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For Immediate Release

January 6, 2021

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Kindergarten Readiness Needs More Attention

By Debbie Critchfield, President, Idaho State Board of Education

Parents and educators hear a lot about how important it is for our young students to be able to read at an early age. Studies show that children still struggling to read by the end of the third grade fall further and further behind and many never catch up before they graduate from high school.

Improving childhood literacy in the early grades is a top priority for the Idaho State Board of Education and for educators statewide. We know it can be difficult for some kids when they enter kindergarten without the skills many of their classmates might already have.

We call it *kindergarten readiness* and it encompasses many areas of learning from the ability to follow instructions, to taking turns and cooperating with classmates - even controlling impulses. Kindergarten readiness also includes the very basics of reading, like learning letters and understanding how they form words. Preschool children begin to pick up on this when their parents or caregivers read to them. Indeed, this simple activity creates the foundation for early childhood literacy and a lifetime of learning.

During the State Board's meeting last month, Beth Oppenheimer, executive director of the Idaho Association of the Education of Young Children (Idaho AEYC), updated the Board on a statewide assessment she is working on of what is needed to improve kindergarten readiness in Idaho.

“Many parents lack understanding of what is needed for young children to be school ready,” she said. “What we found is that parents just don’t know where to go to access resources and information.”

The State Board, in partnership with Idaho AEYC, this week received a \$6 million per year, three-year federal grant to help improve Idaho’s early childhood system “with an eye toward readiness and literacy,” as Oppenheimer described it. She says this could include partnering with local communities to develop a program specific to parents in that community, or providing professional development to childcare providers to help them better understand how they can work with the children they care for.

Board member Dr. Linda Clark has been a longtime champion of kindergarten readiness, having worked in public education at all levels for more than four decades.

“In my view, I don’t think there is a single issue that has greater impact on our system than the fact that many of our students aren’t coming ready to learn,” Dr. Clark said. “We know from our data that more than half of our youngsters are not coming to school with the skills they need to be successful and, in some districts, that number exceeds 60 percent.”

States such as Mississippi and Florida have made progress in the kindergarten readiness realm and we in Idaho will too. It starts with developing uniform kindergarten readiness standards.

“It is hard for us to talk about kindergarten readiness without a definition of what that means,” said Dr. Clark. She is leading the development of draft readiness standards for the Board to review at the next State Board meeting in February.

I am confident that helping parents and childcare providers better prepare their students before they enter school, will pay dividends. Improving kindergarten readiness in Idaho, will leverage the state’s significant investment in childhood literacy programs in the early grades. “There is a case that can be made that staying laser-focused on literacy might be the most important thing we can do,” Board member Kurt Liebich said. “Until we fix our literacy issues, we are going to be struggling throughout our whole system.”

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