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Media Contact:
Maggie T. Reynolds
Public Information Officer
mreynolds@sde.idaho.gov

Critchfield: Helping Schools Select Quality, Effective Curriculum is on the Agenda

By Superintendent of Public Instruction Debbie Critchfield

(BOISE) – What our students learn and how it is presented is important to parents, communities and Idahoans. The materials used in classrooms - referred to as curriculum - are selected by locally elected school trustees in a process laid out in state law. These statutes require that the process is open to the community and that chosen materials align with state learning standards. As an example, standards require students to learn about the Civil War in 11th grade. A local board then selects the materials used to teach the lessons.

Those decisions can be challenging as there are many national publishers who have their own ways of explaining our history. Trustees are responsible for choosing a curriculum which represents community values while ensuring students master Idaho standards. As a former local board member and district employee, I've been part of this process. In a perfect world, the district has curricular experts, an engaged community and an experienced board.

As superintendent, some frequent requests I get from districts are for more help in choosing curriculum tied to Idaho standards, help in paying for expensive curriculum and help in navigating the politics of these decisions. Historically, the State Department of Education (SDE) has provided a list of curriculums and rated how well the materials align with Idaho standards. However, there's been no consideration for proven effectiveness with Idaho students. That is about to change.

Going forward, districts will continue to select their curriculums, but the SDE will begin a process for identifying materials proven to be effective in Idaho schools. Instead of just providing districts a list of what's available, we will instead provide more detailed information so districts know whether or not the material has been successful in Idaho. We will begin this process with reading curriculum, but will expand this process to other subjects in the future. This is a service we can provide our districts to help with these very important decisions.

Idaho education standards are reviewed and approved by the state legislature every five years. We are currently in the process of reviewing our social studies standards. This gives us an opportunity to do an analysis first and then prioritize curriculums that align with the standards. Recently, Governor Little and I provided an opportunity for districts to supplement their classroom curriculum at no cost to them. We used expiring federal COVID dollars to add more interactive content. Many teachers already supplement their core lessons with outside resources, and the new “Story of America” gives them one more. Details on how schools can access this will be available in the coming weeks.

The bottom line is that Idahoans care deeply about what our students learn in the classroom and want them to be prepared for life and the opportunities in a growing state. We want them to be strong citizens, who are self-reliant and independent critical thinkers. Providing our teachers with the right tools supports us in this important pursuit.

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