

At last, a school for free-market patriots

Marty Trillhaase, Lewiston Tribune

In one Idaho charter school, the focus is on teaching students to become free-market patriots.

More could be on the way. Before that happens, Idaho's Public Charter School Commission ought to be asking if this is a proper use of your state tax dollars.

As the Associated Press's Jessie L. Bonner reports, in 2008, that state commission approved the North Valley Academy in Gooding, which promotes itself as a "patriotic" alternative for parents who want their children exposed to a heavy helping of individual freedoms and free-market capitalism. The uniforms are red, white and blue. The cheer is: "God bless the USA."

"We teach something about patriotism every single day," principal Cheri Vitek told Bonner. "Every day in their classroom (students are) singing 'proud to be an American' and if they're not singing 'proud to be an American,' they're singing another song about America."

The eastern Idaho multimillionaire who put \$1 million into a pro-Mitt Romney political action committee and serves as a Romney presidential campaign finance co-chairman wants to transplant the concept to his eastern Idaho back yard. Frank VanderSloot has offered to donate use of a property and refurbish a building to house a similar charter in the Idaho Falls area.

All of which has the American Civil Liberties Union asking the charter school commission to do its job. Charter schools, after all, bleed a disproportionate amount of state tax dollars away from the traditional schools, where 95 percent of Idaho's kids get their education.

If the charter school commission needs a nudge, here are a few suggestions:

- Why is this curriculum even needed? Did Idaho's traditional schools quit flying the flag and requiring students to recite the Pledge of Allegiance? If the traditional schools do such an inadequate job of teaching traditional values and respect for American capitalism, why is Idaho the most Republican state in the country?
- When does education become indoctrination? The last time a charter school program seemed this odd, it was the now-defunct Nampa Classical Academy's drive to use the Bible as a source for its curriculum. That ran afoul of Idaho's state constitutional ban on religious instruction. But that same constitution also says: "No books, papers, tracts or documents of a political, sectarian or denominational character shall be used or introduced in any schools established under the provisions of this article."

- Along with singing "proud to be an American," does anybody at North Valley Academy sing "We Shall Overcome"? Along with "God bless the USA," does anyone recite Martin Luther King's "I have a dream"? And in a school that sounds geared to promoting nationalism, how do students learn about slavery, exploitation of Asians, the Japanese-American internment camps of World War II or the treatment of American Indians?
- Do students hear about free-market capitalism to the exclusion of other models, even though those economic systems are followed throughout the world - including here at home?
- How much of this program is meant to segregate a few select students into a quasi-private school setting at taxpayer expense?
- When Idaho launched charter schools, it was supposed to free educators from bureaucratic restraints, enabling them to innovate new ways of teaching or to create magnet schools in such areas of math or music. At some point, these innovations could be incorporated at the traditional schools, thereby benefiting all of Idaho's public school students. At present, Idaho has more than 264,000 kids in the traditional schools. How does a Gooding charter school focused on patriotism, freedom and capitalism help any of them? - M.T.