

# Pioneering laptops takes time and money

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Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

State schools Superintendent Tom Luna's plan to give a laptop to every Idaho high school student and faculty member has hit a snag.

Rather than have businesses compete for a piece of the \$80 million project, Idaho now will have to go to them.

Earlier this year, Idaho put out requests for proposals from companies to deliver and service laptops defined as 6 pounds or less, with a 12-inch screen and to be able to "withstand the occasional spill."

Three outfits - names withheld - responded.

One missed the deadline.

Another didn't meet the specifications.

Left with one company, the state scrapped the bidding process and next will engage in sole negotiations.

But that can put the state in a bind. In the absence of competitive bids, the state can't know if it's getting a fair price.

There's the nagging feeling that the state is ahead of the product evolution - and others will pay far less for the same or even better technology down the road.

The state is putting a lot of faith in its ability to negotiate - from a position of weakness. It's up against a deadline. To keep its "One-to-One Computing Initiative" on track, Luna's shop wants to deliver computers to teachers this fall.

Finally, the state is dealing with an industry famous for over-promising and under-delivering.

Not to worry, says Luna's spokeswoman Melissa McGrath.

"We knew it was a possibility but we're confident the division of purchasing is handling it the right way and we'll still be able to get devices into teachers' hands this fall," she said.

But if you ask veterans of state government, they might give you a name for this kind of bureaucratic scrambling. They call it pioneering. Getting there first may take Idaho longer, cost more money and deliver disappointing results.

Nor is this first stumble.

Late last year, it turned out handing out laptops to all freshmen - as planned beginning with the class of 2016 - would be problematic. Luna's task force reviewing how to integrate graduation requirements that students take two online classes found a glitch. Not all high school classes are segregated by grade. A sophomore who transferred from another state may need to take a ninth grade class to catch up. Or smaller districts combine grades for some classes. Not to mention the advanced placement courses where students from different grades meet.

So equipping the freshmen in those circumstances with laptops would render the computers useless since other students would not be plugged in.

Now Idaho is implementing the program school by school. Phased in during three years, all high school students will get laptops even if the online requirement does not apply to them.

Doesn't something feel wobbly about all this?

Maybe that's because this is a top-down mandate placed upon people with expertise in the field of education imposed by politicians such as Luna who have no such classroom teaching experience themselves.

Had they consulted the teachers, administrators and parents who are dealing with the real world of public education, they would have been reminded about the steady expansion of technology - computers in classrooms, libraries and laboratories.

Had Luna listened to the people teaching your children, he might have launched a laptop pilot program in several schools - a small district with fewer than 2,500 students, a mid-sized system and a district with more than 5,000 students.

Then, with two or three years of results, he might have known what works and what doesn't. What the students like. What teachers like. What they don't like. Where to get the best equipment and support services.

A pilot program might have taught Luna the whole idea was not practical as a statewide endeavor.

Instead, Idaho is rushing into the unknown. So far, the state has been surprised twice. Makes you wonder where the next surprise will be, doesn't it? - M.T.