

Debbie Critchfield
Responses

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Q1

Why are you best qualified to lead Idaho's education system?

A fourth-generation farm family, my husband Dave and I live in Oakley, where we raised our four children in rural public schools. I have been the Public Information Officer for Cassia School District for the last 9 years.

I am the former President of the Idaho State Board of Education and seven-year board member. I served as Chair of the Policy and Planning Committee, and the Instructional, Research and Student Affairs Committee. I was a member of the State's Accountability and Oversight committee and chaired the Board's Audit Committee. I was Co-Chair to Governor Little's Education Task Force and committee chair for Governor Otter's Higher Education Task Force.

I served as a school board member in Cassia County for ten years, five as chair, and was on the executive committee for Idaho School Boards Association. I chaired Re-Opening Idaho Schools and was a member of Governor Little's K-12 council. I am active in my community, serving as a former Library Trustee, Arts Council president, and Republican central committee precinct chair. I worked for the College of Southern Idaho as a GED instructor and substitute taught for six years.

I have established relationships and know how collaboration can drive change and efficiency as we work with our education partners and legislators to ensure parents, educators, and students have what they need. I know how to listen and lead.

Q2

If elected, how will your department guide implementation of incoming increases to early literacy funding?

Early literacy has been a priority for me and it is important that this additional investment is directed to help our youngest students be prepared to read and learn.

My immediate goal will be to redesign how our State Department of Education (SDE) functions, whether it's early literacy funding or other issues. The department must move from a Boise-centered agency, focused on compliance, to a department focused on supporting local students, educators, and parents and encouraging innovation in the classroom. Each school or district has different challenges, and they need a partner that will provide solutions on how to address their challenges. The SDE should provide operational advice, support, and relevant resources to ensure these additional dollars get into the classroom and make an immediate difference. The SDE should facilitate best practices, share successful literacy strategies, and celebrate success. We need the department of education to help districts meet their own goals and fulfill the expectations we all have for Idaho education and for our students.

Q3

What would you do to engage with parents and students while in office?

My day job for the past nine years has been focused on meaningful engagement for parents and students as the Public Relations Officer for the 13th largest district in the state. I know how to do this. Communication and respect is essential. We cannot move forward without first listening.

Outreach is essential to any success in this area. I intend to travel the state on a regular basis. I have done this as a candidate and have visited nearly 60 schools in 9 months. You can't address what you don't understand, see, or experience. And I can't help districts successfully engage their parents and communities from an office in Boise. Encouraging and channeling the increased level of parental involvement can lead to powerful partnerships with educators and schools, and the next superintendent must facilitate that.

In addition, I want to access the student body leaders across the state, after working with them for two years as State Board president. If we want our students to learn and achieve success in the world, they need trusted adults engaged in solutions. The SDE can serve as a service center for parents to direct them to outside partners, their own districts, and to state resources to assist them as the primary stakeholder in their child's lives and education.

Q4

Where do you stand on putting public tax dollars into private education, whether through vouchers, education savings accounts or other channels?

My first priority as Superintendent is making sure we fulfill our Constitutional obligation for funding public education. We need to keep in mind this responsibility applies to rural Idaho communities, where school choice is limited. I am open to discussions about funding more choice, but it cannot defund public schools or come at the expense of Idaho's rural school districts.

Money currently does follow the student to public and charter schools. Sometimes that point is obscured. I do have a strong record of supporting school choice. Because of my strong advocacy for all educational deliveries, I am endorsed by both public school professionals and the Idaho Charter School Network. I was the President of the State Board of Education when the Strong Families, Strong Students grants gave money directly to families to support educational choices and the student funding model was introduced to fund enrollment, not seat time.

Q5

How, if at all, would you change how the State Department of Education responds to complaints about classroom content?

Our school leaders are begging for a strong and reliable partner to provide assistance for communicating and engaging their community and parents on some of the most sensitive issues schools are facing. We can build on the new expectations for parents who want a part in local decision making. I would collaborate with local schools to strengthen their efforts for outreach by having an open door and providing structured assistance to engage parents. The SDE should be leveraging the expertise and resources of natural partners like educators and K-12 stakeholder groups to support comprehensive action plans and leadership strategies. Helping them with proactive engagement and transparency efforts is key to properly addressing these concerns.

Q6

How would you address the unique challenges faced by rural schools? Which issues would you prioritize?

I live and work in a rural school district, so I am very aware of the challenges they face. This is one of my priorities. Our rural districts are desperate for an advocate at the state level. They need acknowledgement of their unique challenges and a leader to bring viable solutions to them and the legislature. Yes, they need resources for high-quality learning environments that provide opportunities for kids, but they also need leadership for innovative problem solving so they can be creative in retaining high-quality educators, addressing aging facilities, and removing local tax burdens. Rural should not mean lesser than urban when we talk about schools. They need solutions for the lack of internet, infrastructure, and housing. The problems facing a growing and changing Idaho, are exacerbated in our rural communities. I believe I am the only candidate that understands these issues at this level.

Many of our rural and remote districts have limited access to local tax dollars because of their economy or the large amount of federally controlled lands. Among other things, we must have more active management of lands in these communities and more direct control of state lands. The connection between the needs of our rural communities could not be more critical to the role the state superintendent plays on the Land Board.

Q7

Idaho is experiencing rapid growth, concentrated in the state's population centers. What would you do to ease the strain on schools?

I believe that school facilities and maintenance funding is the priority issue for our districts and communities and has been grossly overlooked for the last eight years. Because the responsibility for facilities falls to local taxpayers, our current system for addressing this need is not sustainable. Too much burden falls on local property taxpayers and with a billion dollar facility deficit the solutions cannot wait. Deferred maintenance is deficit spending.

Added to this, fast growing communities and districts are funding new buildings almost every year. Solutions must take into account Idaho's record surplus, our growing economy, and returns on endowed lands. These revenues need to be directed to funding facilities. School leaders are tired of asking and local taxpayers are tired of paying.

Q8

What, if any steps, would you take to improve students' mental health?

It's time to have this discussion without politicizing the topic to the detriment of kids. As a state leader, it must start with an honest discussion of what it means to support and improve mental health for students, from an appropriate and realistic school perspective. Removing the stigma and fear of a statewide conversation has to start at the top. Schools want and need help in how they navigate growing concerns of suicide, anxiety and depression. This discussion must include parents and students. Because of my extensive experience in this area, I will show schools how they can maintain their supportive role while they direct and refer parents, who have the primary role, to outside resources and partners.

If we want to support and retain educators, we need to provide them with realistic strategies for dealing with behaviors in class. Our teachers and administrators are frustrated and want help and our school counselors are overwhelmed. When we talk about school safety, we must include emotional well being. Prevention of behaviors that result in violence are a critical and key part of overall school safety.

Q9

How will you engage the State Board of Education, as one of its members, to advance your goals as state superintendent?

I have already done this successfully as President of the Board. I was twice elected by my peers on the Board, which included the current superintendent, to lead them. I know what is needed to get the work done with honesty and fidelity and respect for roles and responsibilities.

The State Board of Education is an essential partner for the success of the State Superintendent and State Department of Education. We don't have time for fractured relationships and we need positive cooperation. I understand the Constitutional duties and role under state law. The Idaho Supreme Court made that clear in their 2020 unanimous decision. I am eager to have a reset of this relationship.

Q10

Only 37% of Idaho high school graduates continue their education in the fall. Is this a problem?

I think it's an indication there is a mismatch in what our students need/want and what is available. We have record numbers of students accessing dual credit college classes and declining numbers that go to college. Clearly our students want to get a jump start on their preparation and increasingly it's less about a formal college experience. Our students are going on, it just looks like a variety of other ways. Added to this issue is that our state graduation rate has gone backwards. If we don't provide the relevance for our students and prepare them for the variety of choices outside of high school, we will continue to lose students before and after they graduate. There has never been a time to pivot our educational system to fit the needs of the 21st century student and connect them to the opportunities of our growing communities and state more than now.

This issue is precisely why I have put work ready skills at the core of my vision for Idaho education and why I am calling for a required financial literacy course. Our diplomas should matter to kids, employers and colleges. Developing skilled and confident learners is how we show our kids we're committed to their success, regardless of the goals they pursue.

Q11

What would you have to accomplish to make your upcoming term as state superintendent a success?

The next state superintendent must re-establish trust in Idaho public education for students, parents, educators, taxpayers, business leaders, and lawmakers across the state. Caring about kids means caring about outcomes and the return on our investments. Using honesty, integrity, and transparency, I want to build an educational experience we can all be proud of and believe in.

It's time to change the culture around education and restore the value it brings. That starts at the top and is achieved through work ethic, respect for those in and out of the classroom, and listening to the many Idahoans involved and impacted by Idaho education.

At the state level, K-12 education leadership has been missing or late. I will be the leader that understands the complexities of our state, and the changes that are coming and are needed.
