



OPINION

Voices from the Idaho EdNews Community

# Idaho's Upper Carmen Public Charter School closes

Terry Ryan | 04/22/2024



*"For everything there is a season, a time for every activity under heaven. A time to be born and a time to die. A time to plant and a time to harvest. A time to kill and a time to heal. A time to tear down and a time to build up. A time to cry and a time to laugh." Ecclesiastes 3:1-9*

I have had the honor and privilege over the last decade to work with and learn from the dynamic education duo of Sue and Jim Smith. Both are highly certified educators who have worked in private schools, public schools and most recently as leaders of the Upper Carmen Public Charter School in rural Idaho. Both have earned more degrees in education, education leadership, education finance, and special education than I can even remember or accurately report in this piece. I'll just summarize by saying they have over 80 years of education experience between them with Jim running school districts and serving as the Idaho Department of Education's chief financial officer.

For the last 18 years Sue and Jim have operated Upper Carmen. A school that has literally been attached to their home and has served over 1,300 students over the years from across Lemhi County under the shadow of the Bitterroot Mountains. Truly, the location of their school is about as close to heaven as you can get while still breathing. The school first opened in 2005 as a K-3 school serving 24 students. Over time, and under pressure from parents to add grades, Upper Carmen peaked as a K-12 school serving 113 students in 2017-18. In 2019-20 Upper Carmen agreed to focus on Grades K-3 and turn grades 4-8 over to a new charter school in nearby Salmon called Fern Waters. This year Upper Carmen educated 56 students in grades K-3.

Ten years ago, when I first met the Smiths, I had asked them why they started the school. Sue said, "Education is what will sustain the community...The community here functions as a society. We do the funerals, the weddings, the births, and why shouldn't we also educate our children."



Sue Smith supervises children getting on the Upper Carmen Public Charter School bus for one of the last times.

### **The Power of Reading**

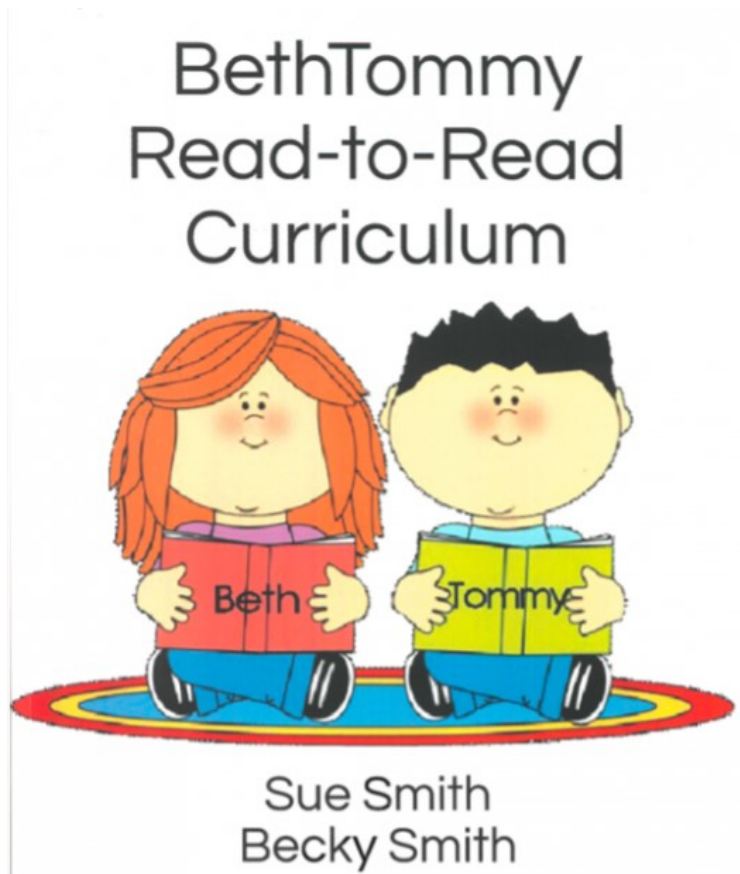
On May 9 Sue and Jim will close their public charter school. I had the opportunity to interview them at their home/school in Salmon recently. I asked Sue what her favorite memories were from her career educating students, and she shared, "it is always the twinkle in the child's eye when letter sound correlation is recognized as a word. I have seen that hundreds of times and it is a delight every single time."

Sue has been motivated by the belief that every child should be a fluent reader by the third grade. This passion for teaching reading came from her personal childhood struggles with dyslexia. She shared, "I started this because I was a dyslexic person and it took years and years for me to learn how to read and how to read well. And, secondly, Jim and I adopted a deaf daughter from Korea and I had to use reading to teach her how to talk." This is all ironic Sue said because, "The last thing I wanted to do was be a teacher because my experience at school was absolutely horrid. But, in the late 1980s I decided to go back to school to become a teacher; so kids didn't have to experience what I did growing up."

In this journey to become a reader and ultimately a reading expert and master educator, Sue told me, “I had a marvelous mom who never gave up on me. Ethel McFarland.”

Sue’s career in education began at the Hope House outside of Nampa. Hope House lives the mission “to provide a home for children who are emotionally impaired, developmentally disabled, and/or come from disrupted adoptions or dysfunctional families.” Sue started a K-12 private school for Hope House children back in 1991. “That was my first job out of college. I taught the elementary school kids and had 27 in grades K-8. These were tragic children.” Making matters harder, Sue shared, “the school had no books, no janitor, no supports. Paper and pencil was all I had.” To both help her adopted deaf daughter Becky, and students at Hope House, read Sue developed her *BethTommy Read-to-Read Curriculum*.

Sue believes, and her experience has proven, that “the reading process has six basic elements. One is not any more important than another, and all must be taught simultaneously to produce effective readers.” The *BethTommy Read equation* is “Phonics + Decoding Skills + Voice + Fluency + Comprehension + Vocabulary = Reading.”



## **The Upper Carmen Public Charter School**

The Upper Carmen Public Charter School had a couple of goals when Sue and Jim opened it. Could they create a high performing academic school on the relatively meagre state finances provided the school? Could they pay their teachers well? But, the primary goal for Sue was “not allowing any student to leave 3rd grade unless they could read effectively.” Importantly, Sue added, “that included students who came to us with special needs. We created individual goals for every student...For students with auditory or processing issues we had to double down.” For Sue it came down to “repetition, repetition, repetition.” In 18 years Upper Carmen has never had a third-grade student go into the fourth grade that “wasn’t at or beyond the third grade reading level.”

In trying to explain her success in educating all children who have been under her charge Sue believes, “Education comes from your experience and the ability to read each child and see what they are lacking and to fill those gaps...It is not about buildings, or materials or other stuff.” Charter schools can do this well if they are structured right, according to Sue, because you get, “state funds and the flexibility to meet the needs of children where they are. You can meet the needs of each child individually.”

I asked Sue how she has gotten her teachers over the years to buy into this. She told me, “I had such an inadequacy and lack of self-worth because of my experience going through school with dyslexia. And the embarrassment of standing up in front of a group and not be able to read...That is what drove me. I wanted to help students not have to deal with that.” “I have seen this quality of putting the student first in teachers,” she continued. Great teachers “have the ability to meet the child’s needs. My daughter Becky has it. She could do this better than me...Tenacity. We are going to hang in here and get this done.”

## **Education is a Team Effort and Needs Parents**

Sue and Jim have learned a lot about what it takes to open and run a great charter school in a rural community where people have strong opinions and ideas about school, education and what their children need. But, not all parents are good partners. In her more than 30-years educating students and serving families Sue has learned that, “if a parent sends a child to school and they understand respect, and know how to obey, I can teach them to read in a very short period of time.” Conversely, “if a child comes to the school without those attributes, I have to first teach them how to be respectful and obey and then I can teach them to read.” It takes longer and it is harder.

“Young parents,” Sue laments, “seem to have an entitlement attitude now that makes this partnership harder. If the parent and teachers collaborate it is to the

students benefit and even students who struggle can and do make progress. Done well education is a team effort. And it should be!" Parents and teachers need to work together for children to read and to ultimately thrive as learners. "It is frustrating when parents don't hold up their share of ensuring their students are academically successful," Sue told me.

### **Why is Now the Time to Close the School?**

"We met our goals," said Sue when I asked her about why now is the time to close the school. Sue continued, "before the charter school there wasn't any competition in Salmon. I think Upper Carmen Charter School has had the level of academic success that sets a standard for our community."

With pride Sue continued, "the bottom line is that Jim and I were able to build the school on the cheap because it is part of our home." Sue also pointed out the uniqueness of their endeavor together. "We used all of our skills, degrees, experience and even some of our own money to make this school work."

Importantly, Sue reminded me, "Jim never got paid for the work he did for the school over all these years. He was the school finance director, facilities manager, counselor, ops guy and bus driver. Jim's school experience with school finance was key, and as a result we are closing the school with money in the bank. Those skills simply aren't replicable up here."

Jim has spent the last few months winding the school's business and financial operations down. Following state law and best practice the school's assets and cash is being turned over to the local Salmon school district. Some of the school's furniture, technology, music equipment and portable classrooms are going to end up in other public charter schools. The school's closure has been managed with the same attention and care that permeated the school's 18-years of successful operations.

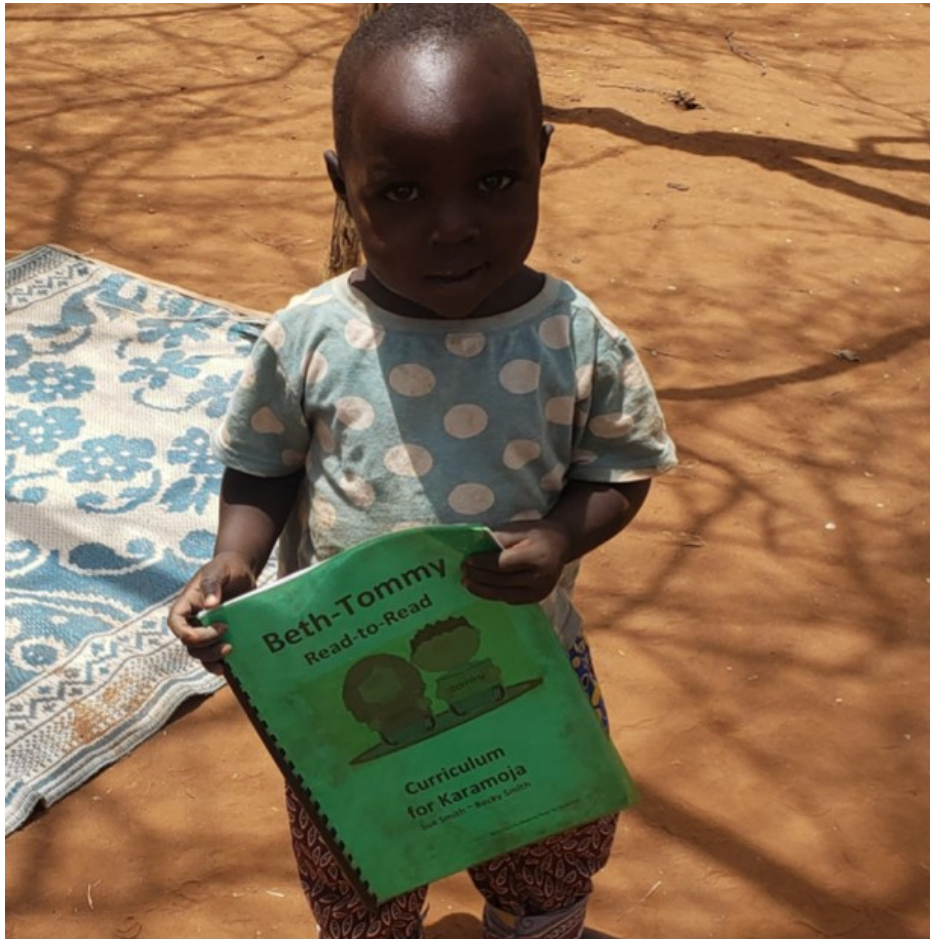
"As we started thinking about closing the school," Sue paused and told me, "we didn't want to tie the Upper Carmen Charter School name to something we didn't think would be up to the same standard." Simply, "we realized it wasn't transferable because we are multi-degreed and have both the education expertise and the finance expertise to make it work."

I asked Sue if she had any regrets. "No. I do not. I feel blessed. I have been able to work with such tremendous teachers and touch the lives of so many of our children."

### **A Note on Africa**

Sue and Jim's impact on children and their learning goes beyond Idaho. In northern Uganda in 2022, amid a civil war, they spent two months serving

children. Jim built prefabbed metal schools while Sue worked with a local education team translating the BethTommy Read-to-Read Curriculum into the local native language Karamoja. Sue told me, “Uganda was an opportunity for Jim and I to give the gift of reading to children in the bush that had never had the opportunity for school.”



An early learner in the African bush with a copy of BethTommy Reads



## Terry Ryan

Terry Ryan is CEO of the Boise-based education nonprofit Bluum and Board Chair of the Idaho Charter School Network.