



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

Back to School During Uncertain Times

By Kurt Liebich, President, Idaho State Board of Education

The new school year began with more uncertainty than we expected because of the rapid spread of the COVID-19 delta variant strain. However, based on our overall performance and experience last year, I am confident that our local school boards, administrators, teachers and parents are ready to meet the challenge, help students recover from the pandemic-caused disruption, and do what it takes to keep them on track, learning and in school.

The 2020/21 school year was the most difficult year in the history of public education in Idaho. As a result of the pandemic, many schools had to pivot between in-person, remote and blended learning over the course of the school year. In order to deliver these flexible education models, the public and private sectors worked together to provide tens of thousands of computers and other electronic devices into classrooms and homes throughout the state. Our teachers did an amazing job of continuing to educate Idaho students during this extraordinary time.

Schools also put protocols in place designed to keep students and staff safe. As a result, most Idaho schools re-opened and stayed open last year, while schools in many other parts of the country were forced to provide online instruction for the entire school year. For that we should all be proud.

Even though the majority of our schools were able to provide in-person instruction or use hybrid models (combination of in-person and online), we can't sugarcoat the

fact that many of our students were negatively affected by the pandemic. Unfinished learning is of particular concern to the State Board of Education. As we begin this school year, the State Board is focused on a few critical priorities to address the achievement gaps that were magnified by the pandemic. Kindergarten through fourth grade literacy proficiency, fifth through ninth grade math proficiency, and credit recovery for our high school students are the Board's focus areas.

2021 results for the Idaho Standards Achievement Test (ISAT) show a slight decline overall in students' proficiency in English Language Arts and math since 2019 (the 2020 ISAT was cancelled as a result of the pandemic). Overall results show students' proficiency dropped about one percent in English language arts and nearly five percent in math, however some groups of students saw greater declines. All public school students in grades 3 thru 8 and 10th grade take the ISAT.

We have seen similar results when looking at student achievement in other areas. The Board will be directing state level education funding for COVID relief for school districts and charters to use to target these areas and help our students catch up and get back on track.

I'd also like to note that despite the disruption, school districts throughout the state made gains this past year. For instance, in the Bruneau-Grand View Joint School District, K-3 students started the last school year with only 40 percent of their students being proficient in literacy. By the end of the year, 82 percent were proficient, doubling the percentage during one school year.

That is but one example of success and there are many more from throughout our state due to the dedicated professional educators we have in Idaho.

I'd like to take a moment to thank our volunteer school board members, administrators, teachers and staff. I'd also like to thank parents too for stepping in and serving essentially as teachers at home during the times when the pandemic forced school shutdowns last year.

We find ourselves in the midst of another COVID surge and it is impossible for us to know what this year will ultimately look like. More than 300,000 students attend public schools in Idaho and a handful of those schools have already been forced to close temporarily. The State Board of Education and local school boards throughout the state are committed to doing everything in our power to keep our schools open and kids learning in classrooms. Let's all hope we can keep disruptions in check and have safe and productive school year.

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