

SEPTEMBER 2026

Homegrown

WHY IDAHO BUILT ITS OWN CHARTER SCHOOL NETWORKS, AND
WHAT THE REST OF THE COUNTRY MIGHT LEARN FROM THE EFFORT.

BY ALAN GOTTLIEB



“Without the advantages of large urban populations, generous public funding, or nationally recognized charter management organizations, Idaho has quietly built one of the nation’s strongest collections of homegrown public charter school networks.”

- Terry Ryan, Bluum CEO

Breaking Ground on Elevate Academy
Twin Falls



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report, like the work it describes, is the result of the time, energy, dedication, and goodwill of many individuals.

First, my sincere thanks to **Alan Gottlieb**, who went above and beyond in interviewing the remarkable individuals featured in this report. Alan is an outstanding journalist, and Idaho is fortunate to have him collaborating with us on this and many other reports over the years.

Our deepest gratitude also goes to the charter network leaders and team members who generously shared their time and insights with Alan. They include **Monica White, Matt Strong, John Rezendes**, and **Erik Bullock** from Elevate Academies; **Jason Bransford, Josh Femrite, Bard Femrite**, and **Laurie Wolfe** from Gem Prep Academies; **Stephen Lambert, Scott Den Hartog, Angela Hansen** and **Kate French** from American Classical Schools of Idaho; **Michelle Ball** and **Reece Drkula** from Alturas Academies; and **Emily Downey** from Sage International Charter Schools.

Special thanks to **Margaret “Macke” Raymond**, Program Director of the Hoover Institution’s Program on K–12 Education at Stanford University, for her guidance and support. We are also grateful to our friend **Marcia Aaron**, Partner at the Charter School Growth Fund and a member of Bluum’s Board of Directors, for her encouragement and counsel. Thanks to **Nanette Merrill**, Executive Director of the Idaho Charter School Association, for her ongoing support and collaboration.

I also want to thank my Bluum colleagues **Marc Carignan**, Chief Financial Officer, and **Keith Donahue**, Director of School Strategy and Operations, for their thoughtful feedback and steadfast support of our work. Thanks as well to **Nicole Kiefer**, Director of Operations; **Ashley Cotton**, Director of Outreach and Organization; and **Sydnee Ames**, Operations & Engagement Coordinator, for helping bring this project to completion and ensuring it was thoughtfully designed and produced.

Finally, our deepest gratitude goes to **Roger Quarles** and the team at the **J.A. and Kathryn Albertson Family Foundation** for their unwavering partnership and support. Without their sustained investment in Idaho’s charter school movement, neither the work described in this report nor the opportunities it has created for thousands of Idaho students and families would have been possible.

Terry Ryan, Bluum CEO

FOREWORD

By Terry Ryan, Bluum CEO

For much of the past three decades, the national conversation about charter schools has been dominated by the largest states and the largest school systems. We have looked to cities like Denver, Indianapolis, New Orleans, and Washington, D.C. for lessons about innovation, quality, and growth. Idaho rarely entered that conversation.

That should change.

Over the past decade, something significant has happened in one of America's smallest and lowest-funded states. Without the advantages of large urban populations, generous public funding, or nationally recognized charter management organizations, Idaho has quietly built one of the nation's strongest collections of home-grown public charter school networks.

This happened in large part because Idaho had no other choice.

When national charter organizations declined to expand into the state, Idaho's nascent school reform community and a leading family foundation took a different path. Rather than importing school models from elsewhere, they invested in local talent and recruited talent to Idaho. Rather than replicating national brands, they cultivated Idaho educators with deep roots in their communities and empowered them to build schools that reflected local needs, local values, and local aspirations.

The result has been an educational ecosystem unlike almost any other in America.

Today, Idaho is home to thriving public charter networks that are as different from one another as the communities they serve. Some prepare students for college through rigorous International Baccalaureate programs. Others revive classical education rooted in the liberal arts and civic formation. Others focus on career and technical education for students who have struggled in traditional schools. Still others are pioneering new approaches to rural education and personalized learning.

What unites them is not a single educational philosophy. It is a shared commitment to excellence, innovation, and public service.

Perhaps even more remarkable is the culture these organizations have created. In many states, charter schools compete fiercely with one another for students, staff, and resources. Idaho's leading charter networks have chosen a different model. They collaborate. They share ideas. They solve problems together. They recognize that the success of one high-quality public school strengthens opportunities for families across the entire state.

This report by veteran Denver education reporter Alan Gottlieb tells that story.

It is not simply a history of five successful charter organizations. It is an examination of how thoughtful philanthropy, patient investment, strong local leadership and partnerships, and a willingness to trust educators can produce lasting public institutions.

Readers will meet founders who never imagined themselves leading charter schools. They will hear from educators who challenged conventional wisdom and took serious risks, community leaders who saw unmet needs, researchers who have studied Idaho's results, and national experts who increasingly view Idaho as an important model for others.

They will also discover that Idaho's experience raises important questions for education policymakers everywhere.

- Can locally governed charter networks outperform both isolated single-school operators and large national charter management organizations?
- Can public education offer families genuinely different educational opportunities while maintaining a commitment to quality and accountability?
- Can competition exist alongside collaboration?
- Can rural states create sustainable charter sectors without relying on national operators?

The pages that follow suggest the answer to each of these questions is yes.

Idaho's experience also reminds us that educational improvement is fundamentally about people. Buildings matter. Funding matters. Policy matters. But lasting success begins with exceptional education leaders who know their communities, understand their students, and are given the freedom—and responsibility—to build schools worthy of them.

The Idaho story is still being written. New schools continue to open. New leaders are emerging. New challenges inevitably lie ahead.

Yet enough has already been accomplished to merit national attention.

For anyone interested in the future of public education, this report offers more than a case study from one small western state. It offers a hopeful reminder that enduring educational change is often built not through sweeping national reforms, but through local leadership, community trust, and a relentless commitment to creating better opportunities for children.

That may prove to be Idaho's most important lesson of all.



BLUUM
LET LEARNING GROW

INTRODUCTION: THE STRENGTH OF LOCAL NETWORKS

As long-time employees of the Caldwell School District in Idaho's Treasure Valley, Monica White and Matt Strong were no fans of charter schools.

Right up until they built one, that is.

For most of their careers the two were alternative education veterans working in a traditional school district. They had spent years watching students they believed in fall through the cracks of a traditional system. By the spring of 2017 they had a rough dream of a different kind of school, one which they hoped their district would buy into.

Their charter-skepticism was the ordinary kind, the case against charters that circulates in every district teachers' lounge, and they believed it. "They take the cream of the crop and the highest kids, and kind of dilute the population, and there's a reason their scores are always better," White said, running through the litany of grievances she once took as gospel.

"We were both so wrong, and it's great it turned out that way."

-Terry Ryan

So when Terry Ryan, the chief executive of Bluum, an Idaho education nonprofit, suggested over the course of an early meeting that what the two should build was a charter school, the idea landed badly. "We hate charter schools," Strong told him.

Ryan made his case anyway. If you can serve the student population you want, however you want, choose your own

board, and build your own model, he asked them, is that really so bad?

Ryan remembered the mutual suspicion just as vividly. He felt the two saw him as an outsider, recently transplanted from Ohio, bent on undermining the traditional schools that employed them.

As for Ryan, "my view of them was, man, they're stuck in the mud and old ways of doing things, they're really not going to be able to see the opportunity here, and they're going to make a hash of it," he said. "We were both so wrong, and it's great it turned out that way."

Once they got past the initial, mutual wariness, things started to click. White warned Ryan that the school she and Strong envisioned would pull down the academic performance numbers of Bluum's high-flying charter portfolio.

On the positive side, if two alternative educators built a school for the students nobody else wanted, the familiar story about charters skimming the best kids would collide head-on with the evidence.

Within two years White and Strong had left the security of district employment and the state retirement system, gone through a Bluum fellowship, and opened Elevate Academy in Caldwell, a career and technical school where every student meets the state's criteria for being at risk.

Five campuses later, Elevate is one of the fastest-growing charter networks in the state.

The story of two self-described charter skeptics becoming charter founders is a good way into a larger and more consequential story about how Idaho has built a charter sector that can serve as a national model.

Over the past decade, with support from Bluum and money from the J.A. and Kathryn Albertson Family

Foundation (JKAF), two federal Charter School Program Grants, support from the Charter School Growth Fund and tremendous local support, Idaho has grown a distinctive crop of homegrown charter networks. These are small clusters of schools, fewer than 10 campuses, founded and run by Idahoans, tied together by a shared model and a central office, and strongly rooted in the communities they serve.

They are not the work of large national charter management organizations parachuting a proven brand into new territory. They were grown at home, intentionally so.

Ample evidence shows the homegrown model has been good for Idaho. It has been good for the public education sector, producing schools that perform well and that pressure the wider traditional system to raise its own game.

It has been good for families, who have gained real choices tailored to genuinely different needs.

And it has been good even for the school districts these charters are often assumed to threaten, because the networks tend to serve students and fill niches that districts were not serving well, without the zero-sum scramble for enrollment that has poisoned the charter debate in other states.

Behind all of it sits a primary funder with a footprint that participants struggle to find a parallel for anywhere else. JKAF has poured money and attention into Idaho education in a way that Macke Raymond, the director of Stanford University's Center for Research on Education Outcomes, compared to national investments by Bloomberg Philanthropies or City Fund in a handful of American cities, with the difference that the JKAF is concentrated in a single, small state.

This report draws on interviews across the five homegrown networks: Gem Prep, the oldest and largest; Elevate, built for students the system had written off; American Classical Schools of Idaho, a federation of classical academies; Sage, which brought the International Baccalaureate within public reach; and Alturas, grown from a single teacher's classroom. It also features interviews with a national funder and the nation's leading academic researcher on charter school effectiveness.

"They were grown at home, intentionally so."

Each of Idaho's homegrown networks has a different model, a different origin story, and a different sense of how big it wants to become. Rather than tour them one at a time, what follows is organized around what they have learned in common, because the most striking thing about these separate organizations is how often their lessons converge.

Together they make the case that the sweet spot in charter management may not be the lone school or the national brand, but something in between, grown close to the ground.



WHEN THE NATIONALS SAID NO

Creating homegrown networks was not the original plan. When Ryan arrived in Idaho from the Thomas B. Fordham Institute in Ohio in 2013, his mission was to execute the JKAF’s vision of creating 20,000 high-quality charter school seats in 10 years.

Ryan’s instinct, based on his experience with Fordham, was to recruit established national operators. The idea did not fly with those large networks’ executives. The nationals looked at Idaho’s low per-pupil funding and small, dispersed population and said no. Expanding into Idaho would not work logistically or financially.

Ryan made the rounds at the national charter conference and heard the same answer everywhere. “They’d say, listen, we like you and what you’re doing, and JKAF and all, but there’s just not enough scale in Idaho, and your per pupil funding is the lowest in the nation. It doesn’t work for us. You don’t have enough kids,” Ryan recalled.

He did not begrudge them the verdict. “That was fair, and that was honest,” he said. “After a year of those conversations we realized we were going to have to do this on our own.”

Doing it on their own meant two things: Growing the strongest schools Idaho already had, and finding top-notch people to open and run new ones.

Bluum borrowed an idea from The Mind Trust, an Indianapolis education funder. “We needed to create a paid fellowship, and we needed to start developing our own talent,” he said.

The first two New Schools Fellows, Amanda Cox and Brad Petersen, came out of a search that stretched across 13 states and drew 44 candidates. Both had Teach for America and KIPP experience, and KIPP agreed to put them through its Fisher Fellowship training even though no KIPP school would follow them to Idaho.

The third and fourth fellows were White and Strong, from inside Idaho. “They made clear that the opportunity and the need here was more than one school,” Ryan said. “They had that notion of some kind of network from the get-go.”

Jason Bransford, Gem Prep’s chief executive, was the first to propose real growth from an origin base of a single school. Gem Prep, Ryan said, was the only growing network JKAF approved for multiple schools at once. Bransford’s initial proposal to Bluum and JKAF sought roughly \$6 million in grant support for three schools.

After that, the foundation settled into a different posture: one school at a time, a new proposal every year, judged against the evidence of the school that had previously opened.

“That was smart on JKAF’s part,” Ryan said. “(Operators) could come to us each year, and they could present their plan, and we could see the evidence of the current school that they just opened.”

Stanford’s Raymond has studied Idaho’s charter sector twice, and her findings complicate the national picture in a way that flatters the homegrown model. In most of the country, Raymond’s research has found a sizable gap between the results of standalone charter schools and those run by management organizations,

with the networks generally doing better.

In Idaho, she said, “that massive difference does not exist.” The singletons perform relatively well, and the homegrown networks do not owe their success to some dramatic economy of scale. The reason, she said, is that Idaho grew its networks out of its strongest independent schools.

“You’re replicating the cream of the crop,” she said. “You’re moving a positive example from the singleton group, which is much stronger than the singletons nationally, and saying, OK, you can grow.”

Raymond’s work also explains why importing a national brand is risky, and why staying local so often works. When a national operator opens a school in a distant new market, she said, “that school is still going to count on the local central office for everything.”

Stretch a network across too much territory, more than a day’s drive from headquarters, and the expansion schools tend to underperform the flagship. CREDO’s data on the management organizations that tried to expand into distant new geographies showed that “only one out of six managed to succeed.”

A homegrown network avoids the trap by definition. It grows in a tighter geography, among people who already know the terrain, with an organization like Bluum able to backstop the occasional far-flung campus.

Marcia Aaron watched the nationals’ calculus from the other side of the table. A partner at the Charter School Growth Fund, the national philanthropy that invests in high-performing charter networks, Aaron came to the Fund after 13 years as founding CEO of KIPP LA Public Schools. She said she doubts the big brands would have thrived in Idaho even if the finances had worked.

DIFFERENT SCHOOLS FOR DIFFERENT CHILDREN

The networks could grow side-by-side because, for the most part, they weren’t competing for the same children. Nanette Merrill, who opened two Gem Prep schools before becoming executive director of the Idaho Charter School Association in 2025, traced it to specialization. Each network “knows who they are,” she said, and does not veer from it.

“Elevate’s serving at-risk students, and Gem Prep’s focus is college readiness. Those are two very different audiences,” she said. Because they serve different families, she said, “that competitive nature is removed.”

From her national vantage point, Aaron called the variety a strength few charter sectors can claim. “We have a really beautiful ecosystem in Idaho,” she said. “You’ve got a network of classical schools, you’ve got two IB school networks, but they’re not in the same communities, and they execute the IB program a little differently. You’ve got Gem Prep, which is your innovative college prep. You’ve got Elevate, which is working with at-risk youth using mastery-based career technical education.”

Compare that, she said, to the national brands. “When you go and you look at KIPP versus YES Prep versus IDEA, they’re all similar and focused on a lot of the same things.”

What those different audiences look like is best seen one model at a time.



Gem Prep
Meridian

Gem Prep: Rigor Out of the Wreckage

Gem Prep is the oldest and largest of Idaho's homegrown networks, and its history is, in a sense, the history of the whole idea. It began not as a network, or even as a promising school, but as a struggling online academy in a town of 500 people in the far north of the state.

In 2004, the White Pine School District in Deary, Idaho, launched an online school called Idaho Distance Education Academy, or IDEA. Barb Femreite, then the city clerk in Deary, was on the White Pine school board when the superintendent brought the idea forward. She resigned her board seat and her clerkship to become the school's purchasing agent, and later its chief financial officer.

Her son, Josh, then in his early 20s, was hired the same year as the school's first technology support employee. "I thought I was going to be a wildland firefighter for my life," he said. "And that's not what happened."

"I thought I was going to be a wildland firefighter for my life, and that's not what happened." -Josh Femreite

The school was popular and, academically, a disaster. In its early years, families would choose a work sample from each unit, often a worksheet torn from a workbook, and physically mail it to teachers, who assigned grades on the strength of whatever arrived.

Bransford, who was hired three years in as one of about 20 teachers brought in to raise performance, remembered walking into an

office full of boxes of the previous year's work samples. "A teacher was assigning an entire grade to a class based on random worksheets and random assignments that students and parents had selected to just mail in. It was just terrible," he said.

The turnaround that followed is the foundation of everything Gem Prep later became. Laurie Wolfe, who joined in 2006 after seventeen years in the Boise School District and is now the network's chief academic officer, led the effort. The team adopted a learning management system so that curriculum, assignments, and grades lived in one transparent place. They built learning portfolios and required students to defend their work against state standards in twice-yearly conferences.

"That started helping lift the lid on rigor and expectations," Wolfe said.

Turnaround work, she said, is harder than starting fresh. Within a few years, the once-abysmal online school posted what Bransford said were the highest SAT scores in the state.

That result taught the founders a lesson that would shape the network's whole approach. The turnaround convinced Bransford that rigor, support, and accountability, not the delivery model, drove learning, and the network carried that conviction into its buildings.

When Ryan arrived and asked Bransford whether he could serve more students, this answer was a proposal to take what worked online and rebuild it in brick and mortar. JKAF approved a \$4.5 million grant to open three physical campuses, and Gem Prep Pocatello opened first, in 2014, followed by campuses in Nampa and Meridian.

Elevate: The Kids Nobody Else Reached

If Gem Prep's founding story is about rigor imposed after a shaky start, **Elevate's** is about a specific population and a specific promise. The network exists to serve students who, by law, meet Idaho's criteria for being at-risk, the young people who tend not to thrive in a conventional classroom. Its model is bent toward getting each of them out the door with a plan for a sustainable, fulfilling future.

It began with the frustration that White and Strong felt inside the Caldwell district. They had watched superintendents come and go, four or five in a few years, and had run into a wall when they tried to add trades to their alternative school. The district shot down the idea.

Discouraged, White went to see Roger Quarles, a former boss and mentor, now the JKAF executive director. She expected to be told to fall in line. Instead, he told her to build her own school.

"I literally punched him," she said. "I said, 'Roger, I'm here for practical advice. And he's like, 'no, I'm being serious.'" Quarles set up the meeting with Ryan, and the rest followed.



Elevate Academy
Idaho Falls



Idaho Novus Classical Academy
Boise

American Classical: The Education That Went Missing

American Classical Schools of Idaho began with a group of citizens in Payette County who wanted an educational choice they did not have, and it has grown into something its founder, retired Air Force Colonel Steve Lambert, is careful to insist is not a network at all.

“We believe that the primary job of public education is not to get kids into college. It’s not to figure out what career-technical track they can take. Those are not bad things... But the most critical job of schools is elemental to the continued survival of our republic, and that is to form knowledgeable and virtuous citizens,” Lambert said.

Each school is part of a group of like-minded schools tied together in mission and governance, “but truly locally executed and locally controlled. There is no big, massive middleman staff that tells them what to do and how to do it,” Lambert said. Lambert calls ACSI a federation, not a network. It currently contains four schools, with at least three more in the planning stages.

Lambert was recruited jointly by that community group and by Bluum to launch Treasure Valley Classical Academy in Fruitland in August 2019. The school graduated its first class in the spring of 2026, 42 students

who, as a group, scored well above the national average on the SAT and who, Lambert said, are headed in every conceivable direction.

“We believe that the primary job of public education is not to get kids into college... (but) to form knowledgeable and virtuous citizens.” -Steve Lambert

“Everybody has a plan,” he said. Some are bound for college, some for gap years and missions, some for the trades, some for the military. He rattled off examples with obvious pride: a graduate off to the University of Hawaii’s honors program to study marine biology, another becoming a heavy diesel mechanic on a scholarship to the College of Western Idaho, another enlisting in the Marine Corps.

“It’s the full spectrum,” he said.

The academic content comes from Hillsdale College, through the Hillsdale K-12 Program Office and Barney Charter School Initiative, the group that provides curriculum, pedagogy, and teacher preparation to classical schools around the country.

Lambert was emphatic about the partnership’s importance, ranking it alongside Bluum and the JKAF among the relationships without which the federation would not exist. “Those partnerships are life-giving,” he said. “Without them, we’re toast.”

What the classical model offers, in the words of the people who chose it, is a kind of education that had gone missing. Angela Hansen, who teaches art and yearbook at Treasure Valley Classical and has four children enrolled, moved her son there out of frustration with a rural district that she felt was passing a struggling reader along because he was well behaved.

“His academic needs were really being missed,” she said.

What she found at the classical school was smaller classes, richer books, and children treated as individuals. Her deeper appreciation, though, is for the adults. The teachers, she said, are “dedicated to living the principles that we teach, to live moral lives,” and their example does something a poster of character values on a wall cannot.

“We become like the people we spend our time with,” she said. “If that’s who they’re spending time with, we are planting seeds of goodness that just are missed in other settings.”

Sage: Public School, Private-School Academics

Sage International School of Boise was built to address a specific unfairness. The International Baccalaureate (IB) program, a rigorous, inquiry-driven course of study developed in Geneva, Switzerland, was in most American cities the preserve of expensive private schools.

A private IB school five miles from Sage’s Boise campus, its executive director pointed out, charges close to \$25,000 a year. Sage’s founders wanted to know why a program that good had to be available only to families who could pay.

“There was some recognition that most IB schools are private schools, and were not accessible to everybody,” said Emily Downey, Sage’s executive director, who came to the school first as a parent, then as a board member, chief financial officer, and chief operating officer before taking the top job.

Now in its 16th year in Boise, Sage is one of a very small number of schools in the country, that offer the full kindergarten-through-12th-grade IB program free, in a public setting. Delivering it is a genuine lift, because the school meets Idaho’s standards and the IB’s on top of them, with certified teachers and extensive, rigorous training.

“It takes a lot of work and a lot of effort. That’s why you just don’t see much of it”

-Emily Downey

“It takes a lot of work and a lot of effort,” she said. “That’s why you just don’t see much of it.”

Downey, the parent of three Sage graduates, is a believer in what the program does for students, and she tells families the truth about it up front. “It’s a lot of work, and it’s hard,” she said. “You’re going to be so glad when you get to college, because it’s going to feel easy.”

Her oldest went into one of the toughest engineering programs in the country at Texas A&M and reported back that his classmates could not write. He could, she said, only because Sage had taught a math-and-science kid to communicate.

IB’s aim, she said, is not a bank of facts but a set of transferable habits of mind. “It’s really developing this whole child,” she said, “so that no matter what it is you’re doing or learning or trying to solve, you’re using these base skills to do it.”

Sage opened a second campus in Middleton (originally called Forge) in 2019. Covid exacerbated early leadership challenges, and the school struggled at first, but has thrived in recent years.



Alturas: Embrace the Struggle

Alturas began in the mind of a single classroom teacher, and its story is the most personal of the five. Michelle Ball spent 37-years teaching, and somewhere in the last stretch of that career she began asking why the United States was not among the world's top education systems.

She read about Finland and Japan, dug into what researchers called best practices, and reached an uncomfortable conclusion.

"I realized that I wasn't doing best practices in my classroom," she said, "and I was going to have to change a lot of the ways that I was doing things."

The classroom she rebuilt around that conclusion is the template for everything Alturas does. She stripped out the rewards and prizes, the best-table competitions and party packs, on the theory that children should learn for the love of it and behave well because it is right, not to earn a trinket.

She threw out whole-group instruction in favor of small groups pitched to each child's actual level, mixing ages so that a student sat wherever the work fit rather than wherever a birthday placed them.

She wanted every voice heard, including the wrong answers, because a wrong answer is where learning starts. And she built the whole thing on a single demanding idea.

"I really wanted my teaching, my classroom, to embrace the struggle," she said. "That's part of learning and growing."

The results, she said, showed up in her data year-after-year, consistent and among the highest in her school. What she was doing did not translate to some colleagues, who could not get past the mechanics of running four reading groups and four math lessons a day.

But it produced something parents did not want to lose. Families who had her for years, in some cases 15 years across multiple children, came back after their kids moved on and spoke of a loss, the loss of the community and collaboration she had built.

Eventually one of them said the obvious thing. "Michelle, let's just start a charter school," she said. "And I said, OK let's do it." And she added with a laugh, "but at the moment at least, I didn't mean it."

She meant it soon enough. Seventeen families and Ball launched the school in 2015, and because the charter would take time, she ran a homeschool cooperative for a year, unpaid, out of an office building in downtown Idaho Falls, to keep teaching while the paperwork moved.

"I couldn't imagine" not teaching, she said. She gave herself nine months to get a charter the commission expected to take years.

That summer she met Bluum's Terry Ryan. He was intrigued by Ball, a world-class teacher with a dream and no charter.

When Ryan and his Bluum colleagues came to see the homeschool, they came with an offer. As Ball tells it, they sat across a table of mismatched furniture and told her they were there to help her get into a real building, on one condition.

"Can you replicate this?" they asked. Ball said her own district superintendent had testified that she was an outstanding teacher, but an outlier whose approach would be nearly impossible to replicate. She did not believe it for a second.

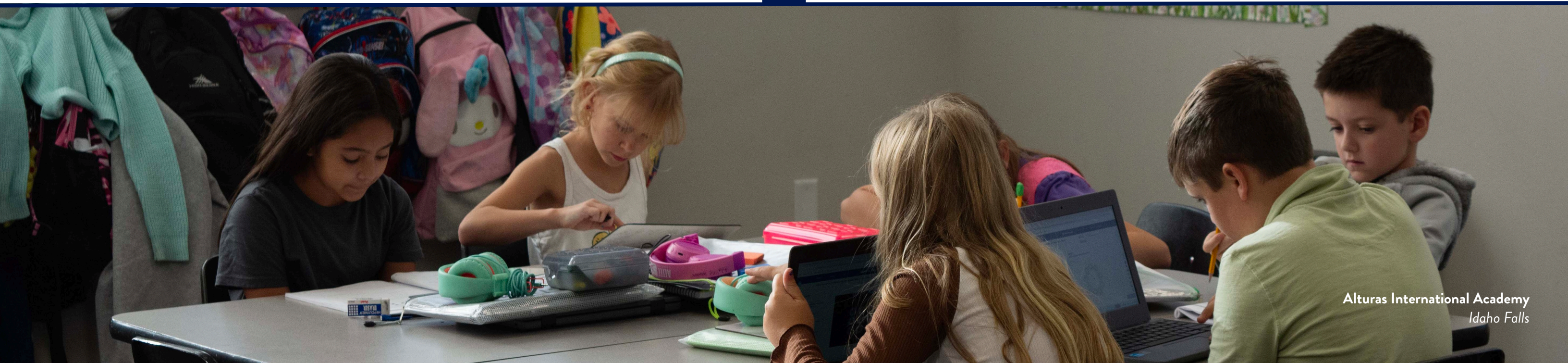
"I believed teachers just needed to be mentored, and given that structure," she said.

Alturas International Academy opened in 2016, spending its first year in borrowed call-center space before moving into a restored 1929 building in downtown Idaho Falls, and the network has grown from there, first into a separate secondary school, Alturas Preparatory Academy, and now into a genuine network, with a third campus, Alturas North, opening in nearby Rigby for the 2026-27 school year.

Alturas offers the IB program, which has sent the young school's graduates to places like the Naval Academy, Harvard, and Oregon State.

Reece Drkula, the principal for grades six through twelve, who started at Alturas as a middle-school history teacher nine years ago, sees his younger self in the model. A shy kid who froze at the whiteboard, he said, would have thrived in the small groups Alturas uses.

"You really get to know your students when you're working with a smaller group like that," he said. Visitors, he said, always say the same thing about the building: "It just feels different. It feels calm."



ROOTED IN PLACE AND PURPOSE

Despite their disparate approaches, what Idaho's homegrown charter networks have in common is their deep knowledge of, and connection to, the local communities from which they emerged.

That connection is what the region demands, Aaron said. "Northwesterners really value people that are our people, from our communities, for our communities," she said. Some of the founders were born in Idaho and others adopted it, but all of them made the state their home and know its students and families in a way an imported operator never could, she said.

After Elevate founders Monica White and Matt Strong quit their jobs in the Caldwell school district, one of their first stops was the office of the Caldwell mayor, who good-naturedly advised that they were probably in over their heads, and then promised to help. He steered urban renewal money toward their first parcel of land. He also helped them with a tour of local industry, to meet leaders.

Over two months White and Strong visited employer after employer, asking what the workforce would need in the coming years, and used the answers to decide which trades to put in the first Elevate school. Those employers became partners who still evaluate student work.

"It was twofold," White said. "We got community partners, and we found where the next generation of students were going to work when they graduated from us. And those businesses are still our partners today."

Because ACSI's model treats schools as civic institutions rather than franchises, the "federation" does not, as Lambert puts it, "helicopter schools into communities." It waits for communities to come to it.

Each school begins with a local founding group that must satisfy four questions before the board will approve a two-year process that culminates in opening: whether there is a committed founding group, whether there is genuine local demand, whether there is a facility or land, and whether there is a credible school leader. Only then does the board commit, placing a leader on the ground two years out.

Gem Prep has resisted the temptation to cross state lines. The network has been approached about expansion into California, Washington, and Wyoming, and each time declined. Spinning up a school in another state, Josh Femreite said, would mean building a whole new entity and potentially weakening the connection to Idaho that makes the network what it is. "I don't think any of us really want to do that," he said.

"We were homegrown," Barb Femreite, said. "A lot of us were born and raised here. We understand the challenges of a small state, and a very poorly funded educational system."

"We were homegrown. A lot of us were born and raised here. We understand the challenges of a small state, and a very poorly funded educational system." -Barb Femreite

THE LESSONS OF GROWTH

Every network learned the same lesson as it grew, sometimes the hard way: codify the model, or watch it wobble.

Gem Prep's early growth taught its own lessons, most of them about the value of standardizing. The founders had imagined a small, medium, and large school model, and quickly discovered that running three different sizes created more variables than they could manage.

They settled on a single mid-size model, two classrooms per grade level, and applied it everywhere. They abandoned campus-by-campus calendars once they realized it was nearly impossible to run statewide professional development when spring breaks never aligned.

"We started tightening up on a couple pieces," Bransford said, so that "if you're a new principal launching a campus, you don't have to figure out from scratch what the instructional day is going to look like. We just hand you the schedule."

Elevate opened its first campus in Caldwell in 2019, then immediately had to navigate the pandemic, going "from being a brand new school to an online school to a hybrid school, all in one year," White said.

A trades-based school does not translate well to a laptop, so Covid brought enormous challenges. "I was delivering discovery kits to kids' houses and meal prep kits for culinary," she said. Because of its year-round calendar, Elevate brought students back in person in mid-May 2020, which White believes made it one of the first schools in the country to fully reopen.

Then the network grew, and fast. After Idaho mayors asked to hold one of their regular statewide meetings at Elevate, several walked out asking when a campus was coming to their town. "Our town's next, our town's next," White said, describing the scene.

Elevate has opened five schools in seven years, a fast pace by any growth measure. The expansion was not painless. White was candid about the network's early, looser approach producing "some pretty epic early failures" at its second and third campuses. That helped them avoid the same mistakes at the fourth campus.

The failures taught the lesson Gem Prep had learned independently, that the model had to be codified. "The result was, as we kept growing, we were way stronger because of it," White said.

"It's really exciting to see us moving into a network. It's only enhanced our ideas, our thought processes, our systems" -Reece Drkula

Elevate is now, by her description, tight: a defined academic model, defined cultural expectations, and a network team of trainers and principal managers, which the network calls the Nest rather than a district office.

John Rezendes, who came to Elevate from the Caldwell district and is preparing to open the network's Kuna campus, spoke to what that support feels like from inside a building. "(Central staff) is in our buildings, we

have principal managers," he said. "We get better daily because of them."

Sage became a network in 2019, when it opened a second campus in Middleton, and that expansion is the source of its hardest-won lessons. The Middleton school, originally given a different name, Forge International, opened just before the pandemic and struggled on several fronts at once.

Construction ran late. Covid arrived in its first year. The two communities pulled hard in opposite directions

over pandemic rules, and the network tried to make decisions for both campuses at once. In a conservative community that resented what it saw as a liberal Boise school imposing rules, the effort cost Sage its reputation for a time, Downey said.

The deeper lesson, and the one most relevant to the case for networks, was about alignment. Middleton had been launched as something close to an island, Downey said, “like they could do anything they wanted to do, and they had nothing to do with the network or with the Boise campus.”

That autonomy, granted too early, became a liability. “Note to self, in case we ever do this again,” she said, “we need to launch this so that they’re aligned with our other schools.”

Sage rebranded the Middleton campus under the Sage name, worked to explain to the community that it was a college-preparatory school rather than an alternative one, and set about aligning the two campuses.

The recovery took time, but has been a success. Middleton now has the enrollment, the finances, and the reputation to have built a high school.

ACSI wrote its answer to the same problem into its founding documents. When a philanthropist toured the inaugural Fruitland school and told Lambert that Idaho needed many more like it, Lambert told him he had no capacity to build 50 in his current role. That early conversation eventually led to the formation of American Classical Schools of Idaho.

Lambert and his colleagues studied how others had scaled and decided to go in a somewhat different direction. Theirs would not be a network, but rather a federation. To Lambert, the distinction is important.

“Each school is part of a group of like-minded schools tied together in mission and governance, but truly locally executed and locally controlled,” he said. “There is no big, massive middleman staff that tells them what to do and how to do it.”

The federation spells out the core elements, the curriculum, the pedagogy, the culture, the virtues, and leaves everything else to the local school. “The curriculum is non-compromisable,” Lambert said. “But everything else is a local expression of that community. If you go to the school in Bonners Ferry, it looks like a Western ranch, because that’s what Bonners Ferry is like.”

Alturas is living the transition from single-site to network as this report is being written. Ball set up her network leadership team only in January 2026, and the value of that structure was proven almost immediately when the network absorbed an abrupt leadership change without the schools missing a beat.

Drkula, from his principal’s chair, sees the shift as energizing rather than threatening. “It’s really exciting to see us moving into a network,” he said. “It’s only enhanced our ideas, our thought processes, our systems.”

The Charter School Growth Fund has backed the expansion with a \$3 million grant to open three more schools, of which Rigby is the first.





North Idaho Classical Academy
Bonners Ferry

WHAT A NETWORK ADDS

The advantages of building a network (or federation, if you prefer), rather than a string of unrelated schools, are inarguable to everyone interviewed for this report.

Barb Femreite, now Gem Prep's board chair, made the case from the perspective of a finance person. Each school is its own legal entity, held accountable individually, "but then we have the (executive) team, so that you don't have to have top-heavy administration for each school," she said.

Wolfe, who went from running a single Gem Prep site to overseeing a network academic team of seven, said the network is a lifesaver for building leaders. On a single-site campus, "you're doing finance and you're in charge of curriculum and you're in charge of special ed, and you just have so much that you're responsible for," she said.

A network lets specialists take those burdens off a principal's plate. "If I were to go back again and open a charter school, I would have a hard time leading a single-site charter," she said. "The level of support that a network can provide is just unmatched."

For Gem Prep, there's also a huge cost savings in avoiding school building design each time a new campus is planned. This has made each new campus cheaper and smoother than the last, which in a state as poorly funded as Idaho translates directly into money kept in classrooms.

Gem Prep's decade as an online-only operation gave it a head start no one else enjoyed, Josh Femreite said. By the time the network began opening buildings quickly, it already had an established business office, an established tech department, and administrators who had worked together for years.

"I don't think a lot of other entities have that benefit," he said. "People tend to shift and move a lot."

A network office does not have to be big to do that work. "We're extremely lean," Den Hartog said of ACSI. "We have seven employees, and we're going to have four open schools this fall."

Being small lets the organization move quickly and pivot when it needs to. French said the same federalism that keeps the central office small is what lets the schools attract strong leaders, because those leaders get real authority.

"They're CEOs of their school, they're not middle managers," she said. That autonomy, paired with selective centralizing where it makes sense, is "the sweet spot of how we structure our school support office."

The people who watch the sector's finances make the same case in starker terms. Marc Carignan, Bluum's CFO, said that in a state with Idaho's funding, a single school simply cannot afford redundancy.

"There are no second layers of leadership or second layers of support in any position," he said. "The networks allow that to be developed."

Keith Donahue, Bluum's director of school strategy and operations, ran Sage before joining Bluum. "The facility costs get lower each time a network builds a new school, so each of those efficiencies end up in more dollars staying in the classroom." In Idaho, he said, "every dollar you can keep in the school is important."

The Charter School Growth Fund has organized its Idaho strategy around that same arithmetic. The fund made early investments in Gem Prep and Elevate, and Sage was already in its portfolio when Aaron arrived.

"There are no second layers of leadership...The networks allow that to be developed."

-Marc Carignan

Since then it has made two follow-on investments each in Elevate and Gem Prep, invested in Alturas and twice in ACSI. It has become a lender as well, with both senior and subordinated loans to Gem Prep and Elevate and a smaller loan planned for ACSI's Riverton campus.

HOW BIG IS TOO BIG?

Scale is worth pursuing, but only up to a point. Where that point is – when a network bloats into a bureaucracy and loses its personal touch – is an issue all of Idaho's network leaders ponder regularly.

Most of the leaders named a ceiling somewhere around eight to 10 schools. Below that, a school lacks the specialists and second layers of leadership that a low-funded Idaho campus cannot afford on its own. Above it, the community rootedness that makes these schools work begins to dilute.

Aaron hears the same numbers, and the growth fund's experience across the country supports them, though she sees maximum value in reaching the upper end of that range. From her experience, the dangerous place is the middle.

"If you're stuck at six, you're kind of in no man's land," she said. "You can't afford the team that you really need for a larger network."

The passage from six to nine schools concerns the fund enough that its partners spent part of a recent retreat working through how to help networks survive it, she said, as an organization goes "from being a small, intimate organization where everybody knows each other to a larger network where you need more systems and processes."

Idaho adds a complication of its own. "You can't have 10 schools in Boise," Aaron said. A network that grows past a handful of campuses ends up with at least one that sits a flight away, or a ten-hour drive from the Treasure Valley to the northern part of the state, a fact of geography she said people who do not live in Idaho rarely appreciate.

Gem Prep today runs seven brick-and-mortar campuses, with an eighth opening in Idaho Falls in the fall, and enrolls roughly 3,500 students across the whole organization. The plan calls for full-size campuses in Rexburg and Caldwell after that, which would bring the total to 10 large schools plus the original online school. Leaders expect to stop there, at least for full-size buildings.

But Gem continues to build out its Learning Societies, small, hybrid campuses often centered on a particular theme, like sports.

Elevate has settled on eight schools as its ceiling, and the reasoning is a clear statement of the homegrown philosophy. "The bigger you get, the more corporate you have to get," White said, "and the less community driven you are."

Past eight, she said, the network would hit a point of diminishing returns, losing the local rootedness that makes each campus work.

Erik Bullock, Elevate's board chair and a longtime YMCA executive, agreed with White's assessment. Grow too large, he said, "and it starts to become diluted." Both of them, and Rezendes too, want a network that stays just big enough to enjoy real economies of scale, and no bigger.

ACSI, too, expects to top out at roughly 10 schools before the governance and support structures strain. "When you get to about 10 schools, you really have to look at, can you continue to be lean, can you continue to be nimble, without getting too top heavy," ACSI's Hartog said.

Sage is still working through its growth plan. "I never want to put a number on it," she said, "because we thought our Middleton campus was going to be it," Downey said.

From where Ryan sits, watching all of the networks at once, said the sweet spot is probably between five and seven full-size schools of 500 to 700 students for most networks.

"It's a lot to manage, seven schools across the state, and seven leadership teams, and seven teacher teams," he said. The caveat, he said, is the new small-format schooling Gem Prep and ACSI are starting to experiment with, which changes the math entirely. More on that below.



Idaho Novus Classical Academy
Boise

COLLEAGUES, NOT COMPETITORS

The conviction that most distinguishes Idaho from other states is that these networks see one another as colleagues, not competitors.

The homegrown networks benefit from frequent interaction and cooperation. Bluum has knit the separate networks into what amounts to a network of networks. Chief executives compare notes; chief financial officers share templates; the growth officers of Gem Prep, Elevate, ACSI, and Alturas meet monthly to swap what is working and what is not.

“There’s a lot of camaraderie between those groups,” Josh Femreite said. The striking thing, even in the rare cases where two networks might be vying for similar students in the same area, is how little the interaction feels like competition.

“If Steve (Lambert) were to call up Jason (Bransford) at Gem Prep and say, tell me how you do your learning societies, they’d have a great conversation, and be honest, and it would be transparent,” ACSI’s French said. “There’s no ‘we’re competing for the same students’ kind of mentality.”

Donahue, who ran a single school before any of this existed, knows how lonely the work used to be. It was, he said, “like a ship out at sea, hoping you were doing the right thing, but with no context or idea if you were.” Now the leaders, and their finance and academic and growth officers, know one another and answer one another’s calls.

“Everybody recognizes the success of their colleagues is just as important as their own success.” -Marcia Aaron

Carignan told a story that captures the ethos. When Alturas needed a certificated administrator partway through its first year to sign off on evaluations (Ball didn’t yet have her license), Bluum brokered a deal for Gem Prep to lend its Pocatello principal for several months to review and sign paperwork.

“That’s how this informal network of networks can help solve problems,” he said.

The collaboration is as real as it is unusual, and it did not happen by accident. “It’s one of the things I’m most proud of,” Ryan

said. The lesson came from his experience in Ohio.

“It was always disheartening when every charter seemed to be pitted against other charters as well as districts,” he said. “I lived that experience, and didn’t want to see it replicated in Idaho.”

He credits the people involved and a concerted effort by Bluum and JKAF to bring the leaders together, year-after-year. The result, he said, is a sector “less toxic in Idaho than almost any other state I can think of.”

Stanford’s Raymond offered a more structural explanation for the unusual civility. Because the networks pursue different models, they attract different families, which removes the fuel for the kind of feud that consumes charter sectors elsewhere.

“You’re not going to get the feeding frenzy that you get in the Los Angeles Unified School District,” she said, where charters poach students from other charters. “It is really dog eat dog in LA,” she said.

Idaho, by contrast, has “a more civil society” and, crucially, “no competition for students, because the models address different needs.” A family drawn to a classical academy in Boise, she said would be unlikely to consider a progressive charter across town, and vice versa.

Aaron also credited JKAF and other funders for creating the collegial environment. “The funders have been broad in who they’re supporting, which has been a big plus,” she said.

The leaders also all sit on the board of the Idaho Charter Schools Association. “They’re all rowing together,” Aaron said. “Everybody recognizes the success of their colleagues is just as important as their own success.”

Merrill has seen both explanations at work. The leaders are hardly soft, she said. “They’re strong, they’re convicted, they’re competitive. But their fight and drive is not against each other.”

The comity has limits, and Ryan is watching them approach. “In the early days there was enough demand to go around,” he said, and there still is market demand, but as the networks push into the same fast-growing towns, friction is appearing at the sector’s edges.

The stress, he said, is not between the Bluum-supported networks. “Where you’re feeling the stress, is between say an ACSI school or a Gem Prep school and an existing one-off charter school that’s been in a community for 12 or 15-years,” he said.

Those schools are asking “isn’t the market saturated enough?” Those kinds of conversations are starting to rear their heads. I don’t see that as a problem, but it’s definitely a tension, and we’re starting to pick up on it more and more.”

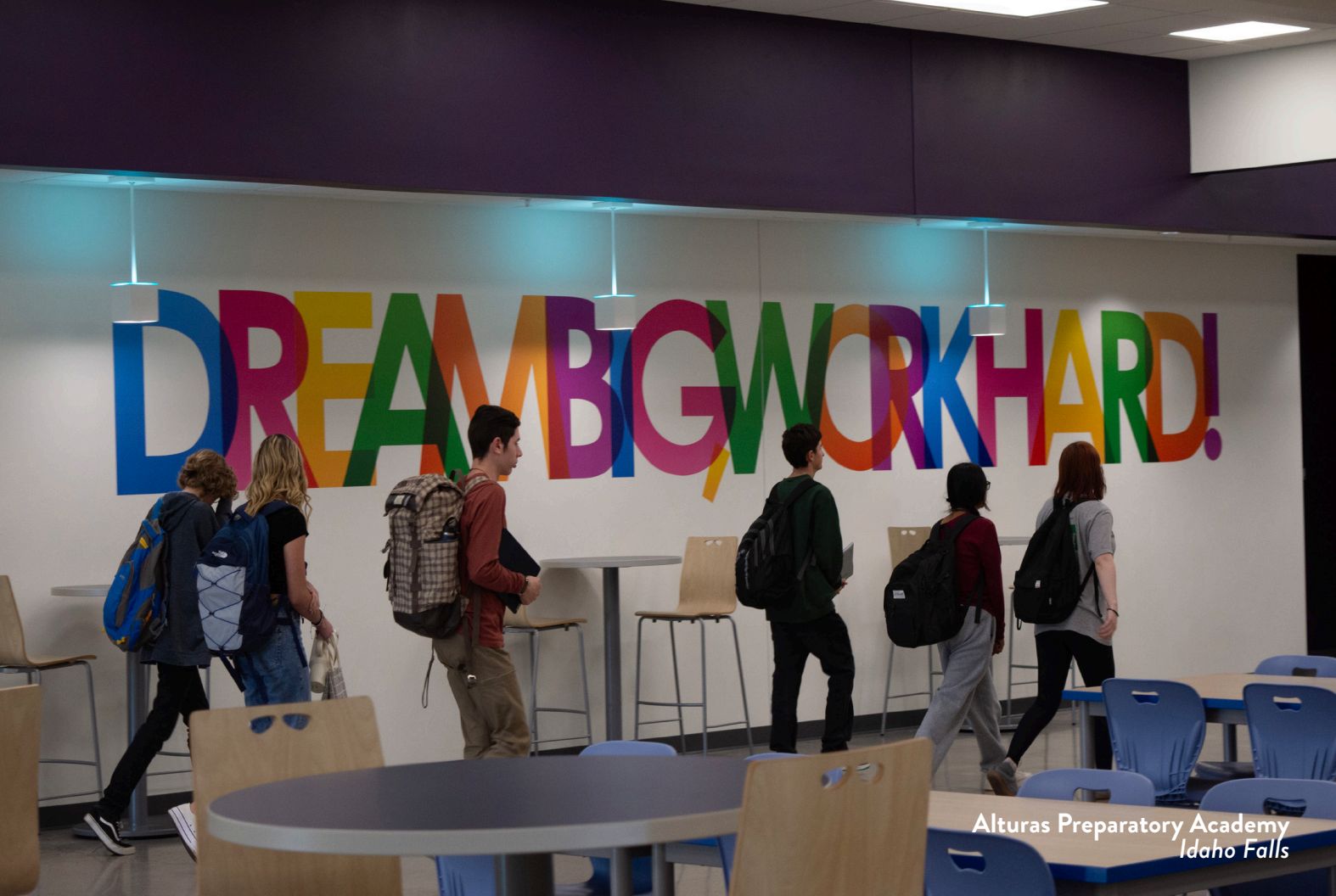
Ryan hopes to see the collegiality expand beyond the charter sector. “We would like to do more with districts. We think we have some good things to share. We have talented people who can be helpful to some of our districts,” he said.

“They’re strong, they’re convicted, they’re competitive. But their fight and drive is not against each other.”

- Nanette Merrill



Gem Prep Graduation
Meridian North



Alturas Preparatory Academy
Idaho Falls

THE PEOPLE CHALLENGE AHEAD

Succession and talent are the problems nearly everyone named as the most challenging to come. Here, too, networks have an advantage over single-site schools. A single-site school, Carignan said, handles leadership transitions “just in time,” scrambling when a key person leaves. A network can build a bench.

Elevate, Gem Prep, and Alturas are all, in their different stages, doing exactly that, developing leaders internally so the founders can eventually step back without the whole edifice wobbling.

White pointed to a statewide leadership talent shortage and a network team now devoted to addressing it. “We’re going to try to build a good internal bench that can outlast all of us,” she said.

The concern that surfaces most often at Elevate is succession, the question of how a network so identified with two founders survives their eventual departure.

Bullock returns to it constantly. “How do you replicate Matt and Monica?” he asked. His answer, and the network’s, is that those unique individuals cannot be replicated. So succession has to be a well thought-out process, with the next generation of leaders coming from within the network.

Rezendes, who has watched the founders build a leadership pipeline, is reassured. “Matt and Monica aren’t people who hold on to everything themselves,” he said. “I feel we’re very prepared for when they retire. We’ll be in a good place.” Whether the founders have a timeline, he said, is another matter. “I think they’re still

enjoying and loving what they’re doing.”

The bench matters because the people are what make the model work. Bullock traces Elevate’s success to the caliber of the adults it puts in front of students, many of them recruited out of the trades rather than traditional teacher prep programs.

“We can have a vision, but we’ve got to have the best instructors,” he said. What has impressed him most is Elevate’s staff retention. Because he signs every instructor’s contract, he sees the same names year-after-year.

“That sends a message that we’re not having a high turnover, and that means the instructors and staff feel valued,” he said. “The two things that all people want in life are to be accepted for who they are, and to have a voice. And I feel like the students and the staff all have that.”

Alturas founder Ball, who intends to work about four more years, is already spending time addressing the succession challenge. She said she is determined to leave the Alturas model in hands as committed as her own.

She has a strong sense of what she built and why it endures. Kids crave consistency and connection, she said, and Alturas is engineered to give them both: the same teachers, the same patterns, an environment where a student is not afraid to be wrong.

When she opens the Rigby campus, she said, she knows what she will face, and it is the same thing she faced the first day at Alturas: children who do not yet trust that their voices will be heard.

“We’re going to have to do lots of community-building things so that they start trusting each other,” she said. The word she keeps returning to, for the students and for herself, is the one she taught for thirty-seven years.

Embrace the struggle.

“The two things that all people want in life are to be accepted for who they are, and to have a voice. And I feel like the students and the staff all have that.” - Erik Bullock

THE NEXT FRONTIER

The frontier some networks are focused on is one they cannot yet reach, at least at scale: rural communities too small for a full building.

What Gem Prep is doing about it is thinking small. Its most inventive recent work is a set of what it calls Learning Societies, tiny campuses of 20 to 50 students designed to reach rural towns where a full building will never pencil out.

The model has since evolved into interest-based locations, most strikingly a campus built around intensive basketball coaching, with soccer sites to follow. Gem Prep provides the teacher, the curriculum, and the computers; a partner organization provides the building and the coaching.

“Imagine a kid learning academics for an hour or two, and then taking a break to get some intensive basketball coaching,” Bransford said. The point, he said, is not athletics for its own sake but a school day built around the way children actually want to spend it, compressing academics and activity so families get their evenings back.

Wolfe sees even larger possibilities in partnerships with Idaho employers like Micron and Simplot, where students could shadow real work. “I think that’s the direction education is moving in,” she said.

ACSI is pushing toward the same future. The federation has more than a thousand students on waiting lists in places where a full brick-and-mortar campus will never be affordable. That gap has pushed it toward a smaller model for rural communities.

Bluum brought in a New Schools Fellow specifically to figure out how to bring classical education to towns too small to fill a conventional building, perhaps in rented church or community-center space serving a few dozen children.

Den Hartog credited Gem Prep with clearing the path. “I think what they’re doing is wonderful,” he said of the learning societies. “It likely will have helped pave the way for what we’re trying to do.”

Ryan sees the small formats as the sector’s next chapter, because the first chapter largely passed rural Idaho by. The demand, he said, is already visible.

“There’s demand for the classical academy in small towns, 30 or 40 students whose families would enroll immediately,” he said.

What is not solved is... everything else. “The economics are tricky. Staffing is tricky,” Ryan said. “Can you maintain a culture if you only have four teachers? Are they really going to be part of the same culture?”

Sage’s frontier runs in a different direction, toward higher education. The most exciting possibility on its horizon is a plan, moving in partnership with Bluum, to relocate its Boise high school onto the campus of Boise State University, an arrangement that would let students take courses on a college campus.

The idea has drawn interest from state legislators, though it has been slowed by Boise State’s search for a permanent president. A separate replication in Kuna, a town whose population is, in Downey’s word, exploding, is penciled in for the end of the decade, with a fellow supported by the JKAF hired to study it.

Ryan sees in the Boise State plan the germ of a new category for potential expansion. In Ohio, he said, a set of STEM schools grew up on the campuses of universities like Ohio State and Case Western.

“The blurring between secondary education and higher ed is happening, especially in the STEM space,” he said. “There could be some opportunity for some really innovative higher ed partnerships that could evolve into their own form of networks. This is very much the early days of that.”

He can name the next networks before they exist. Sue Lux, a Bluum fellow working on a STEM agribusiness school, has not yet opened her first campus, but Ryan can already see the shape of a network behind it.

“I could see there being an agribusiness school here in the Treasure Valley, one in Twin Falls, and one in Pocatello,” he said, if Lux can demonstrate the model works once.

He can imagine a high-end STEM network, too. “There may very well be the possibility for a STEM model for kids who want to work at Micron or who want to go on and get an engineering degree at Boise State or the University of Idaho,” Ryan said.

Ryan offered a major caveat to his musings. “Of course, this is all going to evolve. A lot of what I’m saying is probably going to be totally wrong,” he said.

If you’d asked me 10 years ago what networks you were going to have, I never would have said an Elevate Academy type network. But look, who knows? Things are happening fast.”



Elevate Academy Twin Falls Opening
Elevate Staff & Faculty

WHAT IDAHO FIGURED OUT

In her studies of the Idaho charter sector, Stanford’s Raymond has noticed an uncommon phenomenon. The success of many charters, and the networks in particular, has created pressure on traditional systems to up their game.

The charter sector’s relentless focus on quality, she said, initially drew hostility from Idaho’s education establishment. But over time, as the charters kept posting results without the extra supports that traditional schools enjoy, the argument changed.

Policymakers and even district leaders and school boards began thinking, “if they’re doing it without all of the larger district and state supports that we give to traditional schools, there’s really no excuse why we shouldn’t be doing something similar,” she said, summarizing their thinking.

Charters, she said, are not directly prompting individual district schools to improve so much as “putting pressure on the political side of the system to up their game.” It is a competitive effect most people would not expect, “but we’re seeing it in Idaho.”

There is a significant caveat in Raymond’s work, and the people involved do not duck it. When she studied Idaho’s charters, she found a student population unlike the charter norm nationally, whiter and more affluent than district-run schools, “a group of pretty advantaged kids to begin with.”

Ryan did not dispute the observation. Idaho, he pointed out, is “by far probably the most homogeneous” state in the country, or close to it. with Hispanic students at about 18 percent of statewide enrollment “and everything else (other than white) is infinitesimal.”

But Raymond’s Idaho data is now five years old, Ryan said, and the demographic gap she saw between the charters and the state has been closing since, the result of a deliberate effort.

“The success of many charters, and the networks in particular, has created pressure on traditional systems to up their game.”

“We’ve closed that gap, and that’s something that we’re proud of, and we’ve made an effort to do that,” he said. “The federal Charter School Program grants we’ve received have helped us do that big time.”

The newer campuses tell that story. Elevate’s schools serve only students who meet the state’s at-risk criteria.

Gem Prep “has launched a couple schools in recent years in communities with higher-need student populations,” Ryan said, and “the same is true of ACSI,” whose school in Fruitland “is also pretty diverse, primarily in terms of poverty.”

Sage’s second campus is part of the same story. The Middleton student body is markedly more low-income and more Hispanic than the Boise campus, and the school’s charter was written specifically to reach Hispanic families, with Spanish offered from kindergarten.

The results, where the school keeps students from the early grades, bear out the model. Asked whether lower-income children who start early can handle the rigorous, college-level IB Diploma Programme, Downey did not hesitate. “One hundred percent,” she said.

Her advice to families is simply to start young and stay. “The earlier we get them and can keep them, the more successful they’ll be.”

The impacts of evolving state policies is an open question. In 2025, Idaho passed a private-school tax credit program, and the establishments of Education Savings Account appears likely to happen in the near future. Both efforts could

pull families further from public school choice.

Could another state grow a similarly robust collection of homegrown charter school networks? Aaron thinks so, under the right conditions.

“If Montana or Wyoming wanted to do something like that, because they’re still pretty greenfield, and if they could get a big funder to lean in the way that we have seen with JKAF, I think you could do it,” she said. Wyoming in particular, she said, has enough wealth to produce a homegrown funder of its own.

But the path is less simple for other states, she said. Idaho benefits from an unusually clean structure among its charter backers, where most states have a jumble of funders pulling in different directions.

“You’ve got the simplicity of Bluum, which is associated with JKAF, which has a very set point of view, and then we as Charter School Growth Fund partner with both of them,” she said. “So, we all move together.”

For a decade, Idaho has run an experiment that began almost by accident, when the national operators said no and the state was forced to grow its own. The result is a set of schools that outperform, a sector that collaborates instead of cannibalizing, and a funder whose patience made both possible.

That happy accident has made Idaho, in the eyes of many, the envy of the nation when it comes to public school choice.

“For a decade, Idaho has run an experiment that began almost by accident, when the national operators said no and the state was forced to grow its own. The result is a set of schools that outperform, a sector that collaborates instead of cannibalizing, and a funder whose patience made both possible.”



*Alturas International Academy
Idaho Falls*



BLUUM

LET **LEARNING** GROW

1412 W Idaho St. Suite 110 Boise, ID 83702

BLUUM.ORG