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Guest Opinion

Stakeholders are at the heart of initiative to keep Idaho students safe

By Sherri Ybarra

Superintendent of Public Instruction

At a recent candidate forum, I was asked why I didn't seek feedback from stakeholders on our proposed school safety initiative, Keep Idaho Students Safe.

Frankly, the question took me by surprise, since I and my staff have vigorously been seeking feedback from stakeholders since we first developed the proposal – and on its components for more than two years previous.

It's a question I hadn't been asked at all, by the media or by any leaders of stakeholder groups, since I announced this proposal five months ago – until an individual asked that question at a political forum last Thursday, Aug. 2. An official with a stakeholder group then tweeted from that forum, echoing the man's assertion. And now Idaho Education News wrote a story based on that assertion. The reporter did ask for details about our outreach, and my staff compiled a long list – virtually none of which was reflected in the story, although IEN later linked to that information at my staff's request. I hope that news organizations that use this guest opinion will include a link to that summary and chronology.

I am proud of our outreach and more than pleased with the thousands of thoughtful, helpful comments we've gathered as we work to firm up the KISS initiative. The initiative will be stronger and richer for their input.

None of the leaders who contend stakeholders weren't adequately consulted have contacted me about the initiative in the five months since I announced the three-

pronged plan and asked for feedback to help shape it. But I have definitely heard from many of their members through our KISS survey, presentations at countless meetings and more casual conversations.

I did not specifically approach the leaders of stakeholder organizations, but I was delighted when one group's president urged members to take the online survey, and another leading stakeholder group featured a two-page story by me in their summer issue, asking for feedback.

We have focused on reaching out to educators, students, families and other stakeholders throughout Idaho. Response to the initiative has been widespread, thoughtful and generally positive. We're still taking comments at www.sde.idaho.gov/kiss/

It is a sad state of affairs when a bold ask for the safety of those we hold most dear — our children — should become political fodder nearly a half a year after it is proposed.

It's a little disturbing that some appear to be playing with the facts and changing the narrative, as if this initiative I'm seeking feedback on was pulled out of thin air, cooked up by department insiders without input from those it would affect, like failed initiatives from a past SDE administration. Nothing could be farther from the truth.

The three pieces of the initiative are not new, but rather bring together in a single package the product of three years of conversations around issues plaguing our youth -- bullying, harassment, suicide, relationship conflict, violence, you name it. The strategies that emerge in these conversations are the same: training, staffing, support, public awareness.

Each time a high-profile tragedy or new research on youth behavior patterns emerges in our state and nation, we see a renewed call to equip those who see our children every day -- educators in our schools -- with these strategies to help students.

Last fall, I tasked my Director of Student Engagement, who serves as my representative on the advisory board for the Office of School Safety and a variety of task forces and boards working on the social and emotional issues of youth and safety, to pull together a more comprehensive approach that would build on my anti-bullying initiative, which debuted in 2016.

In December, he delivered an early outline of a proposal to bring to stakeholders that I vetted with my parent and superintendent advisory groups before taking it to broader stakeholder conversations about future state funding or perhaps a grant proposal.

Then in February, tragedy struck again with the shooting in Parkland, Florida, making school safety top of mind for residents throughout Idaho and the nation. I revised, updated and broadened the scope of the initiative and released it in March to focus on a six-month dialogue with Idahoans and to seek volunteers to finalize the ask.

In the past five months, I've shared the outlines of the proposal with more than 2,000 people at conferences and meetings around Idaho, and I've personally met with students, administrators, parents and others to provide information and hear their thoughts. More than 1,000, half of whom identified themselves as teachers, shared their thoughts in our online survey so far. Nearly 200 have volunteered to help shape the initiative.

I'm looking forward to finalizing the proposal later this summer, reflecting rich stakeholder involvement on how to Keep Idaho Students Safe.

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