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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
Thursday, March 31, 2022
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Guest Opinion

Cheers to a great legislative session for Idaho education

By Sherri Ybarra
Superintendent of Public Instruction

(BOISE) – Effective collaborations with a wide range of lawmakers, boosted by the energy and ideas of my new Student Advisory Council, made this year’s session of the Idaho Legislature my favorite yet – and a great success for K-12 education.

Highlights include a historic level of investment and newly signed bills that meet my priorities for the session, from improving pay for teachers and school staff to enhancing civics standards and improving early literacy.

One new law increases total early literacy funding from \$26 million to \$72.8 million, opening up options and opportunities for districts to develop literacy intervention programs that best support their students and meet local needs. That includes offering optional full-day kindergarten, one of my goals for this session. I particularly appreciate that the new law prioritizes services for economically disadvantaged students.

Another of my early literacy objectives was met through a new law to establish statewide dyslexia screening, intervention and teacher training. It is essential to detect and address characteristics of this learning disability early so that all Idaho students are on an even playing field, learning to read so they can read to learn.

This session also brought great news for the hard-working Idaho educators who have soldiered through two years of pandemic disruptions and challenges without losing their passion for education and commitment to their students. They are the epitome of essential workers.

In November, I asked for \$1,000 bonuses for our teachers and support staff, and that is happening as we speak. For next school year, classified staff are getting a 7 percent pay boost, and the Legislature fully funded the teachers’ career ladder for fiscal 2023 and provided an additional \$36.5 million in educator compensation.

All in all, the state’s investment in public schools is historic -- an increase of more than \$256 million from the state general fund appropriated a year ago. That brings next year’s general fund appropriation to \$2.3 billion.

Along with much-needed funding, this session brought me a renewed appreciation for our system of government and for the interconnections between its branches. And much of that appreciation came through the eyes of my first Student Advisory Council, 13 students in grades 4 through 12 from every region of the state.

They examined key issues, attended House and Senate Education committee meetings and met with the governor. They conducted mock legislative sessions, and two of them – ninth grader Audrey Harmon of Idaho Falls and Coeur d’Alene fourth-grader Bridget McNamee – testified at actual legislative hearings, advocating for bills that are now law.

My meetings with the advisory council, along with visits to high school government and history classes across Idaho, inspired my proposal to put statewide emphasis on students’ understanding of civics. The resolution I co-sponsored with legislators drew overwhelming support, and it will guide my department’s efforts to create stand-alone civics standards as part of the regularly scheduled review and revision of Idaho’s social studies content standards.

The goal is to make civics standards – what students are expected to learn at each grade level – easier for educators and parents to access and understand. I plan to do the same thing with the standards for financial literacy, another part of the social studies standards set for review this year – and, like civics, an important part of becoming responsible adults.

Other Idaho content standards – for English language arts, math and science – were thoroughly reviewed and rewritten by educators and other stakeholders over the past two years, and they now will replace the controversial “common core” standards first enacted in 2011. That is thanks to strong support from many Idaho legislators who served on the standards working groups and advocated for the new standards to become law.

That happened last week, and seven lawmakers from both parties and differing points of view gathered with me at the Statehouse to celebrate this achievement. It was a great moment near the end of a session marked by collaboration, cooperation and commitment to education. I am grateful to all who worked with my department to accomplish our shared goals to help Idaho schools and students achieve.

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