

Ybarra says education system isn't broken

Superintendent of public instruction says she has big goals for Idaho schools

Shanon Quinn/Moscow-Pullman Daily News

Idaho's Superintendent of Public Instruction, Sherri Ybarra, could do with a little positivity from her constituents, she told the Daily News on Tuesday.

"It's not just Idaho," she said. "Nationally there is a lot of education bashing going on."

Ybarra said she has heard a good deal about the public education system being "broken" - something she does not agree with.

"Do we need to breathe new life into the system? Yes," she said.

But Ybarra, who took office Jan. 5, said there have also been victories - such as an increased graduation rate across the state and the positive responses she's heard concerning her bottom-up approach to policy making, which is based on the needs of individual districts rather than what the state anticipates their needs being.

"Our job is to assist them, to be a service agency supporting their efforts," Ybarra said during her presentation to the Joint Finance Appropriations Committee earlier in the year.

Ybarra, a Republican, won the 2014 race for superintendent of public instruction over Democrat Jana Jones with a 50.6 percent majority.

In a state dominated by Republicans, the race became tight after a series of flubs from Ybarra, including a plagiarism scandal that surfaced in September after a 46-word paragraph on Ybarra's website was shown to have only an eight-word difference from a similar entry on Jones' site.

Ybarra's campaign was plagued by numerous other issues, including an instance in which her campaign claimed endorsements from elected officials who hadn't

supported her, questions about her lack of a voting history and her level of education achieved.

Ybarra said she prefers not to focus on the past - particularly the campaign - and she would rather move forward with the job she said she loves.

"Campaigns can be ugly," she said.

Although items on her wish list - including class sizes reductions and increased professional development opportunities for teachers and school officials - are not at the forefront of the department's action items during the upcoming fiscal year, Ybarra said she plans to address those

goals in the upcoming budget, as well increase the amount of operations funding to districts, which will allow them to determine where the money is most needed.

The FY 2017 budget will be released to the Idaho Legislature in September.

This will be the first fiscal year budget she has had the opportunity to give real input on, instead of simply making modifications to an existing budget, she said. The majority of the fiscal year 2016 budget was inherited from her predecessor, Tom Luna, as its submission was required before she took office Jan. 5.

"Last time I was presenting someone else's budget," she said.

Ybarra said she will continue working on a career ladder pay scale for teachers - which bases teacher salary on performance rather than years of teaching and the amount of college classes they've taken.

Ybarra said she is also excited to move forward with the Idaho Challenge, which is an effort to establish a collaborative review of the Common Core Standards in mathematics and English language arts. Ybarra's chief communications officer, Jeff Church, said in an email the review is currently in its preliminary stages, but during the next several weeks the department will establish a timeline concerning when the review will take place.

Ybarra said participating in the review is an opportunity for people to make the needs of their district known.

"We really need to start focusing on the kids and their needs,' she said.

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