



SHERRI YBARRA, ED.S.
SUPERINTENDENT OF PUBLIC INSTRUCTION

650 W. STATE STREET, 2ND FLOOR
BOISE, IDAHO 83702
(208) 332-6800 OFFICE / 711 TRS
WWW.SDE.IDAHO.GOV

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www.sde.idaho.gov

Media Contact:
Kristin Rodine
Public Information Officer
208-332-6807
krodine@sde.idaho.gov

Guest Opinion

An open letter to Idaho educators

By Sherri Ybarra
Superintendent of Public Instruction

(BOISE) – As we approach our third spring amid the COVID-19 pandemic, I want to say thank you and congratulations!

Your efforts over these past three school years have been heroic – and, despite what you may hear from some politicians and pundits, your efforts have been incredibly successful in helping Idaho students stay on the path to achievement and success.

As educators, you do great work for the children of Idaho, who are this state’s future. You have withstood numerous disruptions and tremendous pressures over the past three school years. You have worked long, hard hours and taken on additional duties to ease learning loss and help your schools stay open despite crippling COVID-related staff shortages. You have managed to maintain optimism and faith in your students and your peers even when there seemed to be no end in sight.

Time and again, you have had to hear naysayers dismiss your efforts with a persistent, but untrue, refrain: that Idaho schools and students are failing, and that our state ranks at the bottom in education.

You’ve heard the head of a prominent political interest group proclaim that in some Idaho schools, 90 percent of graduates can’t read, write or do math – an absurd, mean-spirited convolution of test results that indicate whether students have the proficiency to succeed in college courses. You’ve heard Idaho legislators decry a supposed lack of progress in K-12 achievement.

But I’m here to tell you what I hope you already know, and I want everyone in Idaho to know: Idaho students are doing better than we could have expected during this long-running pandemic. And we are far from the bottom in national rankings – unless, of course, you’re talking about per-pupil funding.

In December, a national [“Pandemic Scorecard”](#) ranked Idaho third among all states in how our education outcomes withstood the pandemic, pairing with our No. 4-ranked economic response to propel our state to an overall ranking of fourth in the nation despite considerably lower marks in the categories of social wellbeing and health.

This past fall, the national publication Education Week ranked us 17th among all states and the District of Columbia for student achievement. That’s an impressive number when you consider that Ed Week had us ranked as 31st for student achievement five years earlier. And, we outrank our neighboring states of Washington, Oregon, Nevada, Wyoming and Montana.

I want to share a few other achievement bright spots:

- Idaho ranks first (tied with Indiana) for the percentage of high school students who jump-start their college and career training by completing post-secondary courses before graduating from high school.
- US News and World Report ranks our state fifth in the nation for its share – 58 percent – of college-ready high school students.
- Education Week ranked Idaho fifth nationwide in the amount of improvement in students’ chance for success between 2020 and 2021.
- Idaho’s five-year graduation rate hit a new high of 84.1 percent.

This isn’t to say that we don’t still have work to do, or that our students haven’t lost ground in some areas. Pandemic-sparked learning loss is real, and it’s affected our most vulnerable students disproportionately, despite all of our best efforts.

But, as we know, educators in the classroom are the key to getting students back on track and making progress in academics and in life. You have persevered during the worst public health crisis in more than a hundred years, which is an incredibly powerful model for students.

Our students know this, too. One of the absolute highlights of my year has been my newly formed Student Advisory Council – 13 students in grades 4 through 12 from across the state. When I asked these students what is right with education in Idaho, their answer was: “Our teachers.”

Once again, I want to thank you for everything you do. While you’ve received guidance from the state and funding from the federal government, the decisions and actions that really matter are yours – at the local level, in our schools and classrooms.

You are on the front line, the boots on the ground, and I am incredibly grateful for your commitment, your grace under pressure and above all, your dedication to Idaho students.

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