

January 2012 StudentsFirst

StudentsFirst™ is a non-profit, tax-exempt political advocacy organization founded by former chancellor of Washington D.C. schools, Michelle Rhee.

Of the StudentsFirst™ policy prescriptions, Idaho has previously passed similar laws in policy areas including:

- States must reduce legal barriers to entry in the teaching profession, including complicated credentialing or certification schemes that rely upon factors that do not clearly correlate with teacher effectiveness.
- State law should not be structured to penalize districts financially for recruiting teachers from alternate certification programs.
- State law should mandate and dedicate resources toward the implementation of a longitudinal data system that tracks individual student outcomes over time.

(NOTE: all bulleted items in this article are direct quotes from StudentsFirst™ policy agenda)

Last year Idaho Governor Otter, Superintendent of Schools Luna, and the Legislature passed education laws in line with StudentsFirst™. Called Students Come First and referred to as the Luna Laws, they include a focus on technology, teacher contracts, and pay-for-performance. Here's how they compare to the Rhee agenda:

Technology

- State law must facilitate digital learning by requiring online content to align with common core standards, allowing certification for online instruction, and modifying or eliminating mandatory "seat time" laws.

Idaho accepted Common Core Standards and, as Idahoans know, the Luna Laws took digital learning to a new unprecedented and unproven height by being the only state in the union mandating online credits for graduation. Idaho children in classrooms today will pilot this theory of educating "more students at a higher level on limited resources." "Higher level" needs defining while an accounting of costs requires a transparency not yet established. The benefits to such a plan are yet unproven while unintended consequences are likely.

Teacher contracts

- State law and district policy should not mandate higher salaries for master's degrees or additional education credits.
- State law should prohibit districts from establishing a salary schedule that guarantees increases based on additional degrees.
- State law should not grant, implicitly or directly, tenure or permanent contracts for PK–12 education professionals.
- State law must require pay structures based primarily on effectiveness. Teacher contracts must allow for individual performance-based pay.

As with the Rhee way of thinking, Idahoans are making some assumptions in going along with this type of policy. First, lawmakers are assuming that the public doesn't value education or experience, but, over and over again you see job openings in other fields requiring degrees and

offering salaries DOE, depending on experience. Next, we are assuming that “effectiveness” has been clearly defined and is a well-known, consistent standard built into training of teachers and understood by the administrators and parents that will be judging the “effectiveness” of educators and principals.

Pay-for-performance

- Evaluation tools should measure at least half of a teacher’s performance based on student achievement, using a value added growth model.
- To avoid all teachers being ranked as effective without meaningful assessment, evaluations must anchor effectiveness around a year’s worth of growth.
- State law should give districts the autonomy to develop teacher evaluation systems apart from the collective bargaining process. Evaluations should be a matter of district policy.

Merit pay is nothing new and for public education, it has been discussed and evaluated for at least 40 years. At this time, you can find research supporting both sides of the issue. But I think we might want to consider what seems a logical finding by the Brookings Brown Center Task Group on Teacher Quality (executive summary 4/26/11) that states “because of the immaturity of the knowledge base on the design of teacher evaluation systems and the local politics of school management, we are likely to see considerable variability among school districts in how they go about evaluating teachers.” So in the end, we will not have “quality assurance” but will most assuredly have more testing for “growth.”

There is much more to the StudentsFirst™ agenda and these policies are being seen as a roadmap. What if they have us following the wrong thinking?

Idaho is educationally unique. Unlike many other states whose largest populations are concentrated around urban “dropout factories,” some of our more affluent cities not only have the highest population but also have some of our highest performing schools. They statistically carry our state educationally and are least likely to need the trio of Luna Laws to sustain their public education system.

Like all people, the prism through which we see problems and solutions is our experiences. Michelle Rhee has brought her experience with a poorly-performing urban district where she used a union-busting, teacher-firing, sweep the house clean “adult” approach to education reform to Idaho through what is now Luna’s political agenda. In turn, Tom Luna is now an educational adviser to presidential candidate Mitt Romney. This circle of influence could engulf us all.

Rhee has a B.A. in government from Cornell and a Master’s in public policy from Harvard with her teaching certificate awarded without traditional teacher training. She has close ties to multi-billionaire Eli Broad, of SunAmerica (now part of AIG), who has contributed heavily to Teach for America (non-traditional training) and trains “school leaders,” through the Broad Foundation, to take over “underperforming” districts. She supports the Obama school “turnaround models” that have been severely criticized for being unproven.

Rhee sees technology as an equalizer yet that is not proven. She talks about teaching as a professional career but refers to it as a craft. She stresses the importance of the learning

environment for students but ignores what happens to the culture in classrooms when test scores are the goal, or, when the Obama “turnaround models” like firing half the staff are applied.

Rhee offers “promising examples” at a time when we should act with certainty. These policies are based on programs that have been “piloted.” Should we be using piloted or proven educational methods? Which puts students first and which uses them according to the definition of “pilot,” as a trial unit for experimentation?

StudentsFirst™ believes that “because excellent teachers are the backbone of public education, they must be recognized as professionals with whom we entrust the awesome responsibility of developing our nation’s future.” But talking about “treating” teachers like professionals is different from actually taking the policy steps to develop the profession. Statements of support for strengthening and improving the profession were not offered as part of this political policy agenda; nor are they for the Luna Laws.

Rhee asserts that professionals need incentives to keep improving and that “strong evaluation systems contribute to professions.” As a professional myself, I don’t find that to be true. What she doesn’t understand is that properly selected and trained professionals have an internal incentive to improve; its pride in work well done with pay deserving of their profession. Professionalism itself encourages continuous improvement. That’s why countries that educate and respect teachers get results.

False statements meant to justify the StudentsFirst™ policy agenda permeate the document and the media. Adult fights always enter the political arena. We all know how politics “works”; political agendas don’t put students first.

While Indiana’s legislature was passing “Putting Students First,” “Students Come First” was debuting here in Idaho. By mid-June of last year, Rhee was declaring “victories” in four states with five others readying to fall in that column. Now, there are 13 listed but Idaho isn’t in the “win” column, yet, because our people fought back and have the laws on the 2012 ballot as referendums for a direct vote by the people.

Yes, students should come first in education policy. But, no, not with Students Come First, the Luna Laws or StudentsFirst™, the Rhee political policy agenda. Don’t be fooled by words. These policies are not proven to be what is best for Idaho students. With so many good, time-proven, effective and efficient ways to improve the schools and classrooms that need improving, we really don’t have the luxury of gambling on the unproven.

What is happening in Idaho should serve as a red flag for the nation. The use of America’s children as political pawns must end. This story unfolding is an American story of the fight for what is fair and just. The warning flare has been fired.