



IDAHO'S PROMISE

ALL OF IDAHO'S CHILDREN DESERVE AN EXCELLENT EDUCATION

An Open Letter to the Idaho Public Charter School Commission and the Idaho Legislature

The first ever Idaho Public Charter School Commission's [2014 Annual Report](#) is a refreshing document for the public to gain insight into the accountability measures for Idaho's charters under the authorization of the Charter Commission; however, it is also a damning self indictment regarding charters' inclusion of minority populations that requires urgent tangible steps to correct the imbalance.

The report accurately identifies that nonwhite, limited English speaking, special education, and free/reduced lunch minority populations are chronically underrepresented in the bulk of the charters IPCSC authorizes. There is particular concern placed in nonwhite charter student body demographics due to data indicating that *nine in ten* of IPCSC authorized charters are not ethnically reflective of their surrounding communities.

While it is admirable that this data was collected and synthesized in the report, it is now beholden on the IPCSC to make an active inquiry in how IPCSC's charter schools arrived at their current demographics which largely exclude minority student populations, as well as create tangible policy changes in order to take steps in correcting the problem. This requirement is particularly urgent considering that the Latino advocacy organization [Comunidad y Justicia has issued a complaint to the Office of Civil Rights](#) alleging discriminatory practices against minority families which they feel is akin to segregative policies in student enrollment.

Part of that solution requires the Charter Commission to actively study what minority services are required in order for charter schools to be an actual "choice" for minority populations. An excellent starting place is a review of IPCSC's bus transportation and free/reduced lunch policies.

Without exception, the data from the Annual Report indicates a significant disparity between IPCSC charter schools and their surrounding school districts in terms of free/reduced lunch (FRL) student enrollment which indicates that these charters may not be providing programs necessary to make charter schools a choice for minority families.

An example: Coeur D'Alene Charter Academy has a flabbergastingly tiny 1% FRL student population in comparison to the surrounding Coeur D'Alene School District's 42% FRL student population; a staggering 41% disparity. Coeur D'Alene Charter Academy does not offer free/reduced lunch programs, nor does it offer busing; the data unequivocally indicates that when these programs are not offered it impacts low income families ability to "choose" a charter school for their children as they may not be able to provide transportation for their child and/or may rely on the subsidized food program at the school for their child's nutrition.



When free/reduced lunch and bus transportation services are not offered, enrollment in charter schools inherently stops becoming a "choice" for these low income families which results in defacto exclusion of this minority population.

This problem is not specific to Coeur D'Alene Charter Academy; the report demonstrably indicates without exception that charter schools that do not offer FRL and/or bus transportation significantly reduces the FRL population attending the charter school, indicating that these schools stop becoming a "choice" for low income families. Charters under IPCSC's purview that data indicates are excluding low income families by not offering these programs include Sage International, North Idaho Stem Academy, North Star Charter, CDA Charter Academy, and The Academy Public Charter School (Pocatello).

Particularly in Southwest Idaho, there is a strong correlation between free/reduced lunch services and other minority categories (ie English Language Learners); this means that ensuring lunch and bus programs will not only remedy low income households ability to choose charters for their families, but these families will also likely help mitigate other minority categories that are also unreflective of the charter schools' surrounding communities' demographics including ethnicity and English language learners.

Including low income families in charters under IPCSC supervision has a remedy; unfortunately this problem has the potential to be exasperated further instead of fixed.

That is because even in the aftermath of an official [Office of Civil Rights complaint](#) being filed federally that alleges such lack of services is inherently discriminatory--and thus segregative--new charter schools engaged in petitioning IPCSC continue to insist on not offering free/reduced lunch and/or bus transportation services.

Case and point of a current example is Gem Prep: Nampa Charter which recently had its petition denied by the Nampa School District and will be seeking the IPCSC's blessing. [Gem Prep's petition paperwork](#) makes it clear that their facility will offer not offer bus or lunch services despite the fact that the surrounding school district (Nampa) has a tremendously high FRL rate of 61%. This problem is exasperated by Gem Prep's tentative building location on Madison Road which is in an extremely rural location that lacks sidewalk or bike lanes making it unlikely for students to walk or bike to school safely.

In other words, a continued insistence on building "schools of choice" in communities where the lack of basic food and transportation will limit "choice" to a small minority comprised of largely affluent populations.

IPCSC Chairman Reed has indicated a strong desire to ensure that charter schools are an actual choice for minority students and their families. Let us acknowledge that when charter schools fail to offer the most basic of minority services, including bus transportation and meals at schools, that these public schools inherently stop becoming a choice for these families.

Let us rectify this situation by IPCSC refusing to admit any new charter entities that will not offer FRL and bus programs as well as establishing a reasonable timeline for charters under IPCSC's supervision to implement



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these programs in their facilities or face nonrenewal; it is not only the moral decision to take, it also is the correct legal action to take in light of the OCR complaint which has the potential for the US Dept. of Education to shut off the federal fund spigot to Idaho charters if they find that pack of bus and lunch services is evidence of segregative practices.

And if IPCSC continues "business as usual" policies by continuing to admit new charter schools which lack these basic minority services, it then becomes beholden on the Idaho Legislature to put a cap on charter schools to keep this imbalance from becoming even worse than it currently is; better yet, pass clear new laws to promote minority inclusion that include mandating bus and FRL services that are equitable to the traditional public school district it operates inside of for all charter schools in the Gem State to make it clear that minority populations are welcome in *all* of Idaho's public schools.

These are small, tangible, first steps: Continued study of remedies for special education, English language learners, ethnic minorities, and low income families is certainly warranted; however, these are immediate policy changes that have the potential to create enormous impact in Idaho for minority students and their families.

Charter schools are public schools: they belong to all of Idaho's students regardless of income, race, language, or disability. Let's make these public facilities a true choice for all of Idaho's students, not just the ones whose parents can provide transportation and meals for their child to attend a charter school.

Thank you for your valuable time in drawing your utmost attention to this urgent matter. If you have any questions please feel free to reach out via email at LeviBCavener@gmail.com or via phone at (208) 409-3410.

-Levi B Cavener



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