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Guest Opinion

A season to be grateful for Idaho educators, students and families

By Sherri Ybarra
Superintendent of Public Instruction

(BOISE) – This holiday season, I am tremendously thankful for the opportunity of serving Idaho schools and families as Superintendent of Public Instruction for the past eight years. I especially want to thank my staff and educators in schools across the state for their amazing energy, innovation and commitment to our cause of helping Idaho students achieve and succeed.

We have made significant progress, and as I near the end of my tenure I feel confident that our shared strides forward – in teacher compensation, in early literacy, in student and parent involvement, technology and more – bode well for the future.

One impressive and very promising return on investment can be seen in our intensive new early literacy program SMART (Striving to Meet Achievement in Reading Together), which immerses K-3 teachers in the science of reading, providing skilled coaching and collaboration to give their students the best possible start in literacy and learning. Feedback from teachers and parents has been overwhelmingly positive, and this fall it was backed up by analysis of the past year’s results on the statewide reading assessment.

The more than 2,000 students in the first SMART cohort’s classrooms started the year with lower fall proficiency rates than their statewide peers – 49.97 percent compared to 51.3 percent. Then they more than made up that deficit, climbing to 71.3 percent proficiency in the spring IRI, while 68.9 percent of their statewide counterparts were proficient. That’s remarkable and encouraging as the program expands.

More encouraging news arrived this fall when the National Assessment for Education Progress, dubbed “the nation’s report card,” came out for the first time since 2019. Response to the nationwide results was dismal, but while Idaho scores had also declined during three years of the pandemic, the slide was less pronounced and there were definite highlights. No other state topped Idaho’s average

eighth-grade math score, a fantastic sign since middle school is a key time to master the mathematical skills and concepts needed for academic and professional success.

Although this long pandemic has carried with it learning loss that we have not yet fully assessed, Idaho hasn't seen the devastating impact felt by many states, largely because of our dedicated teachers and our commitment to in-person learning. Last December, a national Pandemic Scorecard ranked us third in the nation for how well our education outcomes withstood COVID-19.

I am so thankful to our amazing educators and am proud to have led the change in the culture at the State Department of Education from one of blaming and shaming educators to one of support, service and collaboration. But culture alone won't fix our state's chronic problems with attracting and retaining teachers. That takes a more tangible investment: money. Thanks to the Career Ladder framework to increase teachers' salaries, we have made major strides in making Idaho education wages more competitive.

Throughout my two terms, I've made it a point to visit classrooms whenever possible, getting direct feedback and ideas from the people most affected by education policies and practices – our students. Last year I launched a Student Advisory Council, a huge success duplicated this year with a second group of amazing individuals who have great ideas, energy and desire to improve Idaho's education experience and outcomes.

Parental engagement also has been a priority to ensure families' ideas are included in education policy and school operations.

As superintendent, I've worked with two governors, two education task forces and many legislators to consistently strengthen Idaho's investment in K-12 public schools, securing strategic investments in key areas, including professional development and helping cover the costs of health insurance for public school employees. This year's budget nearly triples the available funds for early literacy, opening up options for districts to develop the programs that best meet local needs, including free optional full-day kindergarten.

Now, thanks to a record budget surplus, a major infusion of millions in education funding is on Idaho's horizon. I am hopeful that we will see continued investments in teacher and staff compensation, professional development and help for districts to repair and replace dilapidated buildings.

Idaho's education future is bright, and I will continue to be a cheerleader for Idaho's students, parents, staff and educators. Thank you all!

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