

# Tom Luna's legacy: Costly technology failures

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

For all the money Idahoans lavished on education technology, you should have seen:

- The Idaho Education Network providing students in far-flung regions of the state with the opportunity to attend courses via teleconferences otherwise unavailable to them.
- The Idaho System for Educational Excellence, a longitudinal data system, enabling teachers, administrators and state officials to share a seamless flow of statistics about where students were - and how well they were progressing.
- Schoolnet, an instructional management system allowing educators across the state to develop and share what techniques work best in a practical, real-time way.

What a difference three months can make.

For years, the \$60 million IEN has been mired in a botched contract that involved the loss of federal support. Once freed of that state compact, local schools purchased more bandwidth for less money.

But in January, legislative auditors turned up something else. Of the 85,000 students attending 217 Idaho high schools, about 2 percent actually used IEN's teleconferencing. About half the equipment was utilized. Fewer than 50 of Idaho's 115 school districts offered IEN classes. And the number of those classes dropped from 178 in the fall of 2012 to 128 last spring.

In February, the Legislature's Office of Performance Evaluations scrutinized the \$12 million ISEE. For years, local schools were rife with complaints about the amount of work they were expected to perform feeding copious amounts of data to the State Department of Education - under penalty of losing state dollars if they got it wrong - only to get little value in return.

"Districts reported spending about two weeks of every month preparing for the ISEE upload, with a significant amount of that time preventing and correcting data errors," OPE analysts concluded.

Despite being the last state in the country to set up a longitudinal data system, Idaho failed to learn from mistakes made elsewhere. That's why it relied on its own in-house experts rather than working with teachers and administrators out in the field. It explains why the state swamped local districts with demands for far more information than even the federal government sought.

Then came Monday, when performance evaluators essentially said the state had lost \$61 million - including \$21 million from the J.A. and Kathryn Albertson Foundation and \$40 million from tax-provided dollars - on a failed Schoolnet system.

"Poor management, poor decisions and poor system functionality compounded themselves and prevented the goals for a statewide instructional management system from being realized," OPE

wrote. "The net result is that the project has sunk costs of about \$61 million, and the Department of Education and the Legislature are left with few options to consider when deciding the future of the program."

Among its findings: Contractors responsible for the system knew more about working on a local level than running a statewide network. Software failed under the overwhelming demands. Some districts labored on without money or training.

The common denominator in all this is former state schools Superintendent Tom Luna.

Luna did not act alone, of course. The IEN project was operated through Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter's Department of Administration.

But Luna was known for a style of issuing top-down mandates and operating a hierarchy with no classroom experience. His agency lacked credibility with people actually doing that work.

Instead, Luna built his relationships with the educational technology sector that nourished and funded his political campaigns.

Luna's gone now. He opted not to seek a third term and has since joined an Indianapolis-based nonprofit - Project Lead The Way - as its vice president of policy, advocacy and research.

It's left to Idaho's modicum of checks and balances - legislative auditors and the OPE analysts - to help work out the kinks. But think of all the opportunities Idaho forfeited. Just as Luna was steering millions into technologies that ultimately failed, lawmakers were slicing away at classroom funding to shore up the state budget during the Great Recession.

That's some legacy Luna left

behind. - M.T.