and salaries. "It's like Idaho has built teacher tenure into its funding formula," said Kate French, Chief Operating Officer of American Classical Schools of Idaho.⁵

Indeed, charter school leaders say there is little money left for anything else—such as paying bonuses to more effective teachers, offering higher salaries to attract educators in hard-to-staff areas like math and science, purchasing equipment for career and technical education courses, or investing in instructional technology.

"It's like Idaho has built teacher tenure into its funding formula.

—Kate French, American Classical Schools of Idaho

Staffing Structures

Charter schools in Idaho may receive state funding for a teacher only if that individual serves as the "teacher of record" for a full day of instruction. Each course must be taught by a teacher holding the specific certification required for that subject, and every student must have a full schedule taught by appropriately certified teachers. Compliance with these requirements must be extensively documented seven times each year. Any error in documentation can result in the loss of all funding for both the teacher and the affected students.

"There is an iron triangle of state requirements—teacher, course, and student—each of which must be extensively documented," said Marc Carignan, Chief Financial Officer of Bluum, which supports many charter schools. "This 'iron triangle' is embedded in the state's documentation requirements and reinforces an industrial-era instructional model.⁶

4 - The average career ladder amount of all teachers in a school is multiplied against the school's number of support units, which provides about one teacher per support unit. See Idaho Department of Education, [2025-2026 Idaho Career Ladder Guidance Manual](#) (2025).

5 - Interview with Kate French, Chief Operating Officer of American Classical Schools of Idaho (Jan. 8, 2026).

6- Idaho Department of Education. [Guidance Document: 2025-2026 Idaho Department of Education Assignment Reporting](#) (2025).

Additional Restrictions

While funding for teacher salaries represents the largest share of state funding, several smaller funding programs significantly restrict charter school flexibility. For example, the state provides funding for technology that must be spent within the current fiscal year. Charter school leaders noted that this “use-it-or-lose-it” requirement fails to account for the nature of technology purchases, which often involve high upfront costs followed by much lower expenses in subsequent years.

For most other state funding programs, charter schools are permitted to carry forward unspent funds into the next year; however, they are not allowed to repurpose those funds for other needs. This restriction incentivizes inefficient use of resources. For instance, even if a charter school has already fully trained its staff on dyslexia, it cannot redirect those funds to address another pressing need. Similarly, funding designated for literacy interventions may encourage a pullout model, even when schools would prefer to provide integrated classroom-based support for struggling students.

Barriers In Practice

Many charter schools do not want to use the same traditional instructional model that was developed in the industrial era. They feel that a more effective use of resources is to have different configurations of teachers, paraprofessional and technology. One common approach is to have a master teacher work with a team of teachers, with specially trained paraprofessionals providing small group tutoring with the assistance of technology.⁷

Idaho’s funding formula appears to offer flexibility to use this model. Funding does not depend on the number of teachers a school actually hires. So, schools can in theory choose to give up a teacher position and reinvest the savings. However, the funding system in practice makes it very difficult to deviate from the traditional model.

The school will save the salary of the unfilled teacher slot. However, the state’s formula will reduce the school’s funding if not hiring a teacher reduces the average salary of the school’s remaining teachers on the career ladder.⁸ The school will also need to pay more to the master teacher and the classroom teachers who are taking on more responsibilities.⁹ However, these teachers will still need to remain on the state’s career ladder, or the school will lose funding under the formula. In addition, the school needs to hire more paraprofessionals and train them. Finally, the school needs to purchase more instructional technology.

The school also must navigate the state’s documentation requirements or face severe financial penalties. Students must have a full schedule of classes taught by appropriately credentialed teachers. This does not include students working with specially trained professionals in a technology lab. However, the school can report these students as remaining in their regular classrooms. The master teacher is working with teachers, not directly with students. However, the state will deduct the full salary if the master teacher teaches less than a full day of classes. The school can code the master teacher as co-teaching, but only if the master teacher has the credentials needed to teach every course.

This documentation is tricky and time consuming. Seven times each year, charter schools must submit extensive data to the state through the Idaho System for Education Excellence (ISEE). According to several charter school leaders, completing the ISEE reports alone requires the equivalent of a half-time staff position for each school.¹⁰

Overall Pressure to Conform

In sum, Idaho’s funding formula, as applied to charter schools, creates significant resistance to staffing structures and compensation systems that differ from the traditional, industrial era model preferred by the state. “We are so used to having the state tell us what to do that it creates a mindset of compliance,” said Darren Uranga, Chief Financial Officer of Elevate Academy.¹¹

7 - See, e.g., the [Opportunity Culture](#) model.

8 - If the salary of the unfilled position was below the school’s average, the school can gain formula funding, but then the reduced expenses are also lower.

9 - In the Opportunity Culture, the master teacher is paid 25 percent more. Teachers receive an 8 percent salary increase, and paraprofessionals are paid 5.5 percent more. Interview with Bryan Hassell, Public Impact (Jan. 26, 2026).

10 - In addition, the state mandates numerous other reports, which collectively impose a substantial—though lesser—administrative burden.

11 - Interview with Darren Uranga, Chief Financial Officer, Elevate Academy (Jan. 8, 2026).

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—Darren Uranga, Elevate Academy

This does not mean innovation is impossible. Idaho’s charter schools are innovating, but charter school leaders say they could do much more if they did not have to push so hard against state restrictions. Charter schools are struggling to keep pace with rapid technological change. “With more autonomy from the state, we could take better advantage of technology to make the job of our teachers more fulfilling and manageable,” said Jason Bransford, Chief Executive Officer of Gem Innovation Schools.¹²

An Alternative: Earned Autonomy

Idaho as an Outlier

Other states have restrictions on salaries and staffing for *traditional public schools*. However, as shown in Table II, Idaho is the only state that has such substantial restrictions on how charter schools pay their teachers and design their instructional models.¹³

Earned Autonomy

There is an alternative to Idaho’s current approach of pressuring charter schools to conform to traditional public school instructional models: granting charter schools substantially greater flexibility in exchange for clear accountability for results. Research and the experience of other states support this model of earned autonomy.

Table 2 State Restrictions on Charter Schools		
State	Compensation Restrictions	Staffing Restrictions
Arkansas	×	×
Arizona	×	✓
California	×	×
Colorado	×	×
Delaware	✓	×
Florida	×	×
Idaho	✓	✓
Louisiana	×	×
Michigan	×	×
Minnesota	×	×
Nevada	×	×
New Mexico	×	×
North Carolina	×	×
Oregon	×	×
Pennsylvania	×	×
Rhode Island	×	×
Texas	×	✓
Utah	×	×

12 - Interview with Jason Bransford, Chief Executive Officer, Gem Innovation Schools (Jan. 13, 2026).

13 -This includes states where at least 8 percent of public school students attend charter schools. See National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS), [How Many Charter Schools and Students Are There?](#), Education Commission of the States, [K-12 Funding 2024, Primary Funding Model](#); Education Commission of the States, [K-12 Funding 2024, Student Count](#); National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ), [Teacher Compensation Strategies](#) (2022).

Texas, for example, sets the minimum salaries for teachers in traditional public schools, but charter schools are exempted from these requirements.¹⁴ North Carolina has a resource-based funding system and state-required career ladder, like Idaho does. However, for charter schools, the funding is converted into a per student amount, and charter schools can set their own salaries.¹⁵

Other states not only provide charter schools with increased flexibility, but they also give special recognition for high-performing charter schools. In Ohio, for example, high-performing charter schools receive additional state funding, which has allowed these schools to improve their student outcomes even more.¹⁶ In Florida, high-performing charter schools, called Schools of Hope, can receive low-interest facility financing.¹⁷

The research has specifically found that school control over teacher salaries combined with accountability for results produces a “huge” positive impact on student outcomes.

In other areas, Idaho has in recent years recognized the distinct place of high-performing charter schools. These schools can receive credit enhancement from the state so that the cost of their facility financing drops significantly. They can also have their charters renewed for 12 years, instead of six.¹⁸

Research shows that school autonomy when combined with accountability improves student outcomes. In particular, school control over teacher salaries produces a “huge” positive impact on student outcomes.¹⁹ High-performing charter schools have attributed their success in large to part to their freedom to develop a great team of teachers.²⁰

Those closest to students are generally best positioned to decide how resources can be used most effectively. This is especially true during periods of fiscal constraint, such as the current reality facing Idaho schools. School leaders are better equipped than distant policymakers to determine which services can be reduced with the least harm to students.

School autonomy is also increasingly important given the rapid evolution of educational tools and technology, including artificial intelligence. State regulations cannot adapt quickly enough to determine how individual schools can best leverage new technologies to redesign instruction and improve learning.

Accountability is a critical companion to autonomy. Greater flexibility must be matched with greater responsibility for results. Research and the experience of other states confirm this principle. Across the country, states grant charter schools more flexibility than traditional public schools in exchange for heightened accountability for student outcomes.

Idaho is well ahead of many other states in this regard. To an extraordinary degree, Idaho’s charter schools are already held accountable. Enrollment is entirely voluntary, meaning charter schools must offer a quality of education that parents and students actively choose. Demand for Idaho’s charter schools is strong. In addition, charter schools are overseen by an authorizer that requires strong student outcomes for schools to remain open. They are subject to continuous oversight, including an annual independent financial audit.²¹

Conclusion

To empower charter schools to use available resources effectively and capitalize on innovation, Idaho does not need to overhaul its current funding system. Rather, the state can acknowledge that charter schools require fewer restrictions—particularly around teacher compensation and staffing structures—because they are held to higher levels of accountability for results.

14 - Texas Education Agency, [HB3 Frequently Asked Questions](#).

15 - [N.C. Gen. Stat. §115C-218.105](#).

16 - The Thomas B. Fordham Institute, [The Impact of Increasing Funding for High-Performing Ohio Charter Schools](#) (2024).

17 - [Florida Statutes §1001.292](#).

18 - Idaho [H.B. 1042](#) (2023); Idaho [H.B. 422](#) (2024).

19 - Eric A. Hanushek and Ludger Woessmann, “[The Economics of International Differences in Educational Achievement](#),” Handbooks in Economics, Vol. 3 (2011).

20 - National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS), [Free to Lead: Autonomy in Highly Successful Charter Schools](#) (2010).

21 - Idaho Public Charter School Commission, [Performance Framework](#) (2024).



About ExcelinEd

Focused on educational quality, innovation and opportunity—both within and outside of the traditional system—ExcelinEd advances a broad range of student-centered policy solutions to:

- Increase student learning
- Eliminate inequities
- Ready graduates for college and career



About Bluum

Bluum is a nonprofit organization committed to ensuring Idaho's children reach their fullest potential by cultivating great leaders and innovative schools.

WE BELIEVE

A robust choice of learning opportunities helps children, families, and educators achieve more and do better.

WE ARE COMMITTED

To ensuring that Idaho's children reach their fullest potential by cultivating great leaders, replicating high-performing school models, and taking risks to develop new approaches so all Idaho students have access to a great education.

BLUUM STRIVES TO

- Empower and support educational leaders who take risks and put children first;
- Grow and replicate high-impact school models;
- Provide school support and management help;
- Develop and share effective practices; and
- Demonstrate measurable impact program-wide and across individual partner schools

