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**For Immediate Release**

December 18, 2018

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**Student Mental Health Must Be Addressed**

By Debbie Critchfield, vice president, Idaho State Board of Education

Conversations about student behavioral health from kindergarten through college are occurring throughout our state. K-12 administrators report that they are spending half of their time dealing with student emotional needs even though full time counselors are available in their schools. In my home district of Cassia County, the mental health needs of our students tend to be the lead topic of community discussions. Amid an increase in student difficulties caused by stress, grief, loss, addiction, peer relationships, anxiety and suicide - parents, teachers, counselors and school administrators are struggling to understand it, and to come up with plans to address it.

We regularly speak of improving student safety and yet spend only a fraction of time discussing the reasons why student safety is put at risk in the first place. Our education system does not have all the answers but it does have the ability, within its infrastructure, to assist national efforts intended to improve student wellness and mental health.

This issue is complex and must involve a variety of approaches and partners. During a recent meeting with student body presidents from Idaho's colleges and universities, the State Board of Education's executive officers, which includes myself, Dr. Linda Clark and Dr. Dave Hill, heard student leaders express the need for greater and expanded mental health resources. The Board will discuss this with the presidents of Idaho's colleges and universities during the regular December

Board meeting this week at Boise State University. The discussion will include what is needed on campuses to meet this growing demand. Unidentified and unmet emotional health needs at educational institutions, can become problems for future employers and for society as a whole.

Parents, teachers and administrators all struggle with the dilemma, which can lead to dangerous situations as students act out, rather than reach out and speak out about their emotional needs.

The State Board of Education is taking a serious and deliberate approach toward improving mental health resources at our secondary and postsecondary schools and institutions. Identifying areas where clear standards for social and emotional learning can occur tops the list. Superintendent Sherri Ybarra and I began discussing this about a year ago and have identified places where the State Department of Education and the State Board can take needed actions to help support schools in this effort.

A State Board working group is also meeting this week to discuss a variety of strategies. This ranges from looking at classes for future educators to in-field professional development for those already working in our classrooms. Recommendations will be presented to the Board with an associated action plan.

We work to set and achieve academic goals both in statewide and local education plans, as we should. We set education policy and aim for rigorous targets, but for a growing number of students, there are complicated emotional needs that go untended often keeping students and their families in crisis and interfering with scholastic goals.

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