

A Foundation for Change

By Janelle Brown and Larry Burke

Idaho schools are just beginning to sense the ripples of change caused by the arrival of the J. A. and Kathryn Albertson Foundation on the Idaho education scene last year. Soon, they could experience a tidal wave.

With the cachet that comes from a \$700 million endowment, the foundation has the potential to turn Idaho into a national leader for innovative programs to improve schools, says Robert Barr, dean of Boise State's College of Education.

"It has the funds to do things we can never possibly do otherwise. Idaho could evolve into one of the most provocative settings in the country for education ... we'll attract some of the best and brightest in the field to come to Idaho," says Barr.

The name of the foundation's largest effort to date — the Idaho Management of Change — is a not-so-subtle reflection of its agenda.

"The foundation is clearly looking to make systemic changes in our schools — it's about restructuring. And they have the resources to make a huge impact," says William Parrett, director of BSU's Center for School Improvement.

If the Idaho Management of Change (IMC) project is any indication, the foundation can, and will, act swiftly when it finds the right projects. And its reach will extend to even the state's smallest school districts.

The project began in October when 2,000 educators gathered in Boise to hear school reform guru Willard Daggett hold forth about the need for change in America's educational system.

Buoyed by the enthusiasm of those who heard him, the foundation began the IMC project so schools could incorporate Daggett's concepts at the local level.

Less than three months after Daggett's appearance, 34 school districts and individual schools were awarded the grants, which will enable them to work with consultants from Daggett's International Center for Leadership in Education. Their goal: to bring schools and communities together to make curriculum more rigorous and relevant.

"The foundation wanted to do more than run a conference and leave the scene. It realized the potential for a sustained effort to change our schools ... and acted very quickly to make things happen," says Parrett, who is assisting with the grant project through the Center for School Improvement.

The IMC project is just one example of how the foundation is using some \$35 million annually to improve — and in some cases, restructure — Idaho's schools.

Another major grant will focus on reinventing teacher training programs at Idaho's universities. All colleges in Idaho have been invited to submit proposals.

"They want us to think out of the box ... to come up with some original ideas on how teachers should be trained," says Barr.

The foundation was established in 1966 by the late grocery store magnate Joe Albertson and his widow Kathryn. But it wasn't until Mrs. Albertson transferred her shares of the company's stock, a gift of some \$700 million, that the foundation began to fund projects

like IMC. Almost overnight, it became one of the 30 largest foundations in the United States. It may be the only one of its size limited primarily to one area of giving — in this case, education.

Mrs. Albertson's decision to accelerate her estate planning meant the foundation could greatly expand its efforts to foster educational excellence in the state, says Sharron Jarvis, the foundation's executive director, a former Boise elementary school principal with 32 years' experience in education.

But Jarvis says it's important that the foundation doesn't usurp what should be state-funded programs.

"The state needs to bake the education cake. We'll put on the frosting," she says. "We don't intend to take over what the state is supposed to do."

Partnering with Idaho's colleges and universities to start new programs is something the foundation is particularly interested in, says Jarvis.



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The Albertson Foundation is sponsoring the Idaho Management of Change project led by Willard Daggett.

In addition to its work with Boise State on the IMC project, the foundation has joined with Idaho State to help teachers pursue national board certification and with the University of Idaho to bring teaching workshops to 14 school districts.

Some funding issues are still being decided. Jarvis says the foundation is wrestling with whether it should fund building projects. Preparing students for technical vocations and enhancing early childhood education are other possible issues it may address.

"We're proud of what we've funded during our process of getting started — we've experimented on some of the early things," she says.

Barr predicts the Albertson Foundation's projects will attract worldwide attention and keep Idaho on the cutting edge of new concepts in education.

And while that prediction may come true, Jarvis says the basis of all decisions will always rest on the answer to a simple question: What is best for Idaho's kids? □