

Hands on Approach to Educational Reform in Idaho

Governor Otter should be commended for his efforts in putting together a diverse group of talented teachers, administrators, state board members, school superintendents, parents, and others that now comprise the Task Force for Improving Education in the State of Idaho. These dedicated educators have been assigned the undaunted task of traveling to seven different Idaho cities actively seeking input from concerned individuals about how to improve education in the state of Idaho.

I had the opportunity to attend the scheduled Task Force meeting in Pocatello, Idaho, on Tuesday, April 23, 2013. Comments, suggestions, and criticisms were voiced, some substantive, others not. After listening to everyone speak I felt like a number of important issues were either not discussed or needed to be expounded on. I will offer my insights on these critical challenges facing our Idaho public educational system and present progressive ideas for possible improvement focusing on many best practices already successfully implemented in other states.

Dr. Sigmund Freud, famous Australian physician and psychiatrist, believed the formative years for a child's physical, emotional, and cognitive development occur during the first five to six years of life. Although many of his other theories have been questioned, few disagree with this one. Is the State of Idaho doing enough to facilitate the cognitive, emotional, and educational development of our children during these formative years? I do not believe so!

Quality early education for our young citizenry is critical to improving how they achieve, learn, and mature physically and emotionally in their subsequent grade levels. Mandatory kindergarten should be implemented for all public elementary schools in the State of Idaho. Class sizes should be reduced to make the educational process more individualized for our young children. Highly qualified paraprofessionals should be provided in all kindergarten/first grade classrooms so as to help facilitate this process. Media specialist, counselor, and social work positions lost during budget cutbacks need to be restored in both our elementary and secondary schools.

A higher level of collaboration, coordination, and support among state and local educational entities for head start and other pre kindergarten programs is needed to assure that our youngsters have a better academic and emotional foundation to enter kindergarten, and actually have the opportunity to not only succeed but to exceed educational achievement bench marks! Early in the educational process parent education classes need to be provided so that parents better understand their role in the education of their children.

There is currently a mass exodus of a substantial number of our most qualified existing teachers, many who are from our elementary school ranks. How can we provide our children the best education possible during their most formative years when we are losing our best teachers to other states who have more competitive salary and benefit packages? It is no secret that these states value teachers and realize the important role they play in educating their future leaders. I am embarrassed to say I know a number of teachers who are eligible for food stamps because their median family income is below federal poverty guidelines! This must change!

This year's teachers were unfairly evaluated for possible salary increases which were based exclusively on standardized test results for their classes and individual schools. Many outstanding teachers were denied salary increases because of this flawed system which clearly discriminates against those professionals who teach at schools that have a disproportionate number of students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

We must implement an equitable and fair way of evaluating existing teachers who excel and reward them financially for their dedication and efforts. A multi factored system of performance evaluation should be implemented that examines: student's academic growth and improvement; student performance benchmarks that are based on realistic objectives taking into consideration the student's individual needs, challenges (physical and emotional), learning styles, and their primary/secondary languages; teacher's who actively seek additional, relevant professional development should be rewarded for keeping in tune with current best practices in their field; parent feedback should be encouraged; and the extent by which teachers are evaluated as meeting and/or exceeding individual performance objectives established between them and their supervising principals.

Good teachers must be respected and financially compensated at competitive, market values (compared to other progressive states that value education), if we are to retain them in the future.

Our best and brightest young adults in the state of Idaho are not pursuing their bachelor degrees in education. With one of the lowest starting base teaching salaries in the nation there is little interest or appeal to seek out teaching majors at our state universities. If we really want to have a pool of excellent, qualified teachers to select from to fill openings across Idaho the starting base salary must be raised significantly.

In summary, some of the more critical issues effecting the quality of public education in Idaho include the need for smaller class sizes across the elementary and secondary school spectrum; additional qualified paraprofessionals, media specialists, counselors, social workers, and police officers in our elementary and secondary schools; the increased importance and commitment to early childhood programs; parent education classes; the implementation of a competitive, market valued salary compensation schedule for our existing, qualified teachers at all class levels; and a significant increase in the starting base salary for new teachers. I know there are additional issues like the common core state standards being proposed, however, I felt compelled to address the ones presented.

It is my sincere hope that Governor Otter, the State Board of Education, the Task Force for Improving Education in Idaho, and the Idaho Superintendent of Schools will be transparent in their efforts to embrace the feedback received by all of the concerned educators, parents, and citizens across the state and formulate well thought out and viable options for truly improving education in Idaho!

Quality educational reform will NOT occur if we continue to have unfunded mandates that have little chance of succeeding without access to the appropriate resources and financial commitment to implement them properly! It is time the State of Idaho Legislature make a long term, serious financial commitment to fund our educational programs and teachers in a progressive, pro-active way that will ultimately result in our youth excelling in their educational endeavors!