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IT'S "NEXT STEPS" MONTH IN IDAHO

By Debbie Critchfield, President, Idaho State Board of Education

Idaho businesses tell us that they have many unfilled jobs that require workers with an appropriate level of training or schooling. This mismatch not only holds our economy back and is a limiting factor on future growth, but it holds Idahoans back from achieving personal and career related goals. The Idaho State Board of Education continues to tackle the challenge of how to get more young people to pursue some form of post-high school education or training, helping to position them for personal and professional success.

Less than a decade ago, lawmakers and other leaders began to hone in on Idaho's "go-on" rate as a bellwether measurement. At the same time, we started looking at how to get more young people to proactively consider their futures and fully explore their options. In 2015, we launched the Next Steps Idaho website - a comprehensive clearinghouse of tools, resources, and information for students as they explore their post-high school options. We wanted to offer students and families a platform with great content information that is easy to access, easy to understand, and trustworthy.

In 2017, we introduced the Direct Admissions initiative, notifying *all* high school seniors that they had been accepted into several if not all of Idaho's public colleges and universities. This removed a key barrier to going to college by eliminating the fear of rejection and logistical hurdles that come with applying to school. A year later, we introduced a single, online common application, which can be used to submit information to one or more Idaho colleges simultaneously and at no cost.

We've also tried to address financial barriers by expanding the Idaho Opportunity Scholarship, even offering it to people in the workforce who have not completed their degree or certificate program.

Finally, we are using this month of October to encourage students, particularly in the 11th and 12th grade, to spend the time - perhaps with the help of a parent or other relative, a counselor, a teacher, a trusted mentor - exploring options and discovering that further education and a promising career is within reach. That's why Governor Little declared this October Next Steps Month, a time when we as a state can rally behind our students and provide them with the support and guidance they need to understand their options and plan their next steps.

All seniors across the state have now received their direct admissions letter. They can also fill out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) to see what kind of financial aid for which they may be eligible. By accessing the Next Steps Idaho website, students can find many tools and sources of information that can help to answer the age old question, "What do I want to be when I grow up?" Or in the context of how today's youth think, "What problem do I want to solve?"

Successful people, which I define as having found a career that is enjoyable, meaningful, and well suited to their talents - always do two things; first, they plan and second, they take action. Next Steps Month encourages students to do both. Yes, developing a blueprint for the rest of one's life can be overwhelming, but students can make it much less so by exploring helpful resources, consulting with trusted adults, and formulating a plan. As part of Next Steps month, we encourage students, particularly high school seniors, to "Take 5" - choose at least five of the dozens of activities we have provided in a list on the website, some of which only take five minutes to complete, and all of which prompt students to think about what's next for their life.

On behalf of Idaho's State Board of Education, I urge students and the adults who support and mentor them to dedicate time this fall to exploring Next Steps. There is a tremendous amount of pressure on students and families to make long term decisions during an uncertain time of life. Next Steps can't provide all the answers to life's career questions, for those in the decision-making process, but it will give them a well-informed start.

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