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COMMENTARY

Commentary: Idaho could learn from another rural state: School vouchers are not conservative government

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The debate over school vouchers this legislative session in Idaho very well could be “the most important debate we have had since statehood,” predicts Rod Gramer, executive director of Idaho Business for Education.

So what’s the experience been of other states that have already approved school vouchers, such as Indiana?

Not great, according to Chris Lagoni, executive director of the Indiana Small and Rural Schools Association, who detailed his state’s history with school vouchers during a legislative preview Monday hosted by Idaho Business for Education.

The bottom line: School vouchers and education savings accounts do not check the boxes for fiscally conservative government, according to Lagoni. His presentation was, “A Conservative Fiscal View on Why Vouchers Don’t Serve the Interests of Rural America.”

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Indiana is similar to Idaho in many ways. Like Idaho, Indiana took school budgets off local property taxes and raised the sales tax by one cent to pay for it, just like Idaho did in 2006. And just like Idaho, Indiana saw a precipitous drop in per pupil education funding through the recession. And just like Idaho, Indiana has seen a growth in supplemental levies, paid by property taxes to bolster public schools.

Indiana had a double whammy, though. Its legislators expanded school vouchers in 2011.

Lagoni ticked off the five markers for conservative government: fiscally responsible, smaller government, less taxation, transparency and accountability.

In each category, Indiana's school voucher program fell short.

Lagoni, who is also an assistant professor at Indiana Wesleyan University, found that the state is spending more on education, yet per pupil funding for public education dropped as much as 10% following the Great Recession and hasn't fully recovered.

Interesting to note, too, for those advocating for vouchers in Idaho, Indiana's per pupil spending on education is \$12,800. Idaho has the lowest per-pupil spending in the country, at \$8,376, according to the most recent National Education Association report.

Lagoni reported that the number of students enrolled in private schools not using the state's voucher system went down, while the number of students enrolled in private schools using the state's voucher system went up, suggesting that most vouchers simply went to students already enrolled, which has been a big concern about voucher programs.

Further, of the 44,376 students enrolled in private schools and using vouchers, only 421 of those students had moved from a failing public school, putting a big hole in the argument that vouchers are there to "save" children from terrible schools.

While Indiana's voucher program started modestly, targeting low-income families, the program has expanded, now serving families with household incomes of as high as 300% of the federal poverty level.

A look at the numbers also showed that a vast majority of the Indiana students using vouchers were in metropolitan areas, not rural areas, and were mostly white, not minority students.

Indiana's been at the voucher game for more than a decade, and Lagoni cited a number of studies showing a lack of academic performance and an inability to help low-income students.

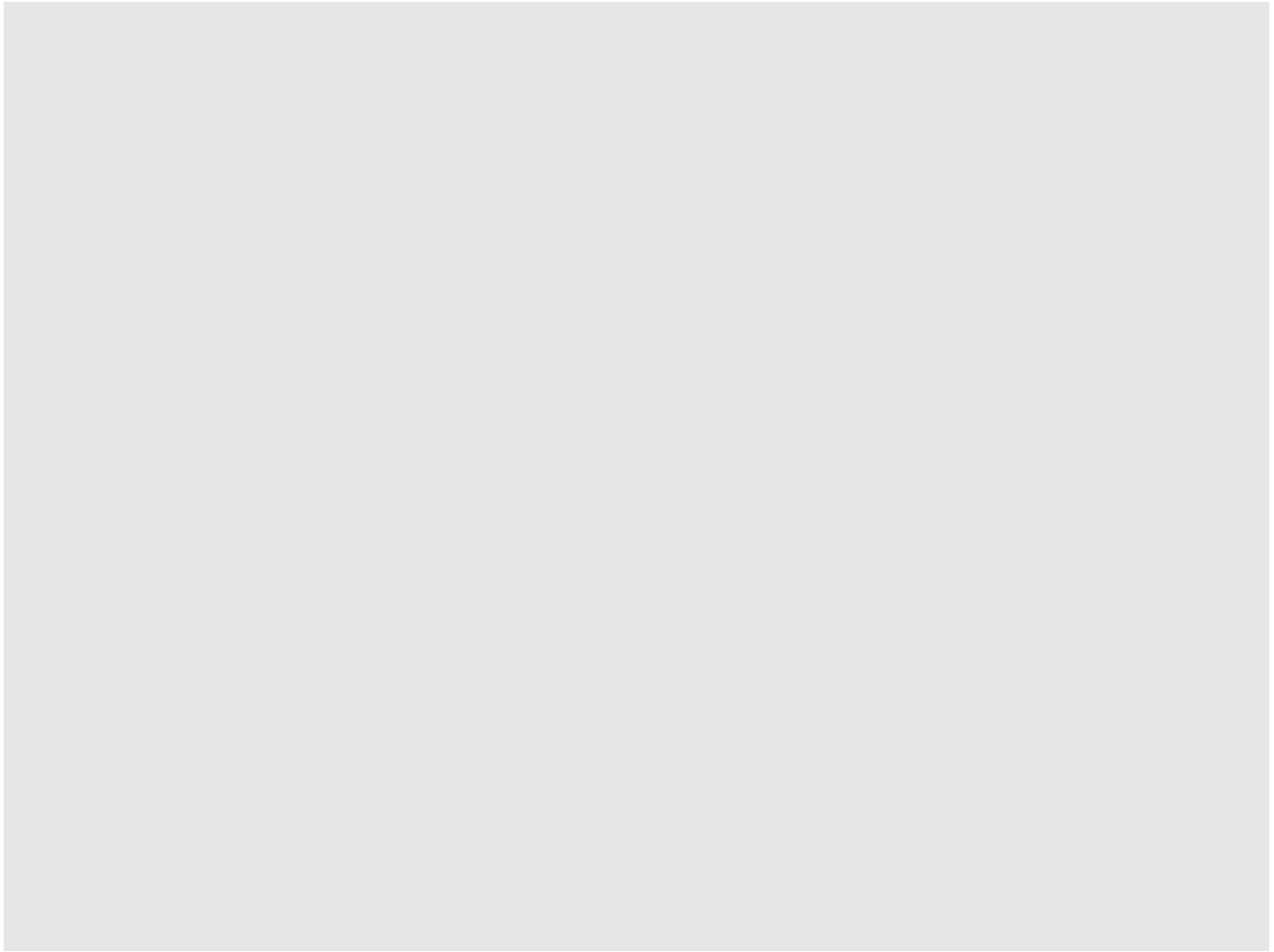
The presentation was modestly attended, and I saw a number of lobbyists, business leaders and state legislators from both parties, as well as new Superintendent of Public Instruction Debbie Critchfield.

After the presentation, Idaho Rep. Matthew Bundy, R-Mountain Home, who teaches civics and government at Mountain Home High School, said he's open to the discussion about school choice. He said he didn't want to talk specifically about education savings accounts, a proposal that's likely to come up this session, but he said as a teacher he supports public education.

"I thought he made a very good case that continued support for public education is the right conservative answer," he told me afterwards.

It remains to be seen whether legislators like Bundy will be able to successfully push back against anti-public education, school voucher proponents this session.

But at least they'll have Indiana's example to help make the case.



Scott McIntosh

Scott McIntosh is the Idaho Statesman opinion editor.

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