A.J. Balukoff

School safety responses

Submitted via email.

*In the past two weeks, we have seen two large student protests at the Statehouse regarding school security and gun violence. But some have criticized these protests, especially on the national level. What is your general impression of the tone and the message of the student protests, particularly in Idaho?*

I support the First Amendment, and it’s inspiring to see Idaho students seize the opportunity to have their voices heard by engaging in the democratic process. I’ve been an elected member of the Boise School District for 21 years, and I appreciate and recognize the right of students to demonstrate — that’s written in our school board policy. As a school board member, I’ve worked alongside the district to support the First Amendment rights of both teachers and students so they may participate in our democracy.

*The demonstrators have, to a large degree, called for gun control. Is there a place for gun control, in any form, as part of a state strategy on school safety? Specifically, are there measures you would support, or measures you would oppose?*

There’s a place for smart policies to keep our schools safe. I support the Second Amendment and the Supreme Court decision reinforcing the right to bear arms. I also support gun safety measures, including universal background checks, and believe in gun-free schools. As Justice Antonin Scalia said in District of Columbia v. Heller, “the Second Amendment right is not unlimited. It is not a right to keep and carry any weapon whatsoever in any manner whatsoever and for whatever purpose. The Court’s opinion should not be taken to cast doubt on… laws forbidding the carrying of firearms in sensitive places such as schools…”

*In your view, has the state of Idaho done enough to keep its schools safe? If not, what would be your top priority? What would a school safety plan look like in your administration?*

I believe the Boise School District has demonstrated that the most effective way to ensure student safety is through a comprehensive and ongoing plan that focuses on coordination with local law enforcement, reasonable physical security measures, trained counselors, social workers and behavior intervention specialists, cultivating respectful and inclusive school cultures and keeping open communication with students, parents and community members.

*Should the state do more — and allocate more resources — to add school resource officers or other employees to “harden” school sites?*

I support additional School Resource Officers (SROs) in schools and also want to make sure students have access to social workers and counselors who can identify issues among the students early and intervene where necessary. The state doesn’t offer our schools the resources they need to have an all-hands-on-deck approach from SROs to social workers to counselors. I would support providing additional safety resources to Idaho schools.

*Should the state do more to encourage or enable schools to arm teachers or other staffers? Do you believe such moves would make schools safer?*

I agree with the Boise School District that arming teachers, who shouldn’t be burdened with this responsibility, is not the way forward. Extensive research and experience have proven that the most effective way to ensure student safety is through a comprehensive and ongoing plan that focuses on coordination with local law enforcement, reasonable physical security measures, trained counselors, social workers and behavior intervention specialists, cultivating respectful and inclusive school cultures and keeping open communication with students, parents and community members.

*To what extent do you believe the school safety issue is a component of confronting issues such as bullying? If so, is there anything your administration would do differently to address the issue of bullying?*

School safety and combating bullying go hand in hand. We trust our teachers and school staff to do what they do best, provide an unparalleled academic environment where our students can thrive. Safety, of course, is a key component of that. As governor, I would work with our schools to implement the proven and best tactics of combating bullying through comprehensive and ongoing coordination with local police, utilizing trained counselors, social workers and behavior intervention specialists, while fostering a respectful and inclusive environment with open communication between students, parents and the community.