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Education Revitalization is the New Reform: Five National Classroom Trends for Idaho

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Gracie Nelson, now a Boise School District teacher, with the "education banner" at Boise State's Winter Commencement, 2011.

John Kelly

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Five National Classroom Trends for Idaho



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Critics have long assailed American education for failing to train a globally competitive workforce. All too often, we are faced with a shortage of highly qualified graduates in fields that are essential to our economic growth as a state and nation. An emphasis on education in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) is crucial for our children's future.

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Idaho must consider national policies associated with revitalization and improvement of education. In the midst of the politics of a new legislative session, a nascent education task force and the repeal of the Students Come First laws, national policy issues and legislation will influence Idaho decision makers, ushering in new opportunities.

The Idaho State Board of Education has set an admirable goal that 60 percent of Idaho citizens between the ages of 25 and 34 will have a postsecondary degree or certificate by 2020. State-level goals have been widely publicized, but national goals may not be so clear. Outlined briefly below are five of the more frequently articulated national goals that will impact Idaho's immediate educational future.

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

The Common Core State Standards are at the forefront of re-energizing education and college preparedness through a challenging curriculum in mathematics and English language arts. These standards provide a framework and describe what students should achieve to be "college and career ready" as measured by the Smarter Balanced assessment, a new type of standardized test.

Educators within states implementing them are expected to align rigorous curriculum with the Common Core State Standards by 2014 and colleges of education are rising to the task of preparing highly qualified teachers who have a strong understanding of these new standards. Training and implementation will be achieved only when the 45 states that have adopted these standards (including Idaho) fully embrace this challenge and focus resources on transformational efforts

and best practices. This represents a systematic change in K-12 education in an effort to strengthen student learning and the quality of teaching.

The actual shifts that will most significantly impact students in mathematics include a deeper focus on fewer topics with an emphasis on structure, process and a solid foundation in critical mathematical concepts. The expectation is for students to have a clear grasp of each concept, knowledge of mathematical structures and sequences, as well as appropriate situations for application.

Students need to see the importance of math in whatever career path they take. The chef, the carpenter, the electrician and the auto mechanic all need a clear understanding of basic mathematical concepts to be successful in their jobs, as do the engineer, accountant or pharmacist.

In the English language arts standards, the expectations include an emphasis on content-rich nonfiction with reading and writing grounded in evidence supported by practice with complex texts and academic language. The instructional shifts and increased expectations for student reading will create relevance and lead to cross disciplinary mastery while strengthening student skills to confront more complex issues than can be addressed in a 140 character “tweet.”

A major critique from those hiring recent graduates is that students leaving secondary and even post-secondary educational settings are not well prepared to face complex and often ill-structured issues. They are not prepared to engage in critical thinking and problem solving, nor do they have the well-developed written and oral communication skills that should be the product of language arts programs. However, the definition of college ready continues to evolve and has implications that go beyond the common core such as physical, social and emotional preparedness issues.

ASSESSMENT AND MEASUREMENT ISSUES

The Common Core State Standards also require careful assessment developed to measure student mastery. The Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium will assess Idaho students’ performance on the Common Core State Standards, track their progress and compare their scores to students in other states. These efforts will have to be continued over several years to fully measure the effectiveness of the changes that are under way.

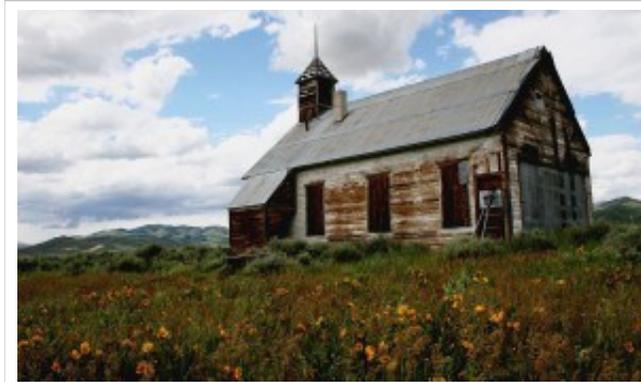
Valid, reliable data is essential, with clearly understood analytical measures that can drive policy changes. Longitudinal data systems that track progress at the individual student, whole classroom and total school level over time are essential for validating progress, achieving goals and defining benefits at all levels.

TEACHER PREPARATION AND EVALUATION

Effective educators are crucial to student success. Teachers need training and resources to offer the instruction required. Idaho is fortunate to employ numerous outstanding teachers and educational leaders who are dedicated to providing a high-quality education, engaging and motivating students and framing best practices focused on multidimensional learning models and pedagogy.

Continuing evaluation of the effectiveness of the individual teacher in her or his classroom setting goes hand in hand with pre-service and in-service preparation. No single instrument can measure teacher performance. Multiple yardsticks focusing on value-added instruction provide balanced measures for evaluation.

Accountability and development is an expectation for all of us, as long as it is fair and used wisely.



Mike Edminster
One-room schoolhouse in Corral, Idaho.

Each classroom is a complex and changing system, varying not only between but also within school years. Recently the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation undertook research on teacher performance measurement that led to the recommendation of a multi-element mechanism for

teacher evaluation. While not fully tested, this new evaluation methodology holds promise in putting more workable and valid methods in the hands of administrators, leading to overall better teacher performance.

EDUCATIONAL TECHNOLOGY ADVANCES AND CHALLENGES

Educators must be well trained in the area of integrative technology in order to meet the instructional demands of the 21st century. Resources need to be available to fund professional development, digital devices, high-speed Internet connections and online and hybrid course models for optimal learning and capacity. Blended learning coupling technology and teaching methods is essential. The Center for Digital Education's 2012 Yearbook: Technology Innovation in Education showcases incredible accomplishments from educational institutions that have leveraged new sources to strengthen technology goals and objectives.

EMERGING NATIONAL POLICIES

National connections and policy choices will create relevance for the efforts taking place in Idaho to enhance and implement systemic change to increase student learning and engagement. There are opportunities to compete for and be recognized as leaders in the movement to improve the quality of schools locally, across the state and nationally.

The successes of stimulating and dynamic programs across the nation provide us with clear benchmarks for improving Idaho's schools. Transformational learning strategies based on innovative pedagogy that empowers critical thinking and inspires enthusiasm for learning will build workforce skills across the spectrum of global opportunities.

The overly used term "reform" and its accompanying negative connotations have been intentionally omitted from this essay. Gov. C. L. "Butch" Otter's Task Force for Improving Education ought to be encouraged to closely examine the action steps of national organizations, other states' education initiatives and research at higher education institutions. We are already realizing success in many arenas and need to build on what is already working well, assessing current strategies and carefully implementing program improvements. Education in Idaho is challenged to increase student achievement and embrace the future of Idaho's education in the 21st century by providing rich, collaborative, high quality-experiences focusing on success for our students.

There is obvious work to be done on a variety of fronts to raise our ranking in reports that compare us to other states, such as Education Week's Quality Counts. The challenges will require efforts by state officials, local education agencies, colleges and schools of education, and within the individual classroom. All stakeholders must be involved in this complex endeavor.

Equitable funding and resources are essential to support quality education and increase student outcomes. The educational funding landscape in Idaho needs to be a priority for policymakers. We endeavor to collaborate with public school partners, business leaders and the Idaho Legislature to increase student learning and improve instructional practices. By enhancing support and communication among educational stakeholders, our students benefit from a robust education leading to meaningful careers and the ability to compete in a global society.

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The views and opinions expressed here are those of the writer and do not necessarily reflect those of Boise State University or the College of Social Sciences and Public Affairs.