

In 2033, it will be *deju vu* all over again in education

By Wayne Hoffman

I missed a major opportunity several months ago, prior to Gov. Butch Otter's announcement that he would put together a task force to examine and make recommendations for education reform. Before the first task force meeting I should have predicted the outcome of the group's work, written my prediction on a piece of paper and buried the prediction in a jar in my backyard.

The prediction: That the task force would recommend more of the same: Basically, more money for schools to prop up a failing system. I would have been called a genius—or evil manipulator of time and space, predicting the unpredictable. Does Wayne possess some dark magic that allows him to conjure images of that which hasn't happened, the media would have asked.

Trust me, it didn't take much to imagine the outcome.

And since money is what the task force wants, the stars are aligning to give the task force what it has requested. Days ago, the state's Democrats announced they've put together legislation to implement the recommendations of Otter's task force. It's a coup for the Democrats, who jumped past the governor and Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Luna to own the issue. Otter and Luna say they're supportive of the legislation the minority party has put together, and will back it.

While some of the recommendations may be laudable—for example, creating opportunities for students to move ahead in their education—the plan to throw millions of dollars in more money into the system just gets us back to where we started, to an education system that is not innovative, moves too slowly to align to 21st century realities and relies heavily on the latest national education fad, Common Core.

Indeed, while some states are reconsidering their adherence to Common Core, Idaho is embracing it, relabeling it in order to trick parents, students and teachers that it's not part of a nationalized education agenda and scrambling to line up support, in case the Legislature starts asking a lot of questions about it this winter.

The task force's recommendations are not what we need, nor what Idaho schoolchildren deserve.

What if Idaho schoolchildren really had innovative education opportunities that stand out on the world stage? What if Idaho abandoned ritualistic adherence to the status quo and jettisoned our unyielding loyalty to “the system” above all else? What if schoolchildren were treated as individuals, not run through the mechanics of a bureaucracy like widgets in a factory?

The vast majority of Idaho's teachers are trying to do their best for their students. Some students need individual attention from caring teachers. Others need less interaction and the support of a battery of resources such as books and technology. And other students fall in between. Some students advance rapidly through subject matter and others struggle. And some students struggle with some lessons, but move easily through others. No two students are alike.

What if Idaho led with an education system that was unlike anything else in the country, that truly utilized all the resources available to the most prosperous and most technologically advanced nation on earth?

And what if Idaho attracted the best teachers who earned the best wages, and those teachers were free to use their skills to teach according to their understanding of what's best for the children in their care?

The proposal to dump more money into Idaho schools does nothing to improve or reform the system.

Today, I'm writing these words on a piece of paper, putting it in a jar and burying it in a backyard. I'll dig it up 20 years from now. It says, "The year is 2033. Idaho's public schools are failing. The nation's public education system is failing. And Idaho's governor has announced the creation of a task force to study the problem and recommend reforms."

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