

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
Wednesday, Jan. 5, 2022
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Guest Opinion

New Year, old pandemic and priorities for a bright future

By Sherri Ybarra
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(BOISE) – Happy New Year! As we enter our third Idaho legislative session under the COVID pandemic, it’s hard not to wish this year felt a little more “new.” **But we have much to look forward to.**

My goals for this legislative session and the next school year are all geared toward addressing the learning gap from the pandemic, supporting our educators and regaining Idaho’s momentum as we move forward.

These past two years have impacted Idaho children, families and educators in ways we don’t yet fully understand, and we need to be vigilant in safeguarding the mental and emotional wellness of both students and school staff.

One positive sign for both personal and academic success is that students and teachers are back in classrooms. Ensuring that students have the option for in-person instruction was my top legislative priority last year.

This month, as the Idaho Legislature convenes again, my priorities are about people – students, families and our essential educators and staff. I will be advocating for more in-person class time for our youngest students and for continued progress on an essential objective – ensuring that all Idaho students learn to read by Grade 3 so they can read to learn for the rest of their lives. I am also committed to making sure all students have extended academic opportunities to address any learning gaps or obstacles they face in learning and achieving.

Full-day K: My Fiscal 2023 budget request includes \$39 million to provide free, full-day kindergarten – at parents’ option – in all Idaho school districts for the students who need it most. That’s about two-thirds of all incoming kindergartners, based on a three-year average of fall Idaho Reading Indicator scores and economic status. Parental involvement must be an integral part of the program.

Early literacy: We are intensifying our emphasis on the science of reading so that our skilled, committed K-3 teachers have a more expansive understanding and toolkit to identify and address the

specific needs of students before they fall behind. Our new, yearlong SMART (Striving to Meet Achievement in Reading Together) professional development program is getting overwhelmingly positive response from its first group of participants – more than 190 Idaho K-3 teachers from 56 schools and 40 districts. My 2023 budget request includes ongoing funding of \$26 million to continue Idaho’s focus and support for early literacy.

Dyslexia: The need for early detection and intervention is particularly critical for students with learning disabilities, including dyslexia. Students often aren’t diagnosed with dyslexia until later grades, when a bright student’s difficulty with deciphering written language becomes more apparent. But by then, teaching them to read for comprehension and even for enjoyment is an uphill battle.

I am working with legislators and stakeholders to pass a bill this session to strengthen our focus on dyslexia. This includes continued efforts to develop a dyslexia handbook for teachers and parents, focused teacher training, and early screening.

Civics: Our social studies standards are up for review this year, and it is essential that we put statewide emphasis on studies that expand students’ understanding of our government and society, preparing them for a productive life beyond school. That is why I am proposing a resolution to develop standalone civics standards. I will advocate to include a focus on what high school students need to know in order to participate in our democratic form of government as they become voters.

Retaining teachers and staff: This long pandemic has made Idaho’s teacher shortage even more urgent, and we must continue to improve salaries to attract and retain skilled educators. My 2023 budget request includes nearly \$49 million for the Career Ladder compensation model.

I also seek \$10.3 million for a 6 percent increase in base salary funding for school support staff, who also are essential to our students’ success and wellbeing. There are shortages across the board in school staffing, from bus drivers to paraprofessionals and substitute teachers, and we must provide competitive wages.

I wrote to Gov. Little in early November to advocate that Idaho use some of the state’s federal COVID relief funds to give a \$1,000 bonus to each Idaho teacher. Our teachers are absolutely essential workers, and I am committed to securing funds for teacher bonuses. I’ve also encouraged districts to use the staffing shortage funds they have already received to award bonuses to paraprofessionals and other classified staff who are going above and beyond.

I want to end on a very positive note: When the national publication Education Week published its annual Quality Counts student achievement report this fall, Idaho ranked 17th for student achievement among all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Idaho ranked above all of our neighboring states except Utah in this apples-to-apples comparison with other states. That’s wonderful progress since our 2016 ranking, released in December 2015, put our student achievement at 31st in the nation.

As Idaho’s educators, parents and students strive to achieve our shared goals, I feel confident we can soon be among the top 10 in the nation for student achievement!

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