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Idaho Leads: Applying Learning In and Out of the Classroom to Systems Reform
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Part 4

Reports From the Field:

Innovation in Practice

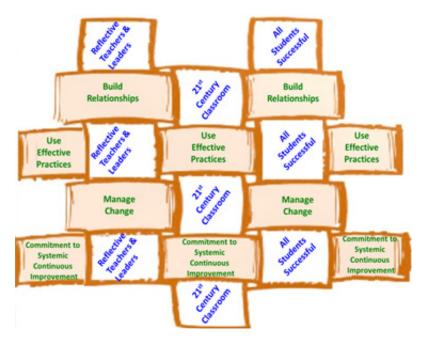# Idaho Leads: Applying Learning In and Out of the Classroom to Systems Reform
Lisa Kinnaman

During the 2011 legislative session, Idaho passed an unprecedented education reform package, Students Come First, which included a mandate for increased technology in schools, limited collective bargaining, and increased accountability through pay-for-performance. The legislation was bold and fomented divisiveness between lawmakers and practitioners. It also created a sense of urgency and uncertainty among education stakeholders statewide as to how they would quickly implement the new requirements. Thus was born the grant-funded Idaho Leads project with a vision to help build leadership capacity in districts across the state—many of which are rural, remote, and lack the capacity to implement change, much less institute such sweeping reforms on their own. This effort would require something vastly different from the typical "drive-by" professional development. Consequently, the Idaho Leads project was designed to deeply engage a wide variety of education stakeholders over a significant period of time in regional networks and in-district support. Ultimately, the Students Come First legislation was overturned in a referendum vote in the fall of 2012. Despite this undoing of the mandate for change, systemwide reform had been sparked across the state, and Idaho Leads was there to help.

The Idaho Leads project was developed in partnership between the Boise State University Center for School Improvement & Policy Studies and the J. A. and Kathryn Albertson Foundation, which provided the center with a $3.85 million dollar grant to start the project in January 2012 and recently refunded it for $2.7 million to continue work through the 2013–2014 school year.

The goal of the Idaho Leads project is to provide essential technical assistance and professional development to Idaho administrators, teachers, and community members to build the needed leadership capacity to ensure the success of all Idaho students in the 21st century. This capacity building cannot be accomplished by working with one school at a time, but rather by addressing the entire "mega system," including the state, regional, and local communities, districts, and schools (Redding, 2006). This may sound like a flashy goal, but the design is strong, and early efforts have produced impressive forward movement throughout the state.

Applying the concept of "learning in and out of the classroom" to this systems reform effort, the Idaho Leads project pursues its goal by facilitating professional development in regional networks and by putting boots on the ground in districts across Idaho between professional development sessions. Just as students must learn in and out of the classroom, education stakeholders must have opportunities to learn in and out of the traditional professional development setting. Thus, a team was assembled to serve as the Idaho Leads project staff, including faculty from the Boise State University College of Education, teachers pulled fresh from the classroom to serve as instruction and technology specialists, communications specialists, recently retired superintendents and principals, and support staff. They develop and deliver content for regional networks—networks currently representing 43 of the state's 115 districts, plus six charter schools—cultivate district teams engaged in local work, and work intensively with identified "studio districts" (currently, seven districts).

Figure 1: The Weave

The backbone and guide for content development is based on what has been called "the Weave" (see Figure 1). The Weave is a framework for building high levels of leadership capacity and system improvement. The key strands of the Weave are represented horizontally: building relationships, using effective practices, managing change, and committing to continuous improvement. These horizontal strands form a foundation on which school leaders can address the ever-changing challenges of education. The vertical strands represent selected characteristics of high-functioning systems in which teachers and leaders continuously seek ways to improve. In Idaho, the first current vertical strand is "reflective teachers and leaders," which reflects Idaho Lead's efforts to implement Danielson's (2007) framework as a statewide instructional and evaluation model, and a response to pay-for-performance issues. The second vertical strand, "21st-century classrooms," includes efforts to combine both the Common Core State Standards and effective pedagogy with new technologies. The third strand, "all students successful," aims at high levels of learning for each individual as we seek to improve student achievement results that frequently rank Idaho near the bottom of the pack (Education Week, 2013). Table 1 presents the research base underlying each Weave component.

Table 1: Idaho Leads Research Base

Weave Component	Research Base
Building Relationships	The Arbinger Institute, 2008; Fullan, 2010; Sanborn, 2004; Zander & Zander, 2000
Using Effective Practices	Brookhart, 2010; Dean, Hubbell, Pitler, & Stone, 2012; Marzano, 2003, 2007; Parrett & Budge, 2012; Schmoker, 2006; Walberg, 2007
Managing Change	Fullan, 2010; Heath & Heath, 2010; Hiatt & Creasey, 2003; Mauer, 2010; Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000
Commitment to System Continuous Improvement	Fullan, 2011; Joyce & Showers, 2002; Supovitz, 2006; Walberg, 2007
Reflective Teachers and Leaders	Danielson, 2007; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005; Spillane, 2009
21st Century Classrooms	Fullan, 2013; Kendall, 2011; The National Research Council, 2000
All Students Successful	Chenoweth, 2008, 2009; Hattie, 2009; Parrett & Budge, 2012

Although these are the current vertical strands in Idaho, they will change over time. In other educational systems with different areas of focus, different strands would be substituted. If leadership capacity is built across a system to operate within this framework, stakeholders will be ready to tackle each new

opportunity and challenge. When the horizontal and vertical strands are woven together in practice, district leaders have a framework for implementing change within their systems.

The design for delivery of Idaho Leads professional development and technical assistance is modeled on the seven categories of standards for professional development defined by Learning Forward (formerly the National Staff Development Council): learning communities, leadership, resources, data, learning designs, implementation, and outcomes (Learning Forward, 2011). This approach provides a solid framework for creating and delivering meaningful support to Idaho education stakeholders.

Support and Resources for All

The Idaho Leads project applies a differentiated approach to technical assistance and professional development. At the most basic level, a high-quality, user-friendly website has been established and is updated daily with implementation and support resources and stories of success, following a "drip irrigation philosophy," by which information is continually provided in manageable chunks.[1]

Additionally, the Idaho Leads project actively uses a variety of multimedia tools to disseminate information and communicate with educators statewide. Facebook, Twitter, blogging, Edmodo, and YouTube[2] are just a few of the dissemination methods used. Live podcasts and webcasts are also provided, including an interview with Sal Khan, recently featured on *60 Minutes* for his ground-breaking work with the Khan Academy.

Idaho Leads staff are continually developing resources and tools—including research, examples of best practice, and sample templates—to assist educators statewide in implementing sound educational reform practices. These resources and tools are posted on the Idaho Leads website, disseminated during Idaho Leads events, and at times delivered during an onsite visit to work directly with a particular district or group of districts. All resources are provided in print-friendly formats and are designed for easy modification and use at the local level. In alignment with the project goal of building leadership capacity at the local level, it is intended that these resources will jump-start districts engaged in continuous improvement, may be adapted by local personnel according to their needs, and freely replicated in the future.

Finally, to facilitate the sharing of accurate and timely information, an Idaho Leads team member ("real person, real help") is always available to answer frequently asked questions and help broker responses to more challenging information requests.

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[1]See https://education.boisestate.edu/idaholeads/

[2]http://www.youtube.com/idaholeadsproject

Regional Networks for the Willing

A key tenant of Idaho Leads is participation of district teams in regional networks. The goal of the regional network meetings is to provide participants with timely and useful resources to support the implementation of sound reform practices and also to offer a continuing forum for positive discussion and collaboration. With this goal in mind, there was much discussion regarding the best model for delivery. Idaho is a geographically diverse state, making it critical to bring the support to various regions of the state and to facilitate the development of regionally based learning communities. There has long been a perception that in order to get assistance or engage in professional learning, educators from around the state must always travel to Boise. Yet the context and needs of districts across the state often differ from those of the districts in the state's capitol city.

For the purposes of this project, three regional networks—north, southwest, and southeast—were established. Within each regional network, participating districts identified teams of 10 members to represent the district and participate in regional network meetings and activities. The members of each district team were required to represent, at a minimum, six roles: superintendent, principal, board member, teacher, parent, and student. The four remaining team positions could include additional teachers and students, community members, or district office staff, such as business managers or technology coordinators.

Participation in a regional network and accompanying supports were made available to all districts and charters in Idaho. Forty-nine districts and charter schools elected to participate in the project. One district team even included a mayor! The full Idaho Leads community is nearly 500 strong. A breakdown of participants by role is presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Idaho Leads Participants

Participant's Local Role	North	Southeast	Southwest	Statewide
Board Member	11	28	22	**61**
Central Office Staff	23	33	33	**89**
Parent or Community Member	5	11	10	**26**
Principal	26	32	27	**85**
Student	14	25	23	**62**
Superintendent	13	24	21	**58**
Teacher	19	57	31	**107**
TOTAL	111	210	167	**488**

In total, these districts' and charters' supporting teams represent approximately 138,000, or roughly 50%, of Idaho's students and over 20,300, or 47%, of

its administrators and teachers. A critical mass embracing innovation and continuous improvement is on the rise in Idaho.

Regional network meetings were held in the three regions in February, April, and November of 2012, for a total of nine regional network meetings. Each regional network meeting was carefully designed and delivered by the Idaho Leads staff and external consultants selected for their expertise in areas of focus, including Michael Fullan, one of the world's leading experts in education reform; his associate Joanne Quinn; and Joe Morelock, innovative technology director from the Canby School District in Oregon. A combination of presented content using cutting-edge professional development techniques, work time for district teams, and breakout sessions for job-alike groups was provided at each network meeting. This has provided a well-balanced approach to scaling reform and providing much-needed opportunities for team building and networking both within and among districts.

In their job-alike groups, students, teachers, principals, district office staff, parents, and community members were able to meet with others representing their same role and dig deep into topics such as: teaching and learning, the common core, educational technology, and change management. All content was designed to meet the current needs of Idaho districts and to achieve the project goal of building leadership capacity in districts to manage change in a continuous improvement cycle through the building of relationships and use of effective practices. Another round of regional network meetings are slated for delivery through the end of the 2013–2014 school year.[3]

Each regional network meeting was followed by a variety of between-meeting supports and onsite work with participating districts. Some districts were provided with technology audits, a process developed in response to a request from the field. Others were provided with support in developing data profiles and guided deep analyses of student learning gaps. Onsite, between-meeting work was tailored to each district. In addition to the development of regional networks and ongoing technical assistance to all stakeholders, the Idaho Leads project is working to foster reciprocal, working partnerships with the legislature, associations, and organizations connected to education and the future workforce in Idaho.

Onsite Adventures

The Idaho Leads team believes that the conversation about education in Idaho—too often focusing on deficiencies—needs to shift its focus to the "bright spots" (Heath & Heath, 2010). Idaho educators have a responsibility to advocate for their profession and to tell positive stories of educational reform and successes happening across the state. To help redirect the conversation, the

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[3]A video overview of an Idaho Leads network meeting can be accessed at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sgh2HrmC_Yw&list=PL74653402632CD6CA&index=9

Idaho Leads team visited all 49 districts and charter schools participating in the project. A protocol was used during the onsite visits to gather evidence and data, resulting in numerous articles published in local newspapers, in education publications, and in "bright spot" stories posted on the Idaho Leads website.[4] In addition to gathering data about observed "bright spots," the Idaho Leads team offered technical assistance during these visits, deepening relationships with district leaders, which in turn frequently facilitated access to working directly with teachers in the classroom and enabled the team to ask questions and provide tailored support to individual districts.

Visiting communities across the state and directly observing reform efforts in schools has been a powerful component of Idaho Leads. The onsite visits and resulting documentation have not only raised public appreciation of the work of creative and innovative educators, but have also served to disseminate a knowledge of emerging best practices and efforts to scale up many of these innovations.

Studio Districts

Of the 49 districts participating in the regional networks, seven districts were identified through a rigorous set of selection criteria to participate as "studio districts" that could function in a creative space somewhat like an artists' studio. In a time of numerous top-down mandates, districts were interested in entering a creative space focused on innovation from within. The intent behind the studio districts was to provide an opportunity for a smaller group of districts—representing all regions of the state, identified as ready to benefit, and prepared to engage in substantial innovation—to extend their learning from regional network meetings in this smaller learning community setting.

In addition to participating in the regional network meetings, the studio districts convened into a single learning community, each district represented by five members from its larger Idaho Leads team, including the superintendent, a board member, a principal, a teacher, and a fifth member selected at the group's discretion. These teams were provided with additional content and learning—including direct collaboration with Michael Fullan—to extend their implementation efforts beyond those planned in regional network meetings.

Studio districts have also experienced intensive support through the services of the Idaho Leads staff, who are equipped to provide onsite tailored support to help studio districts innovate, continuously improve, and meet their established goals for positively impacting the "instructional core" (City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009). For example, Idaho Leads staff conducted a data analysis of 2012 Idaho Standards Achievement Test results for all seven studio districts' Grades 5, 8, and 10. The achievement of each measurable demographic group was

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[4]https://education.boisestate.edu/idaholeads/

compared to the whole group to ascertain success of typically underperforming groups. This data was presented to the seven superintendents, each of whom shared this information with his or her leadership team and staff.

Ultimately, Idaho Leads envisions that studio districts will not only benefit from their own learning experience and support in the project, but that they will also then share lessons learned and best practices with other districts across the state. Just like good art is eventually put on display for others to see, so will the best practices of the studio districts be showcased.

Showcasing Innovation

As planned in the original project design, the Idaho Leads community assembled at the conclusion of a year of working together to celebrate accomplishments and share best practices. The day-long convening of the 500-plus Idaho Leads community included general sessions, breakout sessions with district participants discussing their innovations and bright spots, and time devoted to district teams planning their next steps.

> *"The Idaho Leads project provides a unique and valuable opportunity for our district community to sharpen leadership skills and find the innovative ways to embrace change."*
> Charles Shackett, Bonneville School District Superintendent

In order to spread the word about innovative bright spots in Idaho education, an evening celebration in Boise also included several hundred legislators, community leaders, and other stakeholders from across the state. A significant component of this evening celebration highlighted and honored the studio districts and their extra work throughout the year. The Idaho Leads staff presented seven 3-minute videos of each studio district's accomplishments as assessed by interviewed stakeholders and observations during additional onsite visits. The videos were viewed one by one, after which each studio district team was recognized on stage.[5]

Voices from the Field

The initial feedback on the Idaho Leads project from participants and other observers has been strongly positive. Charles Shackett, Bonneville School District superintendent, reported, "The Idaho Leads project provides a unique and valuable opportunity for our district community to sharpen leadership skills and find innovative ways to embrace change." Jennifer Branz, a parent of a child in the Wallace School District, said, "The Idaho Leads project is critical for schools in

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[5] The evening celebration and studio district highlight videos can be viewed at http://www.youtube.com/idaholeadsproject

Idaho to make the technological advancements necessary for a 21st-century education." Kent Jackson, the technology director for the Minidoka School District, gave high marks to a regional network meeting, stating, "We went from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. and not one minute was wasted and not one person was anxious to get it over with and go home. It was that good."

Participating District Vignettes

While these quotations testify to positive participants' experiences, the following vignettes provide a brief snapshot into the improvement journey a few districts have had in the Idaho Leads community and actual changes in practice that have resulted from their learning and work.

Boundary County School District

Boundary County School District is a small, rural district located in northern Idaho. The district serves over 1,600 students at five locations, including a high school, middle school, and three elementary schools. Fifty-six percent of Boundary County's students are eligible to receive free or reduced-price lunches.

When Boundary County School District administrators examined their technology capabilities as part of the Idaho Leads project, they came to an uncomfortable realization. As curriculum director Jan Bayer put it, "We needed HELP!" As a result, Boundary personnel requested a technology audit to help them better assess their district's capa-

> *"The focus shifted from devices to how technology will improve student achievement.*
>
> Jan Bayer, Curriculum Director

bilities. Bayer says, "We needed to know what was possible from an infrastructure, policy, and people perspective." Idaho Leads staff partnered with an external expert, created a technology audit protocol, conducted the requested audit, and provided the district with a report that included bright spots, challenges, and quick wins.

"We focused on the quick wins," Bayer says. "The focus shifted from devices to how technology will improve student achievement. We are still working and learning, but most importantly, we are shifting!"

Technology use in Boundary County now looks dramatically different. All of the schools will soon have robust wireless networks, and all have increased their bandwidth by 30%. Teachers have taken the lead in integrating technology into their practices by conducting professional development sessions on technology tools like Prezi, Wordle, Glogster, and Xtranormal. A high school biology teacher is piloting a one-to-one iPad program in her classes, and soon the district will be offering a class for teachers called "Technology as a Resource for Learning," which will focus on district policies, technology as a resource to increase student achievement, and 21st-century skills. Boundary County has made a significant

shift in its thinking about educational technology and taken action so as to provide all students in the district success in the 21st century.

Castleford School District

Located in southern rural Idaho, the Castleford School District serves about

> *Students can now see the places they learn about.*

300 students at three schools located in one building, 63% eligible to receive free or reduced-price lunch. After engaging in deep discussion about technology and a new era of teaching and learning in the Idaho Leads project, Castleford staff decided to take action towards better preparing students for life in the 21st century. The Castleford Idaho Leads team loaded up a big white school bus and took a field trip to Canby, Oregon, where they were provided with an in-district opportunity to observe technology integrated with effective pedagogy as guided by Joe Morelock, special consultant to the Idaho Leads project. Canby has been engaged in educational technology reform for a number of years, and its demonstration schools and classrooms provide an observable, live example of new tools and pedagogy in action. The Castleford team returned determined to implement such practices in their own district. Local donations from a community club started a flurry of fundraising; now every student in Grades 9 through 12 has an iPad, and elementary classrooms are using iPads, iPad minis, and iPods. The districtwide science textbook is electronic, and next year Castleford is looking to shift language arts to digital texts as well.

Superintendent Andy Wiseman reports that teachers are enthusiastic about the benefits of increased student engagement and collaborative learning that have accompanied the increased use of technology in the district. Teacher Darrell Edson finds the advent of technology nothing less than revolutionary for both students and faculty:

> Students can now see the places they learn about. They can zoom in on the Mediterranean and identify some of the city-states of the Fertile Crescent. They have visited Egypt to view the Great Pyramid of Giza and can trace the trade route of the ancient Minoan culture all the way to Norway. Lessons like these give the students a feel for where world events take place and how those places differ from their experience. These fantastic changes force me to evaluate my strategies constantly. Our classes are now concentrating on higher-level thinking skills as well as skills of creativity, collaboration, and adaptability. I attribute this to having and using iPads, applications, and web-based resources in our classes.

Castleford's data further validates the district's willingness to invest in innovative practices. The district has eliminated the achievement gap and now places

a remarkable number of its students in postsecondary programs. Its leadership has provided students with opportunities never before available in rural Idaho.

Garden Valley School District

Garden Valley School District is a rural district located in west central Idaho, serving approximately 240 students at four locations, 58% eligible to receive free or reduced-price lunches. Since 2008, Garden Valley has met its AYP targets and has consistently achieved a graduation rate of over 91%. While Garden Valley's students have historically performed well on achievement measures, the district has struggled with offering a robust set of course offerings due to its rural location and small student population.

To meet these challenges, the Garden Valley School District is breaking down the walls of a traditional educational offering—literally. Superintendent Randy Schrader created the Garden Valley Digital Learning Academy so students are no longer restricted to what their handful of rural teachers are certified to teach. Students are now able to take Mandarin Chinese, World Religions, and European History, courses that were not previously available. Not only have new course offerings been provided, students now experience a greater level of flexibility in when they take courses, rather than being trapped by a traditional schedule. About 15 students per period are learning flexibly online, including six middle school students who are taking high school classes and a 12-year-old enrolled in a freshman-level class that meets his academic needs while still participating in a class of peers matching his social needs.

Because of technology, the learning opportunities are now limitless. Plus, students can drive their own education. They can take any class they want from educators all over the world at the level of their skills. Students are tapping into lessons from the Khan Academy and enrolling in classes taught by highly qualified educators within the state of Idaho and without. While the Garden Valley Digital Learning Academy provides students with any class they want, it also keeps them enrolled in the district under the supervision and guidance of the Garden Valley teaching staff. Even though students are learning online, they still have access to direct instruction, rich discussion, and support from certified teachers with whom they have built a relationship within the context of the more traditional classroom. Schrader said, "We didn't have any other choice here but to become experts in technology; to know what's out there and anticipate what's next. We want to be a high-tech high school while keeping the standards tight." In other efforts to be a high-tech district, Garden Valley is nearly paperless with most districtwide communication transmitted by e-mail or e-text, and all secondary teachers are certified to instruct dual-credit classes.

Twin Falls School District

Located in southeast Idaho, Twin Falls School District is the eighth largest district in the state, serving nearly 8,000 students at 13 locations, including

seven elementary schools, two middle schools, two high schools, one alternative middle school, and one alternative high school. Sixty-two percent of the student population is eligible for free or reduced-price lunches.

In conjunction with their participation in the Idaho Leads project, teachers in Twin Falls School District are participating in a groundbreaking professional development pilot program facilitated by representatives from the educational social media site Edmodo. Edmodo is a free, web-based platform which allows teachers to interact with students in a safe, social media environment and to connect with educators all over the world. Some call it the education version of Facebook, with stellar safety features built into the system. As a result of this project, Twin Falls has seen significant growth in a number of areas: More staff are now delivering high-quality, technology-enriched learning experiences, and they have increased in- and out-of-school engagement for teachers and students.

Participating teacher Ron Withers assessed the use of this technology, "Edmodo is not designed to take the place of effective teaching, but rather is a valuable tool to enhance and supplement learning. It can be used both in and out of the classroom to help student learning." Edmodo additionally introduces teachers to a global community of educators and provides them with opportunities to share ideas for better student engagement and discuss new programs and materials.

Looking Ahead

As the Idaho Leads project moves into the next phase, its focus will narrow to intensive work on the implementation of the Common Core State Standards and new student achievement measures, while remaining committed to the key tenants of building relationships, using effective practices, managing change, and committing to systemic continuous improvement. Participation will be offered both to the original group and to additional districts that may be interested in joining the learning network.

Throughout the duration of the project, the Idaho Leads team will continue to research best practices in educational reform and engage in substantial data collection and evaluative analysis. A variety of data points, both quantitative and qualitative, are being collected on a regular basis in order to provide formative and summative evaluation measures. This data will guide ongoing project design and implementation. Based on this research, the team will continually develop supports for educators across the state to build capacity to lead and deliver an education system that prepares all Idaho students for success in the 21st century.

Regional networks are established, and the culture is set for a positive and rigorous systems approach to professional development in and out of the school setting. Bright spots are abundant in the state of Idaho, and there is a buzz of energy and innovation as educators statewide engage in collaborative continuous improvement.

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