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Critchfield: Showing Kids How to Show Up

From Superintendent of Public Instruction Debbie Critchfield

(BOISE) – Many of you have heard the old adage, “showing up is half the battle.” It’s a simple phrase that packs a powerful message, and as Idaho’s educational communities embark on a fresh year of learning, this saying has the potential to help address a growing issue affecting student achievement in Idaho and beyond.

Since COVID-19, Idaho has prioritized returning attendance to levels seen prior to the pandemic. Attitudes about attendance have also shifted. According to non-profit attendance initiative Attendance Works, the number of students nationwide classified as chronically absent – meaning they miss 10 percent, or two days per month – has almost doubled compared to pre-pandemic numbers. The increase is greater in some states, but Idaho has not been spared from this trend.

Absenteeism can result in younger students struggling to master subjects like literacy, which can have lasting effects on a student’s ability to learn. For older students, regular or chronic absenteeism can mean disengaging from learning and the larger school environment. No matter how engaging curriculum is or how skilled teachers are, learning suffers when students miss school.

Attendance can also affect local schools’ budgets, based on last year’s return to an attendance-based funding model. But, this isn’t the driving factor for why we pay attention to students coming to school. These losses add up and our community leaders and elected officials know this better than anyone.

So, what do we do and how should our schools talk about this issue? This is where I add that I know schools aren’t responsible to get a child up out of bed every morning, but there are things we can do to refresh views on coming to school.

To help with what schools are already doing around attendance, our department this summer created a digital toolkit loaded with resources designed to message to students, parents and the wider community about how important showing up is. It can be found on the Idaho Department of Education website at <https://www.sde.idaho.gov/communications/attendance-toolkit/>.

Years ago, while working for my home district in Cassia County, I secured a donation for a large billboard and put an image of some pretty darn cute students decked out in science lab gear (with parental permission, of course!) and splashed a catchy sentiment across the top. It was all designed to remind parents and kids about how we care about education and wanted them at school. You couldn't drive north or south through town without seeing it! Go big, right?

When we remind kids and parents that just showing up is one of the biggest parts of school, we reinforce strong habits for life. I hope our parents, teachers and administrators look towards the potential that the new school year brings and will make attendance a regular talking point. From kindergarten to graduation, showing kids how to show up is a great way to set them up for success.

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