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## **Idaho Department of Education, Idaho Parents Unlimited to Expand Special Education Support for Parents**

(BOISE) – Parents of special education students in Idaho will soon have a new resource to support their students’ success and connect with other families navigating the special education system thanks to the new Parent LINK mentorship program from Idaho Parents Unlimited (IPUL) and the Idaho Department of Education.

The Parent LINK program provides parents with face-to-face peer support from trained parent mentors who are familiar with the local special education landscape. After a successful training session with parent mentors in the Lake Pend Oreille School District, the department and IPUL intend to expand the program to serve parents and families statewide.

“This is the true customer service side of supporting special education students and families, bringing knowledge and support directly to parents in their own communities,” said Superintendent Debbie Critchfield. “This program means that parents will be able to connect with a local parent who has navigated the system and has lived the shared experience of being a special education parent.”

Parent LINK mentors are trained as local-level special education support who can assist parents in things like child find and referral; IEPs and the IEP process; district and state-level contacts for support and guidance; and more. And, because the parent mentor has familiarity with the local education landscape, they can offer more precise, tailored support to families in need.

“Parents navigating special education face a system that is complex, highly technical, and difficult to access without support,” said IPUL Parent Training and Information Center director Melissa Vian. “Families are expected to participate as equal members of IEP teams, yet they often encounter unfamiliar legal requirements, dense jargon, and decisions that feel predetermined.”

Deploying these mentors, says Vian, is a step towards establishing an open line of communication that’s built on clarity, trust and understanding.

“From IPUL’s standpoint, addressing these challenges requires not only funding and staffing solutions but also an intentional investment in transparent communication and family engagement,” she said.

Currently, IPUL has completed training for ten parent mentors in the Lake Pend Oreille School District and intends to expand services statewide.

“As of today, all ten mentors have been actively supporting families in their district, which includes helping parents understand the services their child is receiving and helping them to understand the IEP process,” said Vian.

The program is part of a multi-pronged approach that the Idaho Department of Education is taking to improve special education services statewide.

“This is a chance for parents to directly connect with the right people to help in their own communities,” said Critchfield. “Getting in-person advice from people who understand the journey is so invaluable, and I’m grateful to Idaho Parents Unlimited for helping to make this possible for Idaho’s students and families.”

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