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In D.C. and beyond, Idaho's Teacher of the Year aims to enhance education

(BOISE) – For Caldwell teacher Becky Mitchell, this is “the week of weeks.”

She's in Washington, D.C., as Idaho's Teacher of the Year, spreading the word about Idaho education, networking with other top teachers, absorbing teaching resources at Smithsonian museums, and encountering people and places she previously had only imagined.

It's Mitchell's first trip to the nation's capital, and it will include a White House event with President Trump, a reception at the vice president's residence, time at the U.S. Department of Education and visits with education staffers for all four members of Idaho's congressional delegation. She'll even spend time with TED Talks trainers, working on a presentation that may eventually turn into a nationally viewed talk.

“From a personal standpoint, this is huge,” Mitchell said of Washington Week. “And it's another opportunity to spend time with the very best educators in the entire nation.”

Everything she learns and becomes curious about, she will bring back to her students at Vision Charter School. She heads the language arts department at the college-prep school in Caldwell, teaching a dizzying array of topics to students in grades 9 through 12.

“From English and drama to chemistry and physics, Ms. Becky Mitchell has a passion for learning that clearly spreads to her students, inspiring them to rack up an impressive number of college credits while still in high school,” Idaho Superintendent of Public Instruction Sherri Ybarra said. “She exemplifies what education in Idaho is all about – human elevation.”

Helping students realize their goals and pursue advanced opportunities is a huge part of Mitchell's mission as Teacher of the Year and a major bragging point for Idaho that too few people know about, Mitchell said.

“We're graduating students from high school with associate's degrees,” she said. “I really think we're a trailblazer.”

At Vision, more than 53 percent of this year's graduating seniors have taken enough dual-credit courses to earn associate's degrees and jump-start their higher education. That includes Mitchell's daughter Abigail.

“My daughter will graduate with two AAs,” Mitchell said. “Probably within three years she’ll have her master’s degree.”

Essentially completing two years’ worth of community college work while still in high school greatly cuts the expense of college for Idaho students and families – especially since Idaho’s Fast Forward program allocates more than \$4,000 for each Idaho student to use for dual-credit courses and other advanced opportunities in grades 7 through 12.

“I think a lot of why many kids don’t go on is money, and taking that pressure away is huge,” she said.

Mitchell sees the role of Teacher of the Year as promoting her profession – updating the public view of education and helping make teaching more attractive to students looking for a meaningful career.

One thing that’s striking, she said, is “how little the general public knows about what’s going on in classrooms today. All they know is what they experienced, and that might be 30 or 40 years ago.”

“Twenty years ago my role was to impart knowledge. Now my role is to help them gain knowledge,” Mitchell said. “I always want my students to broaden their horizons and think outside of what they know. Technology can be super-useful as a tool and as a facilitator.”

Along with Idaho-themed gifts for her fellow Teachers of the Year, Mitchell traveled to D.C. with photo books she compiled for the members of Idaho’s congressional delegation to “show the great things going on in Idaho classrooms.”

Mitchell relishes the opportunity to represent Idaho educators and is always looking for new ways to step up. She plans to spend much of her summer networking with other Idaho teachers and wants to help attract new educators through the state’s teacher-training programs. It would be great, she said, to develop teaching programs that start in high school and continue into college.

“I think this would be an ideal fit for Idaho, as we already have the (Fast Forward) funds and relationship with our colleges,” Mitchell said. “I would love to spearhead such a program in Idaho and grow our next generation of teachers in the great environment of Idaho schools.”

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Interviews: Call Kristin Rodine, 208-332-6807 or cell 863-4545, to arrange an interview with Becky Mitchell while she’s in D.C. Check out her blog detailing her schedule for the week at <https://bit.ly/2I8fbVS>

Captions for attached photos: When the State Department of Education set aside a table to honor Idaho Teacher of the Year Becky Mitchell (standing at end of table, with Superintendent of Public Instruction Sherri Ybarra) at the Legislative Open House in January, she gave center stage to some of her students who exemplify advanced opportunities. (Photo credit – SDE)

Idaho’s Becky Mitchell is in the center of the second row (directly above “2018”) in this Council of Chief State School Officers array of all 55 Teachers of the Year. (credit -- CCSSO)