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Reopening Our Public Schools is a Top Priority

By Debbie Critchfield, President, Idaho State Board of Education

The upheaval caused by the coronavirus pandemic has affected so much in our daily lives, particularly so for our children and grandchildren. Over 300,000 young Idahoans are educated in our public schools, a time-honored learning process that was severely disrupted last spring, perhaps as never before.

In my view, our teachers, administrators, local school boards and parents did an outstanding job of moving the entire system from in-person instruction to distance learning options in a short period of time. Now the time has come to bring our students and teachers back into the classroom.

Idaho Governor Brad Little said it best when he unveiled Idaho's Back to School Framework. "Before coronavirus, too many Idaho students faced a significant achievement gap and ongoing risks to their mental and social well-being," Governor Little said. "It's imperative that students return to the classrooms and interact directly with their teachers and classmates at the end of the summer."

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) shares this view stating "AAP strongly advocates that all policy considerations for the coming school year should start with a goal of having students physically present in school."

The Idaho Back to School Framework does not tell local school districts what to do to reopen their schools. Rather, the framework sets guidelines and lists best practices for school districts and charter schools to use to open their school

buildings while also planning for needed actions based on local public health conditions.

Geographically, Idaho is a huge state and the virus is more active in some places than in others. We took this into account while developing the framework, recognizing that circumstances can change quickly. Recommendations are organized into three categories based on the level of coronavirus transmission in various communities at any given time. For instance, a school located where no community spread is occurring can use the framework guidance listed in the Category 1 to open and operate their schools. There are places in Idaho where community spread is occurring and should it become substantial, as determined by local public health officials, the framework in Category 3 includes suggested considerations for school boards to use in their decision making.

I encourage parents to look at the Idaho Back to School Framework and have conversations with your local school board members and school administrators.

We've posted the framework on the State Board of Education website:

<https://boardofed.idaho.gov/resources/idaho-back-to-school-framework-2020/>

The framework is supported by a State Department of Education webpage that provides resources for school districts and charter schools, educators, and parents. New resources will be added regularly. Here's the link:

<https://www.sde.idaho.gov/re-opening/index.html#>.

We assembled a team of educators, administrators, public health officials and lawmakers to develop this framework. I want to emphasize that this is **not** a top-down approach. Local governance of our public education system has worked very well for over a century in Idaho and the State Board of Education believes decisions about reopening schools must be made locally.

The Back to School Framework is intended to help school board trustees make good decisions for the health and safety of their students and teachers by providing guidance and procedures to safely reopen their school buildings. The framework also provides guidance to help them take proper actions, should public health conditions in their area change.

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