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Guest Opinion

New school year brings new initiatives and ongoing challenges

By Sherri Ybarra
Superintendent of Public Instruction

(BOISE) – As we enter a new school year with the pandemic still creating uncertainty, I remain optimistic because I know that our school leaders share my commitment to providing the best conditions for learning possible in their districts and charter schools.

Our educators are working hard to make sure students and staff are safe, and they are ready to pivot and adjust as needed. Their focus, as always, is on student learning and improving student outcomes.

When it comes to charting a course for “back to school” this year, it’s more important than ever that decisions are made at the local level based on the unique circumstances and needs of each community. It’s also more important than ever that parents are engaged and involved in decision-making, especially given the hot-button issues currently being debated.

I want to thank all the individuals serving on local school boards. These are unpaid volunteers with huge responsibilities in a time of unprecedented challenges for school operations. Parents, too, are working hard to inform themselves and make the best choices for their children. I urge all of us who are passionate about education to respect one another’s concerns and good intentions and work together to do what’s best for Idaho students.

My top priorities for the 2021-22 school year are to address the academic impact of lost instructional time over the past year and a half as well as to ensure that student mental and emotional well-being is supported. My staff and I are working hard to provide districts and charters with resources to provide tutoring, extended instructional time and other interventions

to help students who struggled through the pandemic get back on track. I'm especially excited about two new initiatives taking shape this fall that will support these efforts.

What we do in Idaho's public schools and districts is all about meeting students' needs, igniting their dreams and fueling their success. To tap this amazing resource, I formed a Student Advisory Council to help shape the Idaho public education experience.

I put out a call last spring, and the response was stunning: 58 applications from elementary, middle and high school students across the state, each with a parent or guardian willing to accompany them to meetings, and each with great ideas.

It was hard to narrow it down – so hard that I ended up with 13 council members instead of the planned 12. We're still gathering the paperwork to finalize the lineup, but I'm really excited about this group of girls and boys in grades 4 through 12 from every region of the state, with widely diverse backgrounds and strong ideas about how to improve the Idaho public education experience. Our first meeting is Sept. 20. I can hardly wait.

In addition, my Department of Student Engagement and Safety Coordination is hard at work developing a detailed work plan to beef up mental health services, resources and supports for schools, students and families in Idaho. They are working from a list of strategies and proposals developed by a committee of nearly 90 stakeholders in Idaho schools, agencies and communities.

The recommendations include: a statewide resource to improve districts' ability to monitor and evaluate student mental health and well-being; improving district access to outside behavioral health and wellness services; increasing public school employees' awareness and access to mental health resources; identifying and supporting ongoing training for K-12 educators in best practices related to students' emotional and behavioral development; and increasing students' involvement in communications that support behavioral health.

This school year will bring plenty of challenges, but it also brings abundant opportunities. We are strengthened by what we've learned in the past 18 months, and, as always, I and my partners in Idaho public education are committed to supporting Idaho schools and students to achieve.

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