



Education Excellence Idaho

Improving Life Through Education Choice

EXHIBIT 3
DATE 3/28/1
INB 397

July 2004

Issue Point

New Zealand – A Model for Improving Idaho’s Public Education System

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Faced with financial and academic achievement problems, New Zealand made three simple reforms that dramatically reversed the productivity of their public education system.

* Idaho and New Zealand had two things in common; shepherding and poorly performing public education systems. But things have recently changed. Idaho has lost most of its sheep and New Zealand has completely revamped its public education system. New Zealand students were scoring about 15 percent below average on international tests. Today, they score 15 percent above average. How did this happen?

The New Zealand education system was failing about 30 percent of its children. Idaho’s ISAT is indicating about the same failure rate here in the Gem State. Like Idaho, New Zealand’s cost per student had doubled in 20 years with no improvement in achievement. New Zealanders came to realize bureaucratic wolves were fleecing them in a government monopoly system that lacked the incentives to improve. The Land of Lambs implement three simple yet profound changes:

First they eliminated all of the Boards of Education in the country. Every single school came under the control of a board of trustees elected by the parents of the children at that school, and by nobody else. Talk about local control!

Second, they funded schools based on the number of students that went to them, with no strings attached and no Byzantine formulas.

Third, and most importantly, they told the parents that they had an absolute right to choose where their children would go to school. New Zealanders realized it was absolutely obnoxious that anybody would tell parents that they must send their children to a bad school.

Maurice P. McTigue, who led the reform effort in the New Zealand Parliament, said this right to choose has the greatest effect on the quality of education.

The country’s 4,500 schools were converted to this new system all on the same day.

They also made it possible for privately owned schools to be funded in exactly the same way as publicly owned schools, giving parents the ability to spend their education dollars at the school best-suited to their children’s needs.

Everybody predicted that there would be a major exodus of students from the public to the private schools, because the private schools showed an academic advantage of 14 to 15 percent. It didn’t happen. In 24 months the public schools caught up with the private schools. Why? Because teachers realized that if they lost their students, they would lose their funding; and if they lost their funding, they would lose their jobs.

Eighty-five percent of students went to public schools at the beginning of this process. That fell to only about 84 percent over the first year or so of the reforms. But three years later, 87 percent of the students were going to public schools. Incentives truly matter. New Zealand learned that competition drives quality to the highest common denominator, while monopolies drive it to the lowest.

New Zealand bureaucrats and politicians can no longer pull the wool over the eyes of parents and taxpayers. If Idaho wants to improve our public education system, we should take a lesson from the Kiwi country.

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2004.8