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Idaho's new schools chief gives glimpse of upcoming agenda

By KIMBERLEE KRUESI, Associated Press

BOISE, Idaho (AP) — State Superintendent of Public Instruction Sherri Ybarra offered a brief glimpse of her agenda for the 2015 Legislature at her first news conference since being elected in November.

Ybarra told reporters Tuesday she is considering increasing operational funding for schools while possibly delaying the implementation of a new plan that seeks to tighten teacher certification credentials.

However, she remained mum on most of the details regarding her budget and policy-related questions. Ybarra said she's waiting to hear Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter's education proposal, which he's expected to announce during Monday's state of the state address.

"We're going to be a resource so school districts can get the job done," Ybarra said, adding she wants the state Education Department to be the "go-to" headquarters when schools officials have questions or need resources.

The Mountain Home educator is a political newcomer, narrowly defeating Democratic challenger Jana Jones in November. Jones had more name recognition and political experience than Ybarra but failed to pull enough votes from Idaho's Republican stronghold on election night.

Ybarra has since shied from media interviews, saying she instead was on a "silent tour" and planning with her 16-member transition team for her four-year term. Yet much about what Ybarra plans to do throughout her term is unknown.

Before leaving office, former Superintendent Tom Luna proposed a nearly 6 percent increase to the state's education budget from last year's budget. But Ybarra has refrained from commenting on the plan or whether she will stray from it.

For example, Luna's budget called for \$10 million increase in operational funding — extra money for needs such as staffing or salaries otherwise usually funded through supplemental levies. Ybarra said she supported the idea of increasing operational dollars but provided no dollar amount.

During the news conference, Ybarra introduced her new team of executive staff members, including former state Sen. Tim Corder, who will serve as special assistant to the superintendent.

Ybarra added that more details about her administration's intentions will be announced after she has time to meet with lawmakers, who are arriving in Boise this week for the legislative session.

