Teachers of the Year: Prioritize Safety, Invest in Idaho Schools

*An open letter from Idaho Teachers of the Year to school districts, state leadership, and our communities*

Idaho’s dramatic increase in COVID-19 cases presents a clear and present danger to the health of Idaho students, as well as their teachers and support staff. In addition, the shortcomings brought to light by the pandemic require swift and decisive action to ensure that our students have the best chance at success and our educators are appropriately supported.

As educators we are acutely aware of the value of in-person instruction. We prefer it and we know that many students learn better with a face-to-face dynamic. However, Idaho’s lack of collective strategy and response to the pandemic makes it difficult, if not impossible, to provide in-person instruction safely in most cases. If in-person instruction is Idaho’s top priority, then actions must be taken that will enable it to be done safely.

Our leaders at the state level, as well as school boards and administrators in districts throughout the state must implement and enforce protocols that give us the best chance to keep students and staff safe--starting with requiring face coverings, physical distancing, and sanitization of classrooms and common areas. If that means going to hybrid models or full remote instruction when medical professionals recommend it, then we should listen to the experts and follow that course. If that means curtailing sports and extracurricular activities in the short term, then so be it. Parents and community members also need to be a part of the solution, not a part of the problem. And targeting blame at educators who prioritize their own health and that of their families is far too prevalent in Idaho, and in our opinion represents a completely misguided mindset.

The latest statistics show there are hundreds of confirmed coronavirus cases for students and staff around the state. With holidays and flu season upon us, those numbers are likely to rise even more. There is still time to take the appropriate steps to save lives, but the clock is ticking.

Idaho’s lack of a real and tangible commitment to invest in personnel and facilities in recent years has been exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Even in the best of times we don’t have the resources we need to provide the kind of education our students deserve and that our communities and businesses desperately need. Especially when we are talking about student populations who are living in poverty, who remain underserved, or live in remote areas that lack essential connectivity.

* **Class sizes remain problematic**. During the COVID-19 pandemic large class sizes mean it is difficult or impossible to achieve physical distancing. In “normal” times it means that we cannot provide the level of individualized and differentiated instruction that is most beneficial to our students.
* **More personnel are needed**. One of the reasons school buildings are forced to close is that there are not enough qualified substitutes to cover all of the classrooms when large numbers of teachers get sick. Even with administrators and support staff trying to pick up the slack in areas outside of their area of expertise (not an ideal solution), schools are scrambling to keep their doors open, much less provide the level of instruction we all expect. This is not new. We constantly struggle to find enough qualified people willing to substitute and to hire support staff—especially at what are essentially minimum wages. The certificated and classified staff we do have are spread too thin and asked to wear too many hats.
* **The whole student must be supported**. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought on many additional physical and mental issues for our students. Our nurses, counselors, and psychologists are doing everything they can under the circumstances, but they are overwhelmed. We don’t have enough school nurses to deal with everyday injuries and ailments, much less oversee prevention and treatment of a deadly virus. Our student to counselor ratio is twice the national standard, and counselors are redirected to other areas that pull them away from working with students on mental and emotional health. School psychologists are in even shorter supply.
* **Many facilities are inadequate and outdated**. From a COVID-19 perspective that means it is difficult to create physical distancing, filter the air effectively, or have the technology needed for robust remote or hybrid learning. Idaho is one of the fastest growing states in the nation in terms of population, but our public education infrastructure has failed to keep pace. We have too many cramped facilities, portable units, and buildings with inadequate HVAC systems. Despite recent efforts, too many of our schools and students at home do not have the access to the broadband and devices they need.

All these issues can be resolved if we, individually and collectively, commit to doing so. As Idaho Teachers of the Year, we see the current reality, but we also see the potential in our public education system and especially in our students.

In the short-term, we implore all of you to protect the health of students and staff while the pandemic still rages. In the long-term, we call on state and local leaders to create an action plan that is backed with resources to provide all schools with sufficient personnel, smaller class sizes, better resources and staff to address the mental and physical needs of our students, and up-to-date facilities.

Idaho’s future demands this kind of leadership, commitment, and follow through. As Teachers of the Year, we the undersigned stand together in committing to do our part and whatever else is asked of us to lead in these critical and transformational times. We ask simply that you join and support our efforts.

Sincerely,

Jorge Pulleiro-2021 Idaho Teacher of the Year

Stacie Lawler-2020 Idaho Teacher of the Year

Marc Beitia-2019 Idaho Teacher of the Year

Becky Mitchell-2018 Idaho Teacher of the Year

Melyssa Ferro-2016 Idaho Teacher of the Year

Jamie Esler-2014 Idaho Teacher of the Year

Katie Pemberton-2013 Idaho Teacher of the Year

Erin Lenz-2012 Idaho Teacher of the Year

Stefani Cook-2011 Idaho Teacher of the Year