



650 W. State Street • Room 307 • Boise, ID • 83702
P.O. Box 83720 • Boise, ID • 83720-0037

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Contact: Mike Keckler
208-332-1591 (office)
208-866-5734 (cell)
Mike.Keckler@osbe.idaho.gov

Governing Idaho's Public Education System

By Debbie Critchfield, President, Idaho State Board of Education

Five years ago, I was appointed to serve on the Idaho State Board of Education. I applied for the position because I care deeply about public education in Idaho. I've learned a lot during my time as a Board Member and want to share with you some insights about our system and how it operates.

The State Board of Education was created in the Idaho Constitution and charged with the "general supervision of the state educational institutions and public school system... ." Those "educational institutions" are our public colleges and universities and the public school system is comprised of 115 local school districts and more than 50 charter schools that serve over 300,000 students throughout our state. Yes, overseeing that system is a huge responsibility covering everything from kindergarten through graduate degrees. Idaho is one of only two states (Rhode Island is the other) that has one board overseeing all public education within its borders.

The State Board consists of eight members; seven are volunteers appointed by the Governor and confirmed by the Idaho Senate for five-year terms. The eighth member is the State Superintendent of Public Instruction – a statewide elected position. In addition to serving on the Board, State Superintendent Sherri Ybarra leads the State Department of Education, which supports our public elementary, and secondary (K-12) schools. The Department is not separate from the Board; it operates as the Board's executive agency for K-12 education. The Superintendent

position was also established in the State Constitution, and Superintendent Ybarra votes on all Board matters including those involving our higher education institutions.

The Department has a staff of about 140 people who work closely with local school districts, superintendents and other administrators and teachers to implement policies and state-level standards in areas such as instructional standards and graduation requirements. The Department also distributes state and federal education funds to the districts, coordinates various statewide initiatives and programs and manages teacher certification. Matters involving district personnel and education-related materials are decided at the local level by locally elected school district trustees and administrators who are also in charge of day-to-day operations and classroom instruction.

The State Board's focus is on statewide policy, working with the Legislature and the Governor on development and implementation. A staff of just over 35 provide professional support to the Board, manage state scholarships and other programs, conduct research for decision makers, work with higher education institutions on everything from new degree programs to tuition and fee requests and help implement various student success initiatives. The staff work with elected officials, education stakeholder groups and other interested parties on a vast range of policy matters. The staff conduct policy analysis and prepare agenda materials for Board meetings, which often run 1,500 pages or more for each meeting. Each Board Member has honed his or her critical thinking skills, which are essential in order to absorb and make decisions based on this much material.

The State Board also serves as the Board of Regents for the University of Idaho and as the Board of Trustees for Idaho State University, Boise State University, Lewis-Clark State College, and the State Board for Career Technical Education. Idaho's four community colleges are each governed by their own separate board of trustees and are a growing part of our higher education system, that also operate in accordance with certain Board governing policies. The Board also oversees the Idaho Public Broadcasting System, the Division of Career Technical Education and the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation. Finally, the Public Charter School Commission also falls under Board governance.

We manage this responsibility through a system of standing committees. These committees are the workhorses of the Board where proposals and policy issues are discussed, vetted and refined before they are considered by the full Board. When the Board meets next week in Coeur d'Alene, we will review this structure and

discuss if adjustments are needed to best support Board discussions and decision making.

The [Board's Governing Policies](#) provide the governing framework, which enables the Board to effectively oversee the entire public education system. I agree with former Board President Dr. Linda Clark who noted in an earlier column that "Idaho's consolidated governance model is the envy of many other states because it provides us with the ability to set policy, which impacts the entire education pipeline without having to navigate multiple layers of decisions-makers."

As Board President, I intend to reach out this next year and work with Idaho's elected officials, education stakeholders, parents, students and others. Idaho is doing many things well. Together, we can build on progress made and find ways to continue to improve our overall public education system. After all, our students are counting on us.

If you have a question or an observation about public education in Idaho, send me an email at board@osbe.idaho.gov

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