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## **Critchfield: Let's Come to the Table for Special Education in Idaho**

*By Superintendent of Public Instruction Debbie Critchfield*

(BOISE) - Idaho teachers and education leaders work to ensure that *all* students have the educational services they need to achieve academic success. There are many factors that go into determining what that work looks like. In some cases, supporting a student's needs requires additional help.

When needed, students who need special education services can tap into additional assistance to support their unique academic needs. Accessing these supports can be complex - even overwhelming - especially for parents encountering the system for the first time. More and more, we see parents turning to teachers and school administrators for help in this arena, and like parents, school employees also need knowledge and support to be effective.

I recently hosted a listening session and asked Idaho parents to share their experiences and hopes for how our state, districts and charters could better support their child and lessen the fear of navigating the special education system. Parents said they want the knowledge and know-how to take a lead role in effectively advocating for their child while receiving support from an involved educational community.

The day after hearing from parents, I listened to special education teachers, directors and leaders. They shared frustrations with being understaffed and feeling underprepared for managing changes in students' academic needs and behavioral health.

Feedback from educators also focused on preparation and professional development for all teachers, not just those who specialize in special education. Whether it's through the certification process, student teaching or mentoring, there are opportunities for us to shore up training for the adults who work with our children.

Both sessions suggested the same thing: there are some immediate things we can do to help both parents and educators.

We're creating valuable guides to aid families when they need direction on where to start. These guides will also provide tips and information for what to expect and bring to the table when talking with school officials. Reinforcing to parents that they are the final say in their child's education and that schools are there to provide the needed resources helps foster trust and confidence in what schools can do.

I will also be leading a work group discussion at the State Board of Education meeting in August to discuss how we train, prepare and support *all* of our teachers around special education.

We have one focus when we talk about special education and how it serves Idaho's kids: providing the right supports to help each child flourish. This means that parents need to feel empowered to advocate for their child and educators need to feel empowered because they have the proper preparation and adequate support to get the job done.

I'm eager to see what this important work will mean for students and families in Idaho and I can't think of a better way to start than reinforcing that parents are the experts on their child and the professional educator is the expert on the classroom.

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**Attached:** updated headshot from Superintendent Debbie Critchfield