

Binge tonight means hangover tomorrow

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Idaho schools Superintendent Tom Luna is in such a hurry to scoop up federal cash that he seems to have forgotten a cardinal rule: Ask a lot of questions first.

Luna wants to lift the cap on how many new charter schools Idaho creates each year in order to qualify for a share of \$5 billion in federal grants. The state has 37 of these charter schools and, by state law, it can add no more than six each year. Seven states have lifted their charter school restrictions to compete for the dollars.

But where would Idaho spend these dollars - in traditional schools or charters? What happens when the federal dollars are used up? Are Idaho taxpayers obligated to continue spending their money maintaining programs launched with the federal money?

About 12,000 Idaho students attend charter schools. That leaves 263,000 youngsters in traditional public schools. How would an expansion of charters affect their education? To some degree, charters represent a proliferation of administration in a state with 115 school districts already. As they form, charters siphon away students and state dollars from traditional schools.

That leaves fewer resources and teachers for the children who attend those traditional schools. Are traditional schools supposed to cut back or seek local property taxes to compensate for the loss of state dollars?

A decade ago, Idaho launched charters as a way to experiment. These were to be incubators of educational reform. Presumably, whatever new techniques charters developed could be extrapolated back to the larger mass of students.

So, where's the innovation? How has a wave of charter school laboratories improved the teaching of kids everywhere else?

What are the demographics of the charter schools? Do they mirror Idaho's student body - rich, middle class, disadvantaged and some developmentally and emotionally disabled children? Or is there a self-selection process that drains from public schools students from affluent families who are more easily taught and parents who are more involved with their schools?

Are charter schools really better? A Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory survey, commissioned by the Idaho Department of Education, says parents, students and teachers at Idaho's charters are satisfied. But the National Assessment of Educational Progress hasn't found much difference in student performance between charters and traditional schools. Stanford University's recent comparison of charters and neighboring traditional schools suggests charters actually compare poorly.

There was a time when Idaho leaders viewed federal money skeptically. They recognized binging on federal bucks today left a hangover in the form of programs or policies Idahoans otherwise would not have pursued. Not so when it comes to charter schools. How come? - M. T.