

Idaho school overhaul foes clear referendum hurdle
By JOHN MILLER, Associated Press

BOISE, Idaho (AP) — Organizers of a bid to dump the education and teachers union overhaul that passed the 2011 Idaho Legislature say they've gathered enough signatures to put all three repeal measures on the November 2012 ballot.

More than 48,000 people signed each of three petitions to put the new Idaho laws to referendum votes next year, Michael Lanza, an organizer of the petitions, announced Wednesday.

Idaho will restrict education union bargaining rights, introduce teacher merit pay and shift money from salaries to classroom technology under the changes backed by public schools chief Tom Luna and Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter earlier this year.

Some teachers, parents and students have criticized the measures, prompting the referendum effort to repeal them. Foes say the overhaul will undermine teachers, increase class sizes and shift state taxpayer money to for-profit, out-of-state companies that will be tapped to provide online curriculum and laptops to students.

"Idaho citizens are eager to have a chance to vote on the three education laws passed by the Idaho Legislature," said Lanza, adding his group will gather more signatures before turning them in to the state June 6. "We know that people don't want to see the larger class sizes, layoffs and unfunded technology mandates that these laws are already causing."

Before the repeal measures get on the 2012 ballot, county clerks in Idaho's 44 counties are verifying the signatures, making sure they've come from registered voters. They won't be officially qualified until Secretary of State Ben Ysursa vets them, as well.

Luna, who has made bringing merit pay to Idaho's education system a priority since he was first elected superintendent of public instruction in 2006, said he is confident that voters would turn back any effort to repeal his laws, debate over which dominated the last Legislature.

He said organizers of the repeal are defending the "status quo," a situation where Idaho's superintendents struggle to remove bad teachers, staffing is based on seniority, not teacher ability, and "classrooms remain stuck in the 20th century."

"We knew the referendum was a possibility, but I remain confident that a majority of Idahoans support education reform in Idaho," Luna said in a statement Wednesday evening. "This isn't the answer to the challenges we face in education today. The burden of proof should be on those who want to defend the status quo, not on those who want to change it."

Luna has already named a team to start implementing the changes.

Idaho Education Association union president Sherri Wood, a foe of the bills, said she's convinced voters will turn in droves against Luna's changes after experiencing their effects starting this year when the legislation goes into effect.

"Unfortunately, we won't have a chance to vote on the laws until November 2012, but by then, Idahoans will have seen ample evidence on just how damaging these laws are," Wood said.

Wood's union has also challenged Luna in state court over a key part of the reforms, asking a judge to declare unconstitutional those portions of the new laws that do away with some teacher job protections and collective bargaining rights.

A separate push also seeks to recall Luna, too, but organizers Wednesday didn't provide any update on the progress of gathering signatures for that. Recall proponents face long odds: In their push for an Aug. 30 special election, the group must submit 158,107 valid signatures.

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