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**Charter School Commission Executive Session Comments were Hurtful**

By Debbie Critchfield, President, Idaho State Board of Education

Many have weighed in regarding the oversight and function of the Idaho Public Charter School Commission (PCSC) in light of recent news pertaining to the Commission's discussions in executive session that were recorded and released. Executive sessions are authorized under the Idaho open meeting law to provide for non-public discussion of a limited number of subjects such as student education records with personally identifiable information in order to protect student privacy. Executive sessions are not held in public and are not typically recorded. No action or final decision may be made in executive session.

The particular executive session held last spring was unknowingly recorded and mistakenly released in response to a public record request under Idaho's public record law. Unfortunately, there were comments made during these discussions that were demeaning to individual charter schools and the communities they serve. The Idaho State Board of Education is fully aware of the situation. As a matter of governance, the State Board oversees the Commission's work. Commission positions are appointed by either the Governor, Speaker of the Idaho House of Representatives, or the President Pro Tem of the Idaho Senate. The PCSC staff report to the Board's executive director.

The mission of the Public Charter School Commission is to ensure that "authorized public charter schools comply with Idaho statute, protecting student and public interests by balancing high standards of accountability with respect for autonomy

of public charter schools and implementing best authorizing practices to ensure excellence of public charter school options available to Idaho families.” The PCSC authorizes 73 percent of charter schools in Idaho. Others are authorized by school district boards of trustees.

As Board President, I will not make excuses for comments that disparage individuals, schools or communities. Critical discussions do need to take place in executive session in order to protect student privacy as required by state and federal law. The Idaho Attorney General’s Office is investigating complaints made regarding the Commission’s executive session. Regardless of whether there was a violation of the open meeting law, discussions must be respectful and constructive in order for all of us to work toward our common goal of improving public education in Idaho.

My hope is that this incident will not diminish or overshadow the critical work of the Commission. As the authorizer of nearly three-quarters of all public charter schools, the Commission’s role is vitally important not only for charter school students and families, but for Idaho taxpayers as well. When schools are underperforming, the Commission must work with the schools to correct problems.

Moving forward, the Commission members and staff will receive training about Idaho’s open meeting law and how to have appropriate discussions about school performance, student data and education quality. I also hope to have conversations with parents within the charter school community to help rebuild trust.

The Public Charter School Commission plays an important role to ensure a quality education for the students under its charge. This role is carried out through the authorization of charter schools – a process defined in state law. The Commission does not exist to advocate for charter schools, nor to denigrate them. I sincerely hope that this episode will not diminish that role or cause people to lose faith in public charter schools or use it as a reason to attack the whole system. It is also my hope that we use this an opportunity to improve our communication, whether in public or behind closed doors.

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