

Microschooling in Idaho: Using Policy to Scale a New Type of Small- School Environment

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Foreword

In this first installment in our series on state-level policy and microschooling, Jocelyn Pickford and Duncan Robb explain Idaho's recent legislative debate over two competing approaches to supporting the creation of small learning communities, known as microschools.

Idaho's strong homeschooling community and its low-enrollment rural districts create political dynamics not seen in many other states. Very small schools are not an innovation in Idaho; they are common across the state and have been for generations. Indeed, policy proposals to expand education options that might succeed elsewhere create complications in Idaho because, among other things, many families have concerns about entangling the government and homeschooling, and many districts would be hit hard by the loss of even a couple of dozen students. This report underscores a key finding across this series: if policy is to help advance microschooling, advocates and policymakers must begin by understanding states' histories and policies related to enrollment, funding, choice, and more.

—*Andy Smarick*

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Introduction

Microschools—schools that are formed by a small group of families bringing their children together to be taught by one or a few dedicated educators—offer more options to families that would otherwise default to a traditional public school. What distinguishes microschools from other nontraditional options is the delegation of instruction to a single person or a very

small number of people serving in the role of educator. In Idaho, which is home to many small school districts, legislators have recently been debating two different models to expand access to this new, innovative educational model: one that would place microschools within the current public school system; and one that would provide funding to them while keeping them outside the system.

While rural parts of Idaho reopened relatively quickly after the onset of Covid-19, school districts in population centers lurched between in-person and remote learning models, leaving many families seeking alternative education options. New legislation could provide microschooling financial resources and boost this innovative model. The passage of Senate Bill 1046 in 2021 supports a version of microschooling that requires an agreement between the local school district and interested families. Whether parents will take advantage of the law remains to be seen.

Idaho and Microschooling

Some have described microschools as the “return to the one-room schoolhouse.” But their proponents see something more modern: a nimbler education environment that can leverage newer, more widely available technology.

For the purposes of this report, we define a microschool as generally 10 families or fewer bringing their children together to be taught by one or a few educators. After agreeing on the curriculum and preferences for instructional strategies, the parents delegate day-to-day decisions (lessons, activities, and content) to the educator(s). One or more of the parents could serve as educators, but the role is not shared by most or all parents involved. This is a key difference from homeschooling (where the parent is the educator) or a homeschooling co-op (where parents of participating students share teaching responsibilities).

Microschools are usually based in one location. Some learning may take place through an online platform, but students spend the lion’s share of their time together physically. The schedule resembles a traditional school day, with students arriving in the morning and leaving in the afternoon.

Unlike some homeschool programs that provide supplemental instruction (that is, in addition to students’ day-to-day school activities), Idaho microschools provide core academic instruction. The parents involved will agree on one or more core curricula that include reading, math, science, and social studies.

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Microschools can operate within the traditional state education system or outside it. As we will discuss, Idaho policymakers have been considering both these models for microschools in the state.

It is important to understand that Idaho already has some very small school districts. In all, about 10 of Idaho’s 115 traditional public school districts hover at or below 100 students, depending on the year.¹ Prairie Elementary and Three Creek Joint Elementary school districts take turns holding the title of Idaho’s smallest traditional school district, with enrollment fluctuating between three and 10 students each. Families in the Pleasant Valley Elementary school district (11 students) or Avery school district (23 students) probably would not think of a one-room schoolhouse microschool as a new innovation. In practice, the only difference between these districts and microschools is how the curricula are chosen. Though small, these are still traditional school districts, so curricular decisions are ultimately left to the school board and district administration, not the parents.

Homeschooling in Idaho's Treasure Valley

Jeff and Lauren Church have homeschooled their two children for several years at their home, west of Boise. For Jeff, who previously served as spokesperson at the Idaho State Department of Education, there is no distinction between when the kids are “in” and “out” of school; learning takes place all day. The family draws from two popular homeschool curricula—The Good and the Beautiful and Story of the World—as well as “lots of trips to the library” and Open Educational Resources. Lauren, who has a degree in English literature, handles the majority of day-to-day instruction. Jeff helps teach his kids math and science concepts through daily tasks such as agriculture and woodworking.

The two children also participate—after paying a small fee—in group lessons at a homeschool co-op once a week, which gives the children a change of pace from the family's regular homeschool rhythms. These group lessons are not actually part of their curriculum, and participating families may use different instructional materials. This is a key difference between a homeschooling co-op and a microschool, where all the parents agree to a curriculum and choose an educator to implement it.

On the topic of microschools, Jeff Church indicated that the name may be new but the practice is not, though, in his view, both homeschooling and microschools fit squarely outside the education system. “When you look at people who have made the conscious decision to be outside of the public system, they are fine to stay outside of it,” he said. “We don't need the resources; we just want flexibility.”

Idaho Has Been “Microschool-Adjacent” for Years

According to several individuals interviewed for this report, few Idahoans would have used the term “microschool” before the Covid-19 pandemic. However, microschool-like efforts have been under way for a long time. This is partly a result of Idaho's seemingly robust homeschooling community (exactly how robust is unclear: parents need not report anything to the Idaho State Department of Education (SDE) when they choose to homeschool, and SDE has no data on the state's homeschool population).

Some traditional school districts provide resources to homeschool families and cooperatives. If homeschooled students participate even part-time in a district's services, the student is included in district attendance counts and the district receives additional state funding. But the relationship is about more than money. District officials are inclined to help any parent, including homeschooling parents, because they are often all members of a small, tight-knit community. As a result, many districts have chosen to work hand-in-glove with homeschool families to create more educational opportunities, especially as students get older.

For example, the Oneida school district in rural southeastern Idaho—in partnership with a third-party provider—created the Idaho Home Learning Academy,² which allows participating students to learn primarily at home using different curricular options while remaining enrolled in the district in order to access supplemental resources and courses. In another approach, two districts in western Idaho collaborated to create the Canyon-Owyhee School Service Agency (COSSA),³ in which homeschooled or out-of-district students can participate for a fee and on an à la carte basis. Students who attend the member district schools can use the services for free.

Where Are Idaho's Microschools?

The recent interest in microschooling in Idaho has largely been driven by parents in urban centers, such as the Treasure Valley, which includes Boise, Meridian (the fourth fastest-growing city in the U.S.),⁴ Nampa, and Caldwell, as well as Bonneville County, which is home to Idaho Falls (see sidebar: “Homeschooling in Idaho’s Treasure Valley”). These areas had a rougher experience with the transitions to and from virtual instruction throughout the pandemic. A Boise mother who decided to pull one of her two children out of public school said, “It felt like no one at the district cared about us. I know they did—but it didn’t feel that way. Parents woke up; we felt empowered and willing to ask for what our children needed. If we didn’t get it, we said, ‘then I can figure this out on my own.’”⁵

In most of Idaho’s rural regions, school reopenings generally went smoothly after the spring 2020 pandemic-related closures. Many operated in person for much, if not all, of the 2020–21 school year. This likely partly explains why these regions have not shown as much interest in adopting a new educational model.

The relative lack of Covid-related disruption is not the only reason that rural areas are not as eager to adopt microschools. In small communities, efforts to create additional schooling opportunities can be divisive. In a district with only a handful of students, a microschool created by a small group of families would represent a significant share of the local student population.

Jason Bransford, CEO of the Gem Prep network of charter schools in Idaho, noted that microschools likely contend with some of the same issues that he has encountered when opening new campuses. With traditional public schools serving as the hubs of their communities, parents who coordinate to pull their children out of the public system in favor of a microschool or charter school may experience frustration or even flat-out anger from their neighbors. So, too, can the educators who choose to work in these alternative models.

Smaller independent schools also face economic challenges. “The more specialized student needs you are serving, the harder it is to serve them when that student population is very small,” Bransford explained. “You can’t take advantage of economies of scale, and gathering resources or raising awareness in the community is more difficult.”⁶

These issues are easier to overcome in a growing community where the existing public schools are already confronting an influx of students with a variety of needs, as is the case in Idaho’s Treasure Valley. But the same cannot be said in a community where the population is holding steady or declining, especially in an already-small district. Given these factors, microschools do not at this time seem particularly well suited for rural Idaho. Michelle Clement Taylor, school choice coordinator at the SDE, stated: “In my experience, this is not a rural thing.”⁷

Idaho's Microschool Potential

In Idaho, microschools have helped normalize a homeschool-like approach among parents who probably would not have considered homeschooling. Even parents who thought of homeschooling as “fringe” have been drawn to microschooling, which offers a combination of homeschooling’s autonomy and flexibility with the trusted educator and social interaction of a traditional school—and doesn’t carry the same stigma.

Many of the people we spoke to pointed out that most parents don't want to be completely in control of their child's education because they feel unqualified or because they work during the day. Kelti Baker, who opened her own microschool during the pandemic (see sidebar: A Look Inside "Mission PODsible"), described how she felt when deciding what to do. "I didn't see myself as a homeschool parent. I didn't feel qualified or have time to teach my own kids. This turned out to be the perfect fit."⁸ Taylor, the SDE school choice coordinator, received many calls from fed-up parents in the spring and fall of 2020.⁹ They were disillusioned with their child's online program, or had lost patience with ever-changing district reopening plans, and were not interested in sending their children back to traditional schools. Those parents are a new interest group in Idaho—not keen on homeschooling but motivated to learn about more personalized education options. Accordingly, more voices are calling on the Idaho legislature to dedicate state funds to support more flexible alternatives. Kestrel West, a public-affairs firm based in Boise, indicated that a poll commissioned by one of its clients showed that 75% of parents were interested in funding for flexible school options.¹⁰

State policymakers introduced two bills during the 2021 legislative session that took different approaches to providing more state funding for a variety of educational activities, including microschools. What became obvious is that the parents new to the microschool scene were at odds with Idaho's existing homeschool community when it came to the extent of the state's involvement in K–12 education—and therefore the advisability of state funding. The former group, on the whole, had been comfortable with the public school system in the past—until the pandemic introduced new difficulties—and therefore had few concerns about accepting state aid. Long-standing homeschool parents, on the other hand, were skeptical about what those resources would mean for reporting, testing requirements, and other regulations that they see as invasive. In their view, a major attraction of homeschooling is the ability to be free of government rules.

This tension aside, it appears that, for Idaho microschooling to grow, state aid will be required. It is difficult for most families to cover the costs of an average Idaho teacher's salary of \$50,000, even if several families share the bill.¹¹ Moreover, educators take a risk by choosing to move into a microschool; teaching outside the public education system means not accruing time in Idaho's public pension system (one of the healthiest in the country).¹² Several sources interviewed pointed out that it is difficult to find space to host a microschool, especially for those with smaller homes and lacking the funds to rent a larger facility. For microschools to serve a broad swath of Idaho's families—not just the most affluent—state resources would be essential.

A Look Inside "Mission PODsible," a Meridian Microschool

Kelti Baker runs a microschool (she calls it a "pod," but "microschool" is used here, for consistency) on her homestead in Meridian. She and a few other parents, frustrated with the West Ada school district's pandemic response, started "Mission PODsible" and constitute the school's leadership, making decisions about curriculum and which other families may participate. Baker runs the school out of a building that was originally used to shelter boats during winter but now looks like a classroom, with student work and motivational posters adorning the walls. Each student has a laptop and headphones to use with the online curriculum that the parent leaders selected for the school.

Collin Hartman, the educator who calls himself a facilitator, is not a certified teacher but holds a master's degree in student development. He serves as an adept classroom teacher who efficiently runs the daily operations.

The school day is 8:30 a.m.–2:30 p.m., with three learning breaks, including lunch. The majority of learning takes place individually on a personal laptop or tablet, so Baker and Hartman are starting to think about other ways to get the children to interact, in addition to the daily read-aloud block and 45 minutes for other activities.

The school's 15 students—ranging from second to fifth grade—reflect the demographics of the area. All but one student is white, and all live nearby. While the school lacks racial diversity, it is abundant in diversity of achievement and learning styles, ranging from behind, at, or well above grade level. The students use the same online curriculum but are responding to it differently. Baker is researching an alternative, project-based curriculum for some students who seem to need something different from the current program. She is also preparing for the years ahead, when students will need more advanced content, and is choosing between several online high school curricula that come with qualified virtual instructors. Baker's microschool administered the Iowa Test of Basic Skills in April 2021. "I want to know how each student here compares nationally," Baker explained. This was very important to her and other parents in the school.

Idaho's Microschool Policy (and Politics) Journey

Idaho's 2021 legislative session featured a policy debate about two options that would enable microschool expansion. One was an outside-the-system approach of education grants and scholarships—state mechanisms that would enable families to access public dollars for non-traditional options, including microschools. The other was an inside-the-system approach. This would give families and a willing teacher the option of establishing their own classroom within a traditional school district and making use of district resources.

It is important to examine these bills in the context of Idaho's education policy landscape. Idaho's existing charter school framework is fairly traditional. The state's charter school law¹³ establishes an accountability-centered approach with substantial guardrails and oversight from the state's Public Charter School Commission (or, in a handful of cases, the district that chose to serve as the charter school's authorizer). In addition to the state's accountability framework under the Every Student Succeeds Act, Idaho's public charter schools are held accountable to their own student achievement goals, as described in their approved charter. While Idaho's charter frameworks are similar to those in other states, some—though not all—charter advocates in Idaho argue that charter schools here are held to an unreasonable standard, compared with traditional school districts, contributing to the perception in some circles that the Idaho legislature is not friendly to more flexible school options.

School district anxiety over additional school options is heightened by Idaho's complicated school funding formula, which uses average daily attendance (ADA). Changes in a district's ADA can affect funding in a way that is difficult to predict because the amount of state funding associated with each student is variable. Schools are sorted into tiers based on ADA, so if a school's ADA is at the low end of a tier, losing even a few students might cause the school to move to the tier below, meaning that the school's per-student allotment and minimum funding level could change. Idaho's funding law has some fail-safes designed to protect schools from a large one-year funding drop, but losing even small numbers of students over a two- or three-year stretch can substantially influence the district's finances.

Clark Corbin, a longtime Idaho statehouse reporter, noted: “Legislators have asked the SDE several times over multiple sessions for a one-page flow chart describing how Idaho’s public school funding calculation works, and it’s just not really possible to do in a way that a layperson can understand.”¹⁴ There was momentum in 2018 for a funding formula rewrite, but it has since fizzled. In the meantime, the prospect of losing students is deeply concerning for district leaders.

The legislature has tried and failed several times to pass bills that would provide more flexible funding. In 2019, House Bill 253, which would have established education savings accounts (ESAs), and 273, which would have created a tax credit for education scholarships, went nowhere.¹⁵ House Bill 590,¹⁶ an education scholarship bill, died in the Senate in 2018. According to Corbin and others, opposition has typically centered on sending public funds to private schools. Lawmakers on both sides of the aisle commonly cite the Idaho State Constitution’s charge to create a system of free public schools. They also cite Section 5 of Article IX,¹⁷ Idaho’s so-called Blaine Amendment, prohibiting state education funds from flowing to religiously affiliated institutions. Despite the U.S. Supreme Court’s *Espinoza v. Montana* ruling that Montana’s education scholarship could not discriminate against private religious institutions,¹⁸ Idaho lawmakers still bring up the state’s Blaine Amendment regularly during debate.

In 2021, House Bill 294¹⁹—the outside-the-system approach to microschoools—was introduced, as was Senate Bill 1046,²⁰ which offered the new, inside-the-system approach.

Representative Wendy Horman, who represents parts of Bonneville County and was the House sponsor of both bills, heard from many constituents who were interested in microschoools. “They wanted to but did not end up starting microschoools because they did not have the resources,” she explained. Horman has been a leader in the quest for additional school options and flexible funding policy during her tenure in the Idaho House of Representatives. As the sponsor of the public school appropriation bills on the House floor for the last several years, she has become an expert on school funding in the state. For her, there is now more urgency to act on education flexibility than ever before. “People have always wanted more choice when it comes to their child’s education, and now there is concern about federal influence in schools among my constituents,” she explained. “The time is now for our state to make it easier for all parents to make more decisions themselves.”²¹

House Bill 294

House Bill 294 was intended to do two things. First, it proposed an expansion of Idaho Governor Brad Little’s Strong Families, Strong Students program,²² initially implemented in 2020 using federal Governor’s Emergency Education Relief (GEER) Fund resources. The bill allowed grant funds from the state to be used for education expenses such as tutoring, textbooks, or private school tuition. The grant funding would be limited to \$750 per student, which, while something, would not cover a meaningful share of a microschoool educator’s salary.

Second, the bill would establish a separate state appropriation for education scholarships amounting to 90% of the state’s average per-pupil funding—or just over \$6,000.²³ These scholarships could be used to pay for microschoool-related expenses, among other things.

During testimony,²⁴ bill sponsors were met with skepticism from all sides, making it hard to elevate the voice of “middle ground” microschoool parents. Baker, the Mission PODSible founder, was among those on hand to testify in favor; however, the homeschool community balked at the idea of state funding because they viewed it as the camel’s nose under the tent for more homeschool regulation by the state. The traditional education community, unsurprisingly, worried that the bill would reduce Idaho’s K–12 general fund and use state education money for nonpublic education. Horman recounted: “I was always guarding the left flank, but now I was guarding the right flank, too. Some were asking me to write homeschooling out of the bill, but I wasn’t

willing to give on that because it didn't make policy sense. It would have been blatantly unfair to leave out homeschooling parents who lacked resources but wanted them for their children. This was never about regulating homeschooling.” She noted that some members of the home-school community need resources, too; about 4,700 low-income families had already applied for the Governor's Strong Families grant by the time House Bill 294 was introduced.²⁵ This would appear to contradict the notion that all homeschool parents would reject state aid.

After passing the House, the bill's Senate sponsor, Senator Lori Den Hartog, sensed hesitation among her colleagues.²⁶ She amended the scholarship provision out of the bill in an effort to satisfy public school advocates who feared that the funding would come out of the public school appropriation. Nevertheless, on April 6, 2021, HB 294 failed²⁷ by two votes on the Senate floor. Though it was close, many Idaho senators on both sides of the aisle remained uncomfortable with the prospect of sending state general fund dollars to private schools.

Senate Bill 1046

Senate Bill 1046 would create the option for “innovation classrooms,” which would provide an avenue for a group of parents to have their children taught—inside the district—by one teacher using a different curriculum. It would, in effect, allow the creation of a microschool inside an existing traditional public school, thereby easing the financial burden on participating families. This arrangement would, however, come with administrative and reporting requirements that some homeschoolers would find objectionable.

As originally conceived, this legislation would have *required*—to the consternation of school district representatives²⁸—a traditional school district to accommodate a group of parents requesting to start an innovation classroom. Participating students would still be enrolled in the district, the teacher would still be employed by the district and receive pension benefits (and therefore need to carry a current teaching certificate), and the classroom would be subject to safety and discrimination laws.

The bill was amended twice on the Senate floor. The first amendment made the establishment of an innovation classroom a matter of district discretion—giving school boards the option to do so if parents requested it, but not mandating any agreement.²⁹ The bill was then amended³⁰ to require innovation classrooms to identify measures of student achievement from among those already listed in Idaho's school funding law, such as Idaho's annual statewide student assessment, formative assessments, or Idaho's reading indicator test.³¹ The purpose was to ensure that students were learning in these newly created environments.

While there was still some resistance from districts after these amendments, it was not as vehement. Idaho already has other laws on the books that give districts the option to expand educational choices without requiring that they do so. Indeed, the term “innovation classrooms” is borrowed from another program known as “innovation schools,”³² which would allow a group of school staff to start a separate school if the district allows it. But the district is not compelled to sign off on any such application. Perhaps as a result, no approved innovation schools exist today in Idaho. Veteran school officials know that once a bill includes a provision giving the district the final say, it is likely safe to turn advocacy attention elsewhere.

Nevertheless, the innovation classroom concept seemed to move the policy conversation beyond the standard school choice disagreements. Quinn Perry, the Idaho School Board Association's policy director, noted that some people realized that innovation classrooms might offer an alternative to charter schools, which take enrollment, and therefore revenue, from traditional districts. This new approach would offer families another option while allowing districts to keep those students enrolled. “Our contention was around forcing districts to reach an agreement without working out curriculum [which school board members adopt] and other educational services,” Perry

explained. Once the bill language was changed to make the agreement optional, some districts and school board members recognized that innovation classrooms could be an option to consider.³³

On May 5, 2021, Governor Little signed Senate Bill 1046 into law, and innovation classrooms became an option for parents on July 1.³⁴

What's Next for Idaho?

The microschool landscape in Idaho is nascent and dynamic. Policy—or lack thereof—will have a significant influence on whether this model can scale, or at least become a stable part of Idaho's educational ecosystem. While some members of the homeschool community will continue to resist a state funding mechanism for microschools, the legislature will almost certainly continue to reconsider this issue. The question is whether innovation classrooms will emerge as a viable method of funding within-system microschools without sacrificing the potential for innovation, or whether funding for outside-the-system models will be needed. Without any funding at all, microschools in Idaho will probably be limited to those like Baker's and unlikely to scale. The availability of funding would help budding microschools address some of their early-stage challenges and, presumably, facilitate the creation of more models, thereby serving more students in Idaho.

The first and most obvious challenge is accessibility. Baker's school is probably about as cost-effective as it gets; parents need not pay for a full teacher's salary and benefits or for physical space. But few parents are lucky enough to find an arrangement as creative or affordable. And even a low-cost microschool isn't truly accessible to everyone. Although just 24% of students in Baker's home district of West Ada are from low-income families,³⁵ that number climbs to 56% in nearby Nampa,³⁶ and almost all students in the neighboring Caldwell school district are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.³⁷

Second, it's difficult to recruit an effective educator for the long term—regardless of certification status—without offering a full salary and benefits. The novelty, and precariousness, of a microschool is a career risk, especially if it means a pay cut. And in Idaho, access to the state pension system is a big deal.

Third, microschools can have a difficult time financing the services required by students with special needs—meaning that these students could be underserved by the microschool community. These services are often expensive and require specialized staff. When parents are making their own microschool arrangements with no government aid, it may be difficult to accommodate students needing additional support.

Fourth, microschools are disadvantaged when it comes to extracurriculars and athletics. Families nationwide—and in Idaho—see sports as an integral part of public schools. This is important enough that the bill drafters of SB 1046 made certain that students in an innovation classroom are still eligible to play for the home district's sports teams.

Private support is always valuable and appreciated. It can help defray many expenses that are related to instructional staff, materials, space, and more (see sidebar: "Philanthropy as a Third"). However, Idaho's relatively small philanthropic community cannot be relied upon alone to scale microschooling.

Philanthropy as a Third Way?

HB 294 and SB 1046 were two policy approaches to supporting microschoools in Idaho. However, philanthropy could provide another path, particularly related to facilities. Baker's microschoool costs parents only about \$180 per month, partly because the space is free. When a microschoool needs to pay a mortgage or lease, the cost passed on to parents can skyrocket.

The charter sector can offer lessons. Securing space has been one of the biggest challenges for Idaho charter schools. Jason Bransford, the charter CEO, and his team attempted to create viable budgets for smaller versions of their schools—as small as 150 students—that could serve rural areas. The question was whether these small charters could eventually generate enough per-pupil revenue from the state to cover the capital costs associated with housing a school. In the end, modeling showed that at 150 students, the school would be unable to afford operational expenses and the cost of an appropriate location.

The comparison is not perfect. A microschoool would need far less space than a 150-student charter school and would not be subject to all the same building regulations. But with a much smaller enrollment and tuition payments less than a charter school's per-pupil allotment, a microschoool would also generate considerably less revenue. So absent state funding and barring a substantial increase in tuition, microschoools will, in some cases, face significant challenges related to facilities. Philanthropic support could help in a number of ways, such as supporting initial startup activities, funding relatively small capital expenses (e.g., desks, computers), or subsidizing monthly rent payments.

An outside-the-system funding approach (e.g., ESAs and scholarships) would certainly give families the resources needed to afford a microschoool and therefore potentially encourage more social entrepreneurs to found microschoools. But the legislature has struggled to move in this direction. Even the policies that it has recently considered would not have dramatically increased access: HB 294's \$750 annual grants would not have sufficed, and while the proposed \$6,000 scholarships were more generous, legislators budgeted enough for only 300 families.

The inside-the-system approach of innovation classrooms is promising. However, there are valid concerns that it may not provide as much flexibility as an outside-the-system approach—and, for some, the financial benefits of staying within the system may not outweigh the loss of autonomy (real or perceived). The table below summarizes the potential benefits of both approaches.

Perceived Benefits of Different Approaches to Microschooling

Outside-the-system microschool	Innovation classroom
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Free from federal and state reporting, administrative, and testing requirements • Does not require agreement from a traditional school district to form • Not subject to school district oversight and, depending on policy details, subject to little or no oversight, aside from participating families • Teacher is not required to be certified, increasing options for the position • Curriculum can include faith-based material if that is what participating families prefer 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participating students can take advantage of public transportation and meals, if included in the innovation classroom agreement • Teacher remains publicly employed with full benefits, without additional investment from participating families • Special services can be articulated in the innovation classroom agreement and delivered by the appropriate staff • Facility is provided by the host district • Students are eligible for the district's athletic programs
Both	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participating families may select a curriculum that is different from that chosen by the local school board • Parents and students get a teacher or teachers they choose 	

It is unclear as to what extent parents will take advantage of this option—and, just as important, to what extent school districts will accommodate them. Horman, the Idaho representative, is somewhat skeptical. “There are other levers parents are likely to pull before trying to make 1046 work because they may not know it exists,” she explained.³⁸ That said, she noted that she and Senator Steven Thayne, another of SB 1046’s Senate sponsors and chair of the Senate Education Committee, are reaching out to parents and curriculum providers in an effort to spur interest in innovation classrooms. John Foster, a lobbyist at Kestrel West, the public-affairs firm that worked on behalf of the bill, agrees that after some outreach and a little hardball, the concept could gain steam. “If a district is going to either lose revenue from 10 students or work with parents to set up a different option, the choice seems obvious,” he said.³⁹

Idaho is leading the way on this inside-the-system reform—and it will be a test case for whether this approach will advance microschooling by leveraging public support without threatening school districts, or will allow the existing system to co-opt and stymie the disruptive innovation of small, autonomous learning environments. Other states should watch developments here closely. Idaho’s experience this year has demonstrated that the interest groups representing traditional public schools, additional school options, and homeschooling stick to their scripts and dig in when now-commonplace outside-the-system funding policy debates arise. Perhaps the innovation classroom approach can dislodge activists from their standard positions and lead to more high-quality options for students.

APPENDIX: BILL REFERENCES

House Bill 215/294

Note: A temporary complication caused the bill sponsor to ask the House of Representatives to return House Bill 215 to committee after it had already been debated in House Education. The bill then resurfaced as House Bill 294. For this reason, the debate over House Bill 215 and 294 can be considered to have been regarding the same legislation.

Bill Text

- Home page: <https://legislature.idaho.gov/sessioninfo/2021/legislation/Ho294>
- Original bill text: <https://legislature.idaho.gov/wp-content/uploads/sessioninfo/2021/legislation/Ho294.pdf>
- Amendment 1: <https://legislature.idaho.gov/wp-content/uploads/sessioninfo/2021/legislation/Ho294A5.pdf>
- Amendment 2: <https://legislature.idaho.gov/wp-content/uploads/sessioninfo/2021/legislation/Ho294A4.pdf>

Testimony and Debate

- House Education Committee testimony and debate (215): https://insession.idaho.gov/11S/2021/House/Committee/Education/210224_hedu_0900AM-Meeting.mp4
- House floor debate: <https://insession.idaho.gov/11S/2021/House/Chambers/HouseChambers03-09-2021.mp4>
- Senate Education Committee testimony and debate: https://insession.idaho.gov/11S/2021/Senate/Committee/Education/210316_sedu_0300PM-Meeting.mp4
- Senate floor amendment debate: <https://insession.idaho.gov/11S/2021/Senate/Chambers/SenateChambers03-18-2021.mp4>
- Senate floor debate: <https://insession.idaho.gov/11S/2021/Senate/Chambers/SenateChambers04-06-2021.mp4>

Senate Bill 1046

Bill Text

- Home page: <https://legislature.idaho.gov/sessioninfo/2021/legislation/S1046>
- Original bill text: <https://legislature.idaho.gov/wp-content/uploads/sessioninfo/2021/legislation/S1046.pdf>

- Amendment 1: <https://legislature.idaho.gov/wp-content/uploads/sessioninfo/2021/legislation/S1046A1.pdf>
- Amendment 2: <https://legislature.idaho.gov/wp-content/uploads/sessioninfo/2021/legislation/S1046E1A1.pdf>
- Final engrossed bill: <https://legislature.idaho.gov/wp-content/uploads/sessioninfo/2021/legislation/S1046E2.pdf>

Testimony and Debate

- Senate Education Committee testimony and debate: https://insession.idaho.gov/11s/2021/Senate/Committee/Education/210210_sedu_0300PM-Meeting.mp4
- Senate floor amendment debate: <https://insession.idaho.gov/11s/2021/Senate/Chambers/SenateChambers03-01-2021.mp4>
- Senate floor debate: <https://insession.idaho.gov/11s/2021/Senate/Chambers/SenateChambers03-05-2021.mp4>
- House Education Committee debate: https://insession.idaho.gov/11s/2021/House/Committee/Education/210311_hedu_0900AM-Meeting.mp4
- House floor debate: <https://insession.idaho.gov/11s/2021/House/Chambers/HouseChambers05-03-2021.mp4>

About the Authors



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Jocelyn Pickford is an education policy and communications specialist who uses qualitative and quantitative research to understand and inform policymaking as a Senior Affiliate with HCM Strategists. As a former teacher and federal and state education department policy expert, and current parent and public-school board member, she focuses on elevating the perspectives of students, families, and educators in conversations about public policy.



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Endnotes

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6. Interview with Jason Bransford, Mar. 31, 2021.
7. Interview with Michelle Clement Taylor, Apr. 6, 2021.
8. Interview with Kelti Baker, Apr. 30, 2021.
9. Interview with Michelle Clement Taylor, Apr. 6, 2021.
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26. Ibid.
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28. See Appendix.
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30. Ibid.
31. Idaho Statutes, §33-1001.
32. Idaho Statutes, §33-5804.
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