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Guest opinion

New year brings renewed commitment to Idaho students and educators

By Sherri Ybarra
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Happy New Year! Like educators and families throughout Idaho, I'm looking forward to this new year with the hope that we will be able to get back to school under more normal conditions.

As the state's Legislature prepares to convene and set budgets, my first priority is to make sure Idaho students have access to the instruction and opportunities they must have to succeed. Schools must have ongoing resources to sustain their operations, as well as the flexibility to make decisions based on local needs and conditions that are best for their students. My legislative agenda includes the following priorities:

- 1. Ensure students have access to in-person instruction and programs:** Simply put, our kids need to be in school, with teachers and peers, to have the best opportunities to learn and grow. I will work with the Legislature to ensure that students, particularly those in our special populations, continue to have the instructional opportunities they need, including safe, in-person instruction.
Therefore, I will be introducing legislation that makes in-person learning the general rule and limits interruptions defined by emergencies only. All students in all schools have the right to an uninterrupted education, which includes in-person instruction that covers all disciplines including music, P.E., and the arts, when safety and health requirements can be met.
- 2. Reverse the 5 percent funding holdback:** Districts cut their previously approved 2020-21 budgets as a mid-pandemic precaution. Revenues have exceeded expectations, and we must restore funding to continue essential education efforts. I will work with the Governor and legislators to make sure the reductions are fully restored as soon as state general fund revenue allows.
- 3. Reward and retain teachers and staff:** My budget request for next year includes \$21.7 million to reinstate funding, frozen by the holdback, for teachers and pupil support staff to move up the career ladder. It also will implement the Advanced Professional rung to improve pay for veteran educators to keep them on the job. We continue to struggle with a teacher shortage in Idaho, and the fear and confusion sparked by COVID-19 have, no doubt, aggravated that shortage. Other school employees are also vital to student success. I have requested a 2 percent pay increase for staff and a 1 percent boost for administrators.

4. Address social and emotional health: Coronavirus not only poses a threat to Idahoans' physical wellbeing, but also to our mental and emotional health, creating high levels of stress and anxiety. My department has successfully pursued numerous grants to advance students' mental and behavioral health, and securing and administering those grants remains a top priority. Suicide prevention and risk detection also have been top priorities, and we can't afford to take our foot off the pedal now.

We must be vigilant about the social-emotional health of educators, as well as the children they serve. With extra duties, curriculum disruptions and loss of personal contact, this pandemic has taken a huge toll on the teachers and staff whose commitment and effort are vital in meeting Idaho's education goals.

5. Sustain key initiatives: As we work to regain lost ground, it is essential that we continue investing in mastery-based programs, which foster the individualized, self-directed learning that has proven invaluable as students transition from classroom interaction to more independent work at home. In this fiscal year, 31 new schools joined the mastery education network. I seek to restore the holdback of \$50,000 to continue expanding mastery-based efforts.

My 2022 budget request also includes ongoing funding to continue the emphasis on K-3 literacy -- making sure Idaho kids learn to read in the early grades so they can read to learn and improve their opportunities into adulthood. Because of the disruptions caused by COVID, districts and charter schools likely will need additional funds and resources for early literacy intervention in the years ahead.

Not only is reading essential to student success, so is the ability to understand and apply mathematics. My budget request for next year restores \$100,000 to the Idaho Math Initiative, which aims to increase students' math scores and better prepare them for careers.

Past practices for supporting and funding our public schools have been put to the test like never before over the past several months. I am looking forward to frank and open discussions in the coming weeks about the proposal to transition from funding based on attendance to funding based on enrollment.

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has been a struggle, but it also has taught us to be more innovative and flexible. While we don't know how long this pandemic will last, we do know we will emerge stronger and more focused on the things that matter most. This legislative session and this new year are prime time for taking the steps needed to ensure our schools and students can rebound and thrive in the better times to come.

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