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Guest opinion: Supporting Idaho schools and students

By Sherri Ybarra
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In more than 20 years as an educator, I have learned that one of the most important things we can do – as parents, family members, teachers or community leaders – is to show our children how much we value their education by supporting and celebrating their hard work and success. Our support, individually and collectively, makes all the difference.

Indeed, Idaho's schools and students should be proud of their accomplishments and of the positive momentum we have achieved over the past several years.

In October we announced Idaho's results on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), which shows that, despite reporting to the contrary, Idaho students compare very favorably with their peers across the nation.

We also released the results of the ACT college entrance exam taken by nearly 7,000 Idaho high school students. Again, Idaho students scored above the national average and ahead of many of their peers in other states. This affirms Idaho's ranking nationally as 5th in college and career readiness.

As I have traveled around the state in recent weeks, I have seen, firsthand, so many great things happening in Idaho's schools.

In September, Gov. Little and I visited Northern Idaho to announce our 2020 Teacher of The Year. Timberlake health and PE teacher Stacie Lawler is recognized for her outstanding work supporting students both in and out of the classroom, and, in particular, for her focus on combatting the stigma surrounding mental health.

The increasing social emotional need of our students is a critical issue, and a recommendation to better address students' needs came out loud and clear in the Governor's K-12 task force, "Our Kids, Idaho's Future." Nothing else is possible, or matters, unless we ensure our students' well-being. That's why a key part of my budget request for next year includes \$1 million to develop and implement strong, flexible training for Idaho educators and school staff to help them better recognize and respond to students' social and emotional needs and ensure students have the best opportunity to learn and succeed.

I recently visited Middleton High School, where they are addressing the "great technology divide" between adults and our kids by having students train their teachers on how to use technology during professional development days. It's amazing that these young people care about their education and about their teachers enough to give up a day off to participate in this event.

I also traveled to Hagerman School District to attend a ribbon cutting for a new Agriculture and Food Science Building. Because of the vision of two career-technical education teachers, Mr. Knapp and Mr. Martin, this small district has established an amazing program that is helping prepare students for exciting careers in our state's agriculture and food industry sectors.

I visited Sandpoint High School at the invitation of the editor of the school newspaper, the Cedar Post, who requested an interview and also invited me to the North Idaho College CTE Road Show they were hosting. Let me tell you, I've been interviewed many times in this position, and I would put Emi Lynch from Sandpoint High up against any reporter in this state.

We truly have much to be proud of in Idaho education: Strong showings in national assessments, notable improvements in scores for students in first through third grade on our new Idaho Reading Indicator (IRI), and recognition as a national leader in mastery-based education and in dual credit attainment for high school students.

Of course, we still have much to do. I look forward to the work ahead and to collaborating with all education stakeholders to keep Idaho moving in the right direction.

We must ensure that Idaho can recruit and retain well-trained, highly qualified teachers. I am thrilled that the Governor's task force is recommending the educator career ladder stay in place and that we focus on boosting Idaho teacher pay, especially for our experienced teachers to incentivize them to stay in Idaho classrooms. This is a top priority of my budget request for next fiscal year.

Another growing emphasis for Idaho schools is mastery education, a student-centered, deeper learning approach embraced by high-performing education systems across the country. Idaho has more than doubled the schools participating in our Idaho Mastery Education Network this school year, and my 2021 budget request seeks an additional \$500,000 to continue expanding the network. The mastery approach allows students to progress at their own pace and to master content and skills before moving on, and it is gaining momentum around the country. Idaho is recognized as a leader in supporting innovative approaches to support student success.

I am so proud of Idaho's committed, skilled educators, the students they help and the families and communities who support our schools. I am looking forward to finding solutions with educators, lawmakers, parents and community members to highlight the great work that is being done and to collaborate on the work that lies ahead.

Together, we can and will help our students dream, lead and achieve!