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K-12 and Higher Education Task Force Recommendations are Moving Forward

By Kurt Liebich, President, Idaho State Board of Education

Much has happened over the last five years that is having a profound and positive effect on public education at all levels, despite the pandemic.

The catalysts for these changes are two sets of recommendations put forth by a pair education task forces convened by Governor Brad Little and his predecessor, former Governor C.L. “Butch” Otter.

In 2019, Governor Little’s “Our Kids, Idaho’s Future” Task Force created five recommendations for improving the effectiveness of our K-12 system; two years earlier, Governor Otter’s Higher Education Task Force developed 12 recommendations for our public higher education institutions.

Board Member Dr. Linda Clark and Boise businessman Bob Lokken led the higher education effort. Board Member Bill Gilbert and former Board President Debbie Critchfield headed the K-12 task force.

The State Board of Education adopted both sets of recommendations and I would like to take this opportunity to update you on the progress made toward implementation.

On the K-12 front, the Board worked with legislators to consolidate sections of Idaho Code relating to K-3 literacy to better focus efforts throughout our system on

this vital component of early learning. Leadership by Governor Little and the Board resulted in the Legislature appropriating additional funding for literacy intervention for students who need some extra help. Research shows that students who are struggling to read in the third grade may never catch up and are more likely to drop out at the secondary level. It is imperative we do all we can for students in the early grades and the steps taken to implement the top recommendation from the “Our Kids, Idaho’s Future” Task Force will help accomplish that.

Other completed K-12 Task Force recommendations include a buildout of the educator “Career Ladder” by increasing funding for starting teachers, as well as those with more experience; and providing more resources to train our teachers to be better equipped to help students who are struggling with social and mental health challenges. This is particularly timely given the uncertainty and stress on students caused by the pandemic.

The Board continues to work with policy makers and stakeholders to create paths forward to make all-day kindergarten available to all Idaho families who want it, and to create more flexibility and certainty in how we fund our public schools.

The higher education recommendations adopted in 2017, have benefited from Idaho’s public education consolidated governance structure and the Board’s ability to impact changes through the Board’s policy setting processes.

Here are some of the accomplishments to date:

- Consolidated purchasing and internal auditing at our four year institutions, to improve efficiency.
- Expanded Next Steps Idaho website, adding additional tools and resources for students and for adults to aid them in planning career paths.
- Launched Online Idaho, a statewide digital campus enabling students to attend college online no matter where they live in our state. Funded by Governor Brad Little’s Coronavirus Financial Advisory Committee with federal coronavirus relief funds, students can currently enroll in hundreds of courses and several degree pathways, including cyber security using the Online Idaho course exchange. The Board expects to have the platform completely built out later this year with new degree or certificate programs being added regularly.
- Initiated statewide pilots to support the adoption of open educational resources and the consolidation of student analytics and support resources to

help students make informed choices about the real cost of pursuing higher education.

- Expanded the Idaho Opportunity Scholarship, enabling adults who earned some college credits to attend part-time and complete their degrees.
- Froze tuition costs at our four-year institutions for the last two years to make college more affordable.
- Led discussions about the relationship between military training and general education competencies that are informing ongoing conversations about how to consistently award college credit for relevant prior learning experiences completed by veterans and other adult students.

It is worth noting that many of these accomplishments have occurred while the Board and our public higher education leaders have been focused on our state's overall response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the effects it had on education at all levels.

Despite the turmoil and distractions of these past two years, these recommendations have served as the Board's North Star for important improvements in public education policy and I am proud of the outcomes fully realized to date.

I'm also optimistic about what's to come because the State Board of Education is committed to continuous improvement at Idaho's public schools and higher education institutions.

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