

Op-Ed by State Senator Branden Durst
Ranking Minority Member, Senate Education Committee
Ranking Minority Member, K-12 Educational System Interim Committee

Soon the final pieces will be in place and the puzzle will be complete.

Many Idahoans expressed outrage and concern when Superintendent Tom Luna attempted to ram his ill conceived Students Come First plan down our collective throats. Luckily, Idahoans wisely rejected the Luna Laws and made their voices heard.

Governor Otter responded to the electoral bashing by appointing a (stacked) task force to review options for education reform. Unsurprisingly, the task force refused to look at the most empirically tested approaches to improving education (more early learning opportunities, teacher mentoring, etc.) and decided to continue to follow along the same trail.

Meanwhile, Boise State University, under the auspices of "leading" started the Idaho Leads Project, funded almost entirely by the Albertsons Foundation (more on that in a minute). They appointed Roger Quarles, at that time the superintendent to the Caldwell School District, to run the show. They also hired Jennifer Swindell, the PR flak for the Caldwell School District. Both Mr. Quarles and Ms. Swindell were on record for actively supporting the Luna Laws and Mr. Quarles pro-Luna bent went as far back supporting the failed iSTARS plan (the predecessor to the Luna Laws pushed by Luna in 2007).

The Idaho Leads Project has also become active in pseudo-journalism by creating the propaganda page Idaho Ed News. Lead by Swindell, Idaho Ed News hired two Idaho based journalists, Clark Corbin from the Post Falls Register, and Kevin Richert, the opinion page editor from the Idaho Statesman. Corbin was a much less significant hire than Richert, however. While in charge of the election endorsement process during the 2012 elections Richert personally fought for editorial board support of candidates that supported the Luna Laws as well Luna Laws themselves. His support of the Luna agenda was a key factor in his hiring at Idaho Ed News.

Starting in 2007, Education Networks for America (ENA) and K12 (the for-profit online learning company) began to actively participate in Idaho elections by funding the campaigns of what would become important allies, including Luna. ENA began hiring influential and well connected Republicans such as Gary Lough, a former Idaho GOP party executive director. As was discovered during the referendum election on Luna Laws in 2012, K12 was then connected to another important Idahoan, Joe Scott, better known as the head of the Albertsons Foundation. Scott also had personally funded the pro-Luna Law advocacy group that attempted to convince voters that they were in Idahoans best interest.

And now, Luna has signed a multiyear contract with ENA to provide wireless internet in Idaho high schools, despite not having the legislative authority to do so and ENA clearly not having the best bid. Luna has also appointed Quarles, his longtime ally to become Deputy Superintendent. But the other shoe is yet to drop. Despite recent reports to the contrary, the fact is that Luna has already informed key State Department of Education staff he has no plans to seek re-election. Instead of running Luna will likely be hired by ENA or K12 to attempt to push the same policies to other unsuspecting GOP dominated statehouses and Quarles will no doubt run to replace Luna and continue the duping of Idahoans. The picture is becoming clearer by the day; I just hope we wake up and see it before it is too late.