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## **Guest opinion: Idaho schools adapting quickly to meet student needs**

By Sherri Ybarra  
Superintendent of Public Instruction

For Idaho educators, as for all Idahoans, this rapidly developing COVID-19 pandemic has been a time of quick study and rapid response, with unprecedented challenges from all directions.

School leaders and teachers are suddenly being confronted with what it looks like to provide vital instruction and services while physical classrooms are closed and we are learning the new norms of social interaction.

Families and students throughout Idaho are counting on our education system to continue making sure kids have essential services, such as nutritious meals and meaningful instruction vital to their safety and well-being, despite being cut off from virtually all of their customary interactions.

It's a tall order, and it's a work in progress. But it is made so much easier by the willingness, energy and innovation of our educators and education partners throughout the state who are working long, hard and smart. As Idaho's Superintendent of Public Instruction, I am tremendously impressed and encouraged by the skill, creativity, collaboration and commitment of school administrators, teachers and support staff as we strive to make this strange temporary reality as workable and "normal" as possible.

Twice a week, school leaders join me and my department heads in webinars to share the latest developments and answer questions online in real time from across the state, covering everything from school finance to assessments, distance learning to driver's education. My directors of Child Nutrition Programs and Special Education also hold frequent webinars to help schools and districts navigate the requirements and challenges of offering nourishing meals to children and providing individualized education plans for students with disabilities. Those are just two examples of the

countless interactions between State Department of Education staff and districts and schools throughout Idaho as we provide essential services to Idaho's students and families.

As a member of the Governor's Coronavirus Working Group, I am working closely with Gov. Brad Little and other state agencies, including the Department of Health and Welfare. I can attest to the comprehensive efforts taking place to support all Idahoans through this difficult time.

My staff and I are in near-constant contact with the U.S. Department of Education and other federal agencies to navigate this new terrain without jeopardizing funding or accountability. I've been encouraged by the responsiveness of Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos and the U.S. Department of Education. Just this week, our request for a statewide waiver for standardized testing was granted in less than 24 hours, and I spoke to Secretary DeVos twice this week to discuss Idaho's needs.

We are continuing to work with our federal partners and through the Idaho State Board of Education to eliminate or ease regulations and requirements that could hamstring school operations in this time of emergency. Our pledge to Idaho districts, schools, students and families is to provide maximum flexibility to meet their unique needs and challenges as we work our way through this unprecedented situation together.

The [governor's coronavirus website](#) is an excellent source of information on this pandemic and its impact on Idaho. The State Department of Education maintains a [Resources for Schools](#) page on that website, and we work hard to keep it current and useful, adding and updating information multiple times per day.

As this challenging situation continues to evolve, none of us knows what may develop or when. But we know that Idahoans are resilient and that we have top-notch state and local leaders dedicated to ensuring that we come out of this stronger and better able to meet the challenges and opportunities of the future.

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