



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
Wednesday, Oct. 21, 2020
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Guest Opinion

Back to school isn't back to normal, but keep focus on what's best for kids

By Sherri Ybarra
Superintendent of Public Instruction

This school year is unlike any other, with a long-running pandemic heaping stress on families, teachers, administrators and support staff. All involved are working hard to innovate and keep everyone safe while minimizing learning loss.

It's a tall order, and the challenges and risks vary widely from district to district – and sometimes from week to week. After a spring that forced schools to suddenly rely on distance learning, this fall, districts and charters have shifted between in-person learning, distance learning and hybrid approaches that combine the two.

It's hard, and it's frustrating. Sharp disagreements have developed between some school boards, parents and teachers.

As a longtime teacher, it is my strong personal belief that our children, especially young learners and those with special needs, are best served by in-person, classroom learning. I believe most experts, educators and parents agree – if we can make those classrooms safe for all involved.

That is the crux of the issue, and each local district and charter school must make its own decisions, in concert with local health authorities, to establish the rules that best keep our children, educators, staff and families safe.

School trustees are faced with decisions and situations they never envisioned when running for office, monitoring health statistics and medical guidance while trying to balance parent and teacher concerns with their primary objective, preparing students to achieve and succeed in school and beyond.

Parents have been saddled with new roles, worries and challenges as their children learn from home, at least part of the time, and working parents grapple with unexpected child care issues, often splitting focus between their jobs and their child's lessons. And when a district must change its instructional approach, that change can be disruptive for parents and children.

Teachers have had to learn new technology, prepare lessons for both in-person and online instruction, and shift from one system to another while minimizing disruptions to learning. In the classroom, they must make sure kids are wearing masks and social distancing, sanitize desks and safeguard their own health while at the same time teaching math and reading and looking out for their students' wellbeing.

As Superintendent of Public Instruction, I can't (and shouldn't) tell districts what to decide. But my department can provide support and help to access funding and safety supplies and make their chosen approaches work. Where parties disagree, I urge them to recognize the goals they have in common, listen to each other and find a path forward.

The pandemic poses not only a threat to Idahoans' physical wellbeing, but also to our social-emotional health. Social-emotional learning has been a priority for my department and schools throughout the state for several years, with numerous programs geared to foster students' emotional wellness and to detect and address warning signs.

As I talk with teachers and administrators, it is abundantly clear that we need to be vigilant about the social-emotional health of our educators, as well as the students they serve. Without teachers' continued commitment and effort, none of Idaho's education goals can be met.

Retaining and recruiting skilled teachers continues to be a top priority for my department, and my focus in the upcoming legislative session will be to continue improving pay for those who teach and support Idaho students.

We don't know how long we'll be grappling with this pandemic, and COVID continues to create new challenges.

Issues are not going to be resolved quickly and neatly in all situations, but our saving grace will be our shared commitment to Idaho children, their learning and their futures. We must remember that positive student outcomes depend on committed, caring parents, teachers, administrators and school boards.

We are in this together, and we are stronger together. Let's work together to make sure students can be in the classroom.

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