

Luna places his \$60 million laptop wager

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Idaho is wagering \$60 million on the premise that today's high school students must learn differently. It isn't the only gamble in state School Superintendent Tom Luna's bid to reshape K-12 education; it is just part of the "Students Come First" overhaul that also rewrites the state's teacher negotiation process and establishes a merit pay system.

But the technology initiative may be the one change that most directly, and profoundly, impacts the classroom experience, and the relationship between the teacher and student. It also hinges, to a large degree, on assumptions being made today about tomorrow's technology.

If there is one thing that can be assumed about technology, it is that the state of the art will look considerably different at the end of the state's five-year, \$60 million shopping spree.

Between now and May 25, the state is entertaining bids to supply the state not just with the gadgetry, but with backup that includes maintenance, wireless and tech support. (The fine print, no doubt noticed by would-be vendors, is that the whole deal could be void in November. If voters reject the Luna laws, the state would likely put the technology money into savings.)

Even if the referendum wasn't an unknown, there would still be questions about what, exactly, the state will get for your money.

The contract does not specify the purchase of laptops, per se. But the specs, as outlined in an Associated Press story this week, essentially describe a laptop. Devices must weigh 6 pounds or less, have a 12-inch screen and have a physical keyboard.

That latter requirement precludes tablets, the next new thing in the gadget world. The thinking is that a laptop and a keyboard will best suit high school students, who will be required to take two online high school credits as part of Students Come First.

For now, this may be a sound assessment of the state of technology. But this is a long, phased-in rollout. High school teachers get the devices this fall. Students would get devices over the course of three years, beginning in the fall of 2013.

The state can opt for an upgrade. Just not overnight. The state can rewrite the contract, if necessary, after four years, Luna spokeswoman Melissa McGrath said Thursday. In the meantime, teachers and school district IT staff will meet every summer to review the contract and suggest fine-tuning.

Are these adequate safeguards to ensure that Idaho will be ahead of the technology curve - five years and \$60 million down the road?

Voters will get the last word.

And when Idahoans decide on the fate of the controversial Students Come First laws in November, their decision should be based less on emotion, and instead on a practical review of costs and benefits.