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SDE reorganizes programs as student-centered learning department

(BOISE) –The State Department of Education has reimagined its academics department with an infusion of mastery education principles and teams organized by district size, not subject matter.

“The department’s new name – Instructional Support for Student-Centered Learning – may be a mouthful, but it says it all,” Superintendent of Public Instruction Sherri Ybarra said. “With this reorganization, we better meet our mission to help all schools and students succeed, and we incorporate two of my key initiatives: better serving remote and rural districts and using mastery-based methods to personalize and maximize learning.”

The new structure divides Idaho school districts and charter schools from smallest enrollments to largest, with each division covering all regions of Idaho. Division 1 includes 61 small, mostly rural districts with fewer than 1,000 students, plus 48 charter schools. Division 2 covers 30 districts and 4 charters with between 1,000 and 3,000 students. Division 3 connects 17 districts with between 3,000 and 10,000 students. Division 4, for enrollments of 10,000 to 40,000, includes the fewest districts – seven – and the most students – 158,629.

Previously, the experts in SDE’s academics department were assigned according to content area, such as math, science or social studies. And mastery was a small, separate department pursuing the student-centered, competency-based approach through a model program launched two years ago that includes 32 schools in 18 districts of varying sizes in all regions of the state. Moving Idaho to a mastery-based K-12 education system was the No. 1 recommendation of the governor’s Task Force for Improving Education, and the Legislature approved the model in 2015.

This reorganization combines academics and mastery under the leadership of Kelly Brady, who has headed the department’s mastery-based education efforts from the beginning.

This fall, the new division teams will visit all districts in their divisions, preceded by letters promising “our team will work together to share expertise within each of the content areas in order to provide systematic and equitable support.” Team visits began last week and will continue this fall, aiming to stop at all 115 Idaho districts before the snow falls.

Brady calls it a “listening tour” and said response has been positive so far. Each two-person team will build relationships with the schools within its division, helping them address their needs and goals and, just as important, gathering and sharing stories about the “positive practices” in those schools, she said.

Teams will share information about the new Idaho content standards for science and computer science, and they will offer early literacy support around the new statewide reading test for kindergartners through third graders. Existing regional coaches for English Language Arts and mathematics are included in each team.

“If we want them to personalize learning for students, we need to personalize our support to them,” Brady said, “to ensure that what they’re doing is as effective as possible.”

“We still have staff with expertise in the specific content areas, and they can lend support outside of their divisions,” she said. “But schools will have one team to contact – people they know and trust and who can connect them with the resources they need.”

The goal is to build a truly student-centered experience for children and teens throughout Idaho, helping students build on their background knowledge and make new connections and insights to discover their strengths and succeed, Brady said.

The National Conference of State Legislatures’ [Student-Centered Learning Commission](#) will be in Boise this week looking at Idaho’s mastery-based education program and visiting several schools in the [Idaho Mastery Education Network](#). Idaho is one of two states (along with New Hampshire) the commission is visiting and studying in depth, said Sunny Deye, who oversees NCSL’s work on digital and competency-based learning. Idaho was chosen because of the demonstrated support for mastery-based work at the Governor’s Office, SDE, State Board of Education and Legislature, Deye said.

The 32-school mastery network is still going strong in all four of the new divisions, Brady said, and many schools have shown interest in joining a second cohort of the model program.

Now the SDE’s reorganization of academics and mastery aims will advance a student-centered approach to all schools in the state. The approach will include a consistent implementation plan for new standards and a communication plan to support effective teaching and learning in districts and schools.

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Attached: List of districts and charter schools in each ISSCL division, listing the enrollment for each district/ school and the key point of contact/ administrator for each division.