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## **Planning for Success**

*By Debbie Critchfield, Idaho Superintendent of Public Instruction*

Often in our professional lives, when we take time to reflect on our work, we realize there are few things we've done perfectly. With the benefit of this hindsight, we realize we could have done more towards our efforts to reach our goals. Such is the case when I think back to my service as a board member for the Cassia School District nearly twenty years ago. I got better at that responsibility each year, but I can't help but feel there were areas I could have emphasized that would have strengthened our commitment to student growth and achievement.

Today, months after assuming my new role as state superintendent of public instruction, I don't want to miss a critical opportunity. So, I've commenced an honest, intentional and important initiative at the State Department of Education: strategic planning. Our goal is simply to ensure the future success of education in Idaho. In the business world, there's a notion that if you can't measure something, you can't successfully manage it. In a way, the SDE is a business and we need a plan to accomplish the future I envision.

As we build our strategic plan, we will include my goals for the department, general objectives needed to achieve those goals and measurable activities to address each objective. Our plan is a work in progress but goals certain to make the list include:

- Ensure Idaho children are reading at grade level by third grade;
- prepare Idaho students for life, including college/career goals;
- modernize the state's educational funding structure; and
- position Idaho to attract and retain exceptional teachers and leaders.

When strategic plans are given the time and attention they deserve, they result in many advantages. A well-articulated plan improves communication. It puts down on paper a common vision for an organization so that resources can be deployed accordingly. When there are measurable outcomes, progress towards goals is more easily achieved. Soliciting input from staff for the plan leads to important buy-in. An organization or business should be able to defend its efforts toward results with a measured plan. Finally - and this is especially important for us in the public sector - we achieve transparency with our constituents when they understand how their tax dollars are being spent.

While the benefits of implementing a strategic plan are clear, the process is often avoided for a variety of reasons. We're all aware of instances when big-picture projects have been shelved when our time and attention get consumed by the latest fire that must be extinguished and the damage triaged. Once these important projects are put on the back burner, they often lose momentum they'll never regain. When strategic plans are required, we sometimes go through the motions so we can check a box and clear it from our to-do list. But doing it this way is a missed opportunity that fails our students, our educators and our communities. Giving strategic planning the time and attention it deserves takes leadership and discipline.

This summer I'm asking and inviting school leaders in Idaho to join me in this exercise. I recognize that many are already at various points in their processes. Regardless of whether they've just started, just finished or need to dust off an older version, I hope they will see the importance of taking this step. I encourage our local education agencies to view strategic planning as an opportunity rather than just a compliance task. I really want each board to discuss, plan, engage and commit to something meaningful. That's our goal at the SDE. The plans made by districts will be specific to their unique needs and visions, but we are all dedicated to shared goals: our students. Our students must be able to read and they must be prepared for the world around them. We increase their chances for success by increasing our chances for success. And we won't get there by accident.

It's not often that we hear a lot of excitement, let alone talk, about why strategic plans are so vital to our efforts. I don't know that I can necessarily provide you excitement, but I certainly hope I can provide our schools and districts a spark in their own processes and discussions. Among the many things we do, this may very well be the one thing that ties our efforts to our success.

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