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Superintendent Ybarra announces multi-pronged school safety initiative

(BOISE) – Superintendent of Public Instruction Sherri Ybarra called for a greater investment in the safety of Idaho’s students through a new initiative, announced today, focused on increasing support to Idaho’s schools.

Keep Idaho Students Safe (KISS) combines existing efforts such as Superintendent Ybarra’s three-year-old anti-bullying campaign with new proposals, including a grant for trained security personnel in every school, arming teachers with more knowledge to support student safety and well-being, and a statewide counselor to support schools in crisis and to plan prevention efforts.

“Our No. 1 priority is to keep our students safe,” Superintendent Ybarra said. “No single strategy or program is the answer, so KISS will add a toolbox of new measures to existing approaches that are already having an impact.”

Input from students, teachers and parents over the past three years shaped the initiative, and Superintendent Ybarra plans to present the key areas of KISS during her statewide post-legislative tour in April, gathering stakeholder ideas for what should be added or adapted.

Getting feedback from students is key to Superintendent Ybarra’s initiative, and she plans school visits and an online conversation to gather students’ thoughts and ideas. Other Idahoans also will be able to offer feedback through a survey on the State Department of Education website.

Some aspects of the initiative, including a statewide anti-bullying campaign, are already in place, and wheels were in motion to expand the school safety effort. But the Parkland school shooting in Florida and a surge in concern and activism make this the right time to solidify plans, announce a broad-based initiative and gather input from Idahoans, Superintendent Ybarra said.

Public school funding for the coming school year is already set, but the superintendent plans to ask the Legislature to fund KISS with a supplemental budget request at the start of the 2019 session in January. The funding would be available for the second half of the 2018-19 school year.

The full cost of implementing new KISS measures next year is estimated at nearly \$21 million, covering all three major prongs of the initiative.

SAFETY COURSE: With the help of subject matter experts, SDE is designing a three-credit, 45-hour course focusing on protecting students and addressing risk behaviors, including bullying. It also would include suicide prevention training, which is called for in the pending House Bill 634. The course would be a required part of the recertification process for Idaho educators and, later, a part of the certification process for new Idaho teachers and administrators. Estimated cost \$1.99 million.

SECURITY GRANT FOR SCHOOLS: The SDE aims to secure funds for all Idaho schools to have a trained security presence, either school resource officers, retired military or law enforcement personnel, or private security. An estimated \$25,000 in security grant funding plus \$500 for training would be provided for each of the 732 student-occupied school buildings in Idaho. Estimated cost \$18.67 million.

“Having trusted security people available is of great importance to the students I’ve talked to,” Superintendent Ybarra said. “When I attend non-school public events across the state, there is generally a security presence, and Idaho students deserve the same sense of safety in their schools.”

CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS COUNSELOR: This statewide position, housed at the State Department of Education, would help school counselors across the state address student threats and respond to crises. Similar positions have been established in states where school massacres have occurred. Estimated cost \$116,584 including salary, benefits and \$20,000 in operational funds.

Moving forward with KISS quickly is essential, Superintendent Ybarra said, expressing optimism that concerted efforts can substantially reduce the threat of violence in Idaho schools.

Some people may think the acronym KISS is too light-hearted for an initiative addressing serious issues, but the superintendent noted that the impetus for the effort is student-centered, inspired by affection and prevention rather than fear or dread.

“We need to do everything we can to help students, staff and families feel secure in Idaho’s schools,” Superintendent Ybarra said. “We take that extremely seriously, and that’s what KISS is about.”

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Attached: Overview of KISS initiative