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Superintendent Ybarra’s Student Advisory Council gathers for first meeting

(BOISE) – Thirteen students from across Idaho, grades 4 through 12, gathered in Boise this week for the inaugural meeting of Superintendent of Public Instruction Sherri Ybarra’s Student Advisory Council.

The students, including one who participated via Zoom, spent Monday with Superintendent Ybarra sharing introductions and ideas, touring the Statehouse and discussing what is important to them and their peers about education in Idaho.

“It was a great first meeting – everything I’d hoped for. The students care so deeply and have an impressive variety of ideas, along with the passion to help make ideas happen,” Superintendent Ybarra said. “Some were a little reserved and tentative at first, but they really warmed up as the day went on, and the interaction between these students – strangers before the meeting began – was delightful.”

The meeting began with introductions, with the superintendent and students describing their backgrounds and interests. Then Superintendent Ybarra asked for a one-word description of how each student felt at that moment, starting it off with two words for herself: “super excited.” Students’ answers included “inspired,” “happy,” “curious” and “ready,” with multiples of “interested,” “intrigued” and “excited.”

Icebreaker sessions paired the students for 15-second exchanges on random questions, from describing favorite sandwiches to dreaming up new subjects for school. Both topics generated animated group discussions, with course-subject suggestions including “synthetic engineering,” “how to be a better learner,” “how tires are made,” and “women and STEM.”

Later, they talked about what is happening in their schools, what they like and what they would like to see changed. In group discussions and in anonymous questionnaires, students suggested topics for Student Advisory Council discussion. Topics that came up multiple times included mastery-based education, advanced classes, school funding, school safety, mental health, services for students with disabilities and a need for smaller class sizes and one-on-one learning opportunities with teachers.

The long-running pandemic sparked numerous comments. Students expressed concerns that too many of their peers and teachers were getting sick, with a severe shortage of substitute teachers. One girl worried that schools were getting more lax about COVID precautions, with people not taking time off when they should. Another student praised his school for strict precautions such as requiring masks, but

said it seems like the pandemic is pushing things into a faster pace, with less one-on-one time as schools try to catch up on learning. One student noted that the pandemic has significantly disrupted three school years, starting early in the spring of 2020 and continuing this year.

Several students commented on the value of the state’s Advanced Opportunities program, which Superintendent Ybarra’s office oversees. The program pays for middle- and high-school students to earn college credits, get workforce training and otherwise jump-start their plans for higher education and careers. One student estimated that 80 percent of the students in his school had already used their full Advanced Opportunities allowance of \$4,125 per student.

After a tour of the Statehouse, the Student Advisory Council ate lunch in the House of Representatives’ majority caucus room and sat in lawmakers’ chairs in the Lincoln Auditorium to hear Dave Leroy, former Idaho attorney general and lieutenant governor, talk about Abraham Lincoln and Lincoln’s connections to Idaho.

Superintendent Ybarra described the functions of her department and advocacy for students, teachers and schools, and encouraged the students to speak out when they have concerns about local and district-level policies. Deputy Superintendent for Policy and Communications Marilyn Whitney discussed the legislative process, and Superintendent Ybarra suggested a mock legislative session as an activity for a future meeting.

“Everything we do in my department, and in the education committees of the Legislature, centers on the children of Idaho and how we can guide them to success in school and in life,” Superintendent Ybarra said. “It is vital to hear feedback and ideas from the beneficiaries of those policies and tax dollars, and this Student Advisory Council is a great step in that direction. I can hardly wait for our next meeting.”

Three more advisory council meetings are planned this school year, with the next meeting expected in December.

Members of the Student Advisory Council, including grade, school and district, are: Bridget McNamee, fourth grade, Dalton Elementary School, Coeur d’Alene; Emma Paddlety, ninth grade, Lapwai Middle/High School; Adeline Perry, fifth grade, Valley View Elementary School, Boise; Grady Noble, seventh grade, North Junior High, Boise; Zayan Virani, 10th grade, Timberline High School, Boise; Michael “Quinn” Gusinow, 11th grade, Renaissance High School, West Ada; Joselyn Gutierrez, 12th grade, Caldwell High School; Ocie Atagi, sixth grade, New Plymouth Middle School; Brylee Williams, 12th grade, Weiser High School; Hayden Barbre, eighth grade, Wood River Middle School, Blaine County; Mila Gabiola, 10th grade, Highland High School, Pocatello; Audrey Harmon, ninth grade, Bonneville High School; Caleb Pebley, 11th grade, Hillcrest High School, Bonneville.

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