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Media Contact:
Maggie T. Reynolds
Public Information Officer
208-332-6976
mreynolds@sde.idaho.gov

Critchfield: Let's Make Idaho's School Funding Formula Work for All Communities

From Superintendent of Public Instruction Debbie Critchfield

(BOISE) – I have seen a lot of things in education in the last twenty plus years. I have been in a leadership role at the local and state level for four U.S. presidents. I have learned that the federal government is an influence on what states do to educate their kids, but the most significant influence on outcomes is the state. We have a vested interest in educating our citizens, and we don't take this responsibility lightly.

In Idaho, about 60% of school funding comes from the state. The rest is a combination of local and federal funds. State funds are distributed by assigning districts and charters a specific number of "support units" based on a complex formula that accounts for attendance, grade bands, school size and type. If this brief explanation leaves you with questions, you're not alone. I could dedicate many more words to explaining the formula but it would only scratch the surface in adequately describing it.

I share this to highlight an area of our budgeting that deserves more attention: the actual students. Our funding model should have the agility to support the things we know we need - like paying our teachers and maintaining safe facilities - while taking into account that our students learn differently and that each community is unique. The current state public schools' budget model does not successfully account for these important factors.

I make this point because my attention is on one thing: Idaho kids. For that reason, I am asking our legislature to support a change in how our state education dollars are distributed.

We know that every student is unique and that some students' needs are greater than others. We also know that the resources needed to meet each student's needs are different, and that in some cases, more are needed to ensure a student's success.

With this in mind, my proposed change is simple: send the dollars out based on the students that each district serves. This means every district or charter would get a portion of their budget based on the characteristics of that community's students. I'm specifically referring to kids in special education, those who are economically disadvantaged, at-risk or gifted and talented. Under this new model we can have a budget that aligns with student needs rather than one built on averages or what a neighboring district or charter looks like.

The change would have a minimal effect on the state's overall budget while ensuring that education dollars are distributed fairly and in a way that puts students and their needs *first*.

It's past time for Idaho to modernize school funding. Let's bring kids back into focus. Let's create a model that positions our districts and charter schools to gain added control in how they spend their state dollars while setting *every* Idaho student up for success.

We owe it to our kids and communities.

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