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Artificial Intelligence in Idaho Classrooms: Friend or Foe?

By Superintendent of Public Instruction Debbie Critchfield

(BOISE) – When it comes to technological advancements, the speed of change sometimes feels lightning fast. Most of us have clear memories of what life was like before Google and smartphones. Some may argue it was better/easier then, but we can agree that things that once seemed out of reach are now normal parts of life. Using phones alone as an example, technology has taken them from *rotary* to tiny computers and so much more.

With Artificial Intelligence, we again engage in another change in how we interact with technology, and we may all have feelings about what is to come. After all, AI is capable of simulating human intelligence, mimicking our problem-solving skills, artistic talents and even our emotions. It's exciting, but it also brings a degree of anxiety and discomfort over the unknown.

When parents and educators talk to me about the advancement of AI and its influence in education, most are unsure how to feel. If we talk about it as a tool to improve life-saving medical procedures or to further our knowledge of space, many feel secure in its role as a tool for good. But, when we talk about AI's presence in the classroom, many feel anxious over what that may look like. Though we are at the beginning of these types of changes, I would like to share my thoughts on what we know, what we think and how we plan for where we go when it comes to this fast-moving technology.

What we know is that AI is around us, and it's here to stay. We know that AI is already a factor in many workplaces and that many employers are evaluating what it will mean for their daily operations.

We also know that students are already interacting with AI on their own, especially our middle and high school students.

So what do we think? Because we don't yet have the benefit of hindsight, we must look to the future. I'm in the camp that thinks we can make AI a constructive part of learning. Some of our teachers are already doing this. When used appropriately, I believe that AI can be a tool for both students and teachers. I think considering what AI can bring to the educational sphere is the best first place to start. This means we will need to train and support teachers in how they use it and teach students responsible usage - like any other digital content available at school.

So where are we going and how do we plan for it?

It's not hard to believe that we're headed to a future where employers will expect competitive applicants to have experience with AI. I believe our preparation for kids should include experiences for students with guidance using this tool so we will best position them to be successful with it in the future.

I'd like to encourage educators and parents to familiarize themselves with the basic concepts of how AI works. I'm learning myself! Then take time guiding students through what you've learned. Find out what it can do and cannot do, and share your discoveries.

Any changes to the learning landscape provide us an opportunity to discuss and understand impacts to Idaho's schools and students and AI will be no different.

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