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Superintendent Ybarra lays out student-focused budget request to JFAC

(BOISE) – Improving Idaho students’ ability to learn and succeed is at the heart of each priority listed in Superintendent of Public Instruction Sherri Ybarra’s proposed public schools budget for 2021.

Superintendent Ybarra presented her budget request to the Joint Finance-Appropriations Committee Thursday morning, emphasizing increased teacher pay, literacy, mastery-based learning, and enhancing student safety and well-being.

“Keeping skilled, experienced teachers on the job, ensuring students can read at grade level by third grade and training educators to detect and respond to students’ social and emotional needs are essential to giving Idaho’s children the tools and support they need to succeed in school and beyond,” Superintendent Ybarra said.

The superintendent’s 2021 budget request for public schools totals about \$1.99 billion, a 5.3 percent increase over the current year’s general fund appropriation.

Line items in the budget request include extending the career ladder to improve pay for Idaho’s veteran teachers. Superintendent Ybarra requested \$40 million, noting that it was a placeholder because her budget was due three months before the governor’s task force made its recommendations. The superintendent told JFAC Thursday that she supports the goal to provide an additional allocation for veteran teachers, in keeping with the task force recommendations.

Continuing to increase teacher pay, particularly for experienced teachers, will help combat a teacher shortage that is hitting small rural districts particularly hard. In her presentation, Superintendent Ybarra shared comments from district leaders across Idaho who report severe teaching shortages in special education, CTE, literacy intervention and mathematics. Some reported losing teachers to neighboring Washington, where the beginning salary for teachers is about \$11,000 higher than in Idaho. Many districts, Ybarra said, are forced to seek emergency provisional certification for candidates to fill critical positions because no applicants have the needed endorsement or certificate.

Superintendent Ybarra also seeks \$1 million to develop and implement training in social-emotional learning to help teachers and school staff recognize and respond to students' emotional needs, including how to de-escalate unsafe situations and how to coordinate resources from state, local and non-profit groups.

Idaho educators are eager for this training as more and more of their students show behavioral and emotional needs, Superintendent Ybarra said, noting that this training will create better conditions for learning in Idaho schools.

Another growing focus for Idaho schools and educators is mastery education, a student-centered, competency-based approach in which Idaho is considered a national leader. After a successful three-year "incubator" with more than 30 schools across the state, the Legislature lifted the cap on participation last year. Now many more schools and districts have signed up for the Idaho Mastery Education Network, representing more than a quarter of all districts and 12 percent of charter schools. The superintendent's 2021 budget request seeks \$500,000 to help fund that expansion, bringing total funding to \$1.9 million.

Another key objective in the superintendent's budget request is to continue funding literacy intervention programs to support struggling readers. The superintendent seeks to make the \$26 million in literacy funds lawmakers approved last year for Idaho schools an ongoing appropriation.

Continuing that funding will allow districts to sustain the efforts they launched this year to help meet a vital goal for Idaho: ensuring all students can read at grade level by third grade so they can go on to success in school, careers and life.

In her budget presentation, the superintendent outlined other examples of Idaho public schools' "upward trajectory," including improvements in ISAT scores, improved early reading skills among first-through third-graders, and nearly 500 Idaho schools meeting their interim goals in one or more measures. In the National Assessment of Education Progress, very few states performed better than Idaho in the percentage of 4th and 8th grade students who scored Basic or better in reading and math.

The superintendent also pointed to goals and room for improvement, including the need to boost students' math scores, improve outcomes for students with disabilities and work to provide options for parents to build children's readiness to read before they enter kindergarten.

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