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‘Nation’s report card’ shows Idaho students compare well to counterparts

(BOISE) – Idaho’s latest scores in the National Assessment for Education Progress provide encouraging news as the state works to increase student performance in reading and mathematics, Superintendent of Public Instruction Sherri Ybarra said.

“It’s sometimes popular to complain that the quality of Idaho education ranks near the bottom of the barrel nationally, but this well-respected assessment shows that is simply not true,” Superintendent Ybarra said. “Idaho’s results are in line with the national average, and many states posted lower average scores than Idaho in all four tested cohorts.”

“Our educators are working hard to improve student learning, and it is encouraging to see positive progress in some areas,” the superintendent said. “The NAEP also highlights what we already know: that we have more work to do to improve outcomes for students who are learning English and those who qualify for special education.”

The results, released nationwide April 10 as “the Nation’s Report Card,” track reading and math proficiency among a statewide sampling of fourth- and eighth-graders. Each sample, systematically selected by a contractor for the U.S. Department of Education, includes 2,400 students. Testing took place in early 2017.

“I’m pleased to see that student outcomes for Idaho are improving,” Governor C.L. “Butch” Otter said. “Our five-year plan for improving education is starting to yield positive results, and I am hopeful that the rate of improvement will increase. Our goal must be all Idaho students achieving up to their highest potential, so we also must ensure that students who aren’t meeting grade-level goals get the support they need.”

State Board of Education President Linda Clark said: “Four years ago, we launched our plan for improvement. I’m encouraged to see growth, however I and the other board members believe we can do better. We need to find ways to accelerate the progress we are making and to better understand why some of our students are falling behind. Investments always take time, and we are moving in the right direction.”

NAEP math and reading tests are administered every two years, and Idaho's 2017 scores held steady with those from 2015: The average score in each category remained the same or increased by 1 point, a statistically insignificant difference. But in the previous two-year period, Idaho students' average math scores dipped by 2 points.

The brightest outlook in the new NAEP report comes in the reading tests, particularly for eighth-graders. More than 80 percent of Idaho eighth-graders in the sample tested in the "basic" range or above, a measure that was bested by only two jurisdictions, Massachusetts and Department of Defense-operated schools. Thirty-one states posted lower percentages of basic and above, and 18 states performed similarly to Idaho.

And Idaho compares favorably with other states in the average scores of tested students in all four subject-grade pairings. The number of states that had lower average scores than Idaho ranged from 19 to 27, and only between six and 12 states showed higher average. Other states showed similar results to Idaho's.

"NAEP is the only assessment that gives us apples-to-apples comparisons among states," Superintendent Ybarra said.

Numerous programs and initiatives bode well for continued improvement in Idaho education, Superintendent Ybarra said, from the new reading test that will be rolled out statewide next fall to newly approved science content standards that will spark a new science assessment.

Even Ybarra's proposed multipronged school safety initiative, expected to be implemented early next year, promises to help improve Idaho students' classroom confidence and performance.

"Kids who don't feel safe don't feel motivated, and they don't perform well," Superintendent Ybarra said.

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