

Responses from Terry Gilbert

Page 1

Q1

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

I have a vision to improve public education for our Idaho children, a vision influenced by my years as a teacher in public schools, as a leader of teachers throughout Idaho, from my training at Northwest Nazarene College, including a B.A. in English and an M.A. in Curriculum Development, even as a teacher in my church Sunday School.

Because I have served at every level of instruction – teaching junior high and senior high school students, mentoring elementary school students, and instructing a course on ethics as an adjunct professor (a college course I developed), the Idaho classroom teachers and support professionals are my family members. They are professionals with whom I have worked side-by-side during my career, advising and counseling them, educating them about trends in learning, and sharing their joys and sorrows.

As Superintendent, I will fight for public education, the cornerstone of our democracy! I will fight for adequate funding for our schools so teachers can give individual attention to your sons and daughters.

I will ...

- encourage course offerings that match student's interests in STEM, agriculture, arts and humanities, vocational tech, and specialized apprenticeships;
- require a curriculum that teaches the essentials in every subject to create informed, literate, and ethical adults,
- mandate a curriculum that complements the teaching our students receive from their parents about appropriate ways to treat our fellow human beings,
- demand education that helps our students distinguish right from wrong,
- encourage a school environment where our teachers can model the joy of learning, so this joy remains with their students throughout their lives;
- demand safer schools to protect students and teachers from another Uvalde massacre by ensuring that schools provide a police presence in every school and that buildings are fortified to prevent entry by unwanted persons.

Students and their parents will be valuable partners in co-creating in my vision of the learning process, from early childhood education to adult professional training in college or vocational preparation.

If you share my vision, come work with me. Idaho education is on the cusp of a revolution. I am ready to lead. (See www.Gilbert4idahoschools.com)

Q2

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

We need a literacy moon shot!

First, I will ask districts what they need to increase early literacy in their schools. Then, we will work together to meet those needs, supported by funding from the legislature and advice from the State Department.

Teachers are crucial to nurturing students who can read effectively, write persuasively, speak clearly, and think logically. That is: to become literate. However, teachers are not the only persons teaching students about the importance of reading a wide variety of printed materials. You are, as parents. Grandma and Grandpa are. We all are.

We have endured a pandemic, a tragedy rivaling the Great Influenza epidemic of 1918, and it's affected our children. Too many of our children have lost their mothers and fathers and other beloved relatives to this dread disease. New data shows worsening mental health among Idaho children. Meanwhile, the level of literacy in Idaho has fallen, as it has nationwide.

Our current teachers can help this effort by creating an individual reading plan for each student who is below grade level.

It is vital that we ask retired professional teachers to join the ranks of educators once again, and, along with other skilled professionals, to become tutors. We need to expand the number of citizens willing to help increase literacy of our young people for the 2023 school year and perhaps beyond, until our students regain lost literacy skills.

If there is not literacy coach in every school, one (or several) need to be hired soon to help this statewide effort.

It is time to expand our kindergarten program so it is high quality and year-round, and starts our children's literacy skills off strong.

The Idaho State Department of Education can be a resource to our districts, offering advice, counsel, and insights into approaches used by successful Idaho state and national school districts.

The State Department has begun the Striving to Meet Achievement in Reading Together (SMART) program, which provides training and collaboration, and I celebrate the efforts in this area. The department also provided support and guidance on how to use data from the Idaho Reading Indicator in order to tailor instruction that meets the needs of individual students, and suggests best interventions and best practices.

I thank them for this work.

Further, the department is working with a new law to guide teachers dealing with dyslexia. From my many conversations with teachers, I know this new law needs additional work and I am ready to assist in its influence.

I will rely on tried methods used by the Department, while developing new methods in consultation with educators nationwide about practices that have proved effective. Developing new methods requires listening, and that is one of my greatest skills, developed over 45 years in education.

So one of my first questions to school superintendents and teachers will be to ask them what they need to be successful in teaching students to read, write, talk, and think. Their answers will guide the Education Department, so employees can feel pride in their important work as they offer their expertise and connect schools and teachers with the resources they need to be successful. (See www.Gilbert4idahoschools.com)

A word about dyslexia: HB731 attempted to provide guidance to teachers who have responsibility to help young learners struggling with the learning challenge of dyslexia. However, as well-meaning as this legislation was, according to current teachers of these students, it was poorly written and vague. There must be a closer relationship between legislators, the State Department of Education, and actual teachers providing invaluable educational guidance. (See www.Gilbert4idahoschools.com)

Q3

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

Congratulations to 18-year-old Boise student Shiva Rajbhandari, who had the get-up-and-go to run for the Boise School Board. He was successful and makes me proud!

I think Shiva represents young students throughout Idaho who demand to have a voice in their education and the future of our planet. I will ask students and parents who have been inspired by Shiva's example to work with me to form a "Cornerstone Movement," to support the concept that "Public Schools Are the Cornerstone of Our Democracy."

Citizens in the Cornerstone Movement will be invited to engage in our democracy as an organized and powerful voice to...

- influence the legislative process;
 - agitate when appropriate to advance grassroots democracy in Idaho;
 - educate and engage citizens to speak and act on behalf of their desire to strengthen democracy in Idaho;
 - organize citizens of all political persuasions to demand a responsive government that listens and acts on behalf of their interests;
- and
- celebrate victories on behalf of Idaho's children.

I will engage Cornerstone Movement citizens in activity in the Idaho Legislature that will advance education in the state.

For the youth participants in the Cornerstone Movement, I will continue the work of the statewide Student Advisory Council, seeking their advice on proposed legislation and creating proposed legislation, as necessary. (See www.Gilbert4idahoschools.com)

Q4

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

I am committed to keeping public money in public schools — the legacy of our Idaho forefathers who placed in our constitution the requirement that we “establish and maintain a general, uniform and thorough system of public, free common schools.” Public education is necessary for a democracy and a vibrant economy. Knowledge needs to be made available to every citizen, regardless of their zip code or income, so that each Idahoan has a voice and a vote.

So I am opposed to the Voucher Vultures of Idaho who seek to destroy Idaho public education. How will they do this? They plant seeds of mistrust in public schools and scare parents by lying about things like Critical Race theory, which is not taught in any K-12 school in Idaho.

Once that lie is planted, they hope that terrified parents will begin to abandon public schools, leaving them with lower enrollment and endangered budgets and opening the door to vouchers for private schools.

Then the greedy corporate profiteers arrive, the Voucher Vultures who hire outside companies called “Educational Management Organizations” to cash in. As for-private corporate education grows, investors in EMOs get rich, and our taxpayer dollars flow into private hands.

We already have school choice options in Idaho— right now! There are five opportunities for schooling: public charter schools, unregulated home schools, magnet schools, private schools, and public schools. All of those options are viable, but the most valuable to the state of Idaho is our public schools. These are the cornerstone of Democracy — public schools promise that every single student will get a first-rate education from a certified, prepared, professional teacher. This is what Idaho’s students deserve. So I will always fight any effort to weaken public education. (See www.Gilbert4idahoschools.com)

Q5

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

Any of us who has wrestled with bureaucracy feels in their bones how frustrating it can be, especially if the bureaucrats do not listen to or identify with our pain. I believe that under my skilled leadership as a lifelong mediator, the office of Superintendent will model considerate and thoughtful listening and facilitate conflict resolution.

Every district already has a complaint procedure that is generally available online. This is the heart of local control, so I will ensure that the public understands how to work with already-available processes to register concerns.

I will encourage parent complaints first be registered directly with the teacher. If they remain unsatisfied, the complaint should be registered first with the principal, then the superintendent, and finally, the local Board of Education. At all times, the dignity of all parties at every level should be honored.

If the parent is still not satisfied, I want them to come to the State Department of Education with their observation. They should be advised when their complaint should be submitted to the Idaho Professional Standards Commission, especially if there is an allegation of violation of the Code of Ethics, in which case, they will be asked to file a form with the PSC.

What is my answer if the complaint is not an allegation of a code violation?

I will create a body of mediators statewide to help resolve larger disputes that cannot be addressed locally. My objective is to do everything on the local level as often as possible, in order to satisfy every party. Even when some feel their preferred solution was not adopted, it is my commitment that their dignity and right to be heard will be honored. But a task force of skilled mediators will be a valuable addition to the State Department of Education, and in my administration, it will be an effective force in resolving concerns. (See www.Gilbert4idahoschools.com)

Q6

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

There is a gap between the Idaho haves and have nots, because property taxes fund local schools. For example, a 2017-18 study by the SDE showed that the Preston School District spent \$4,660 per student, while schools in Blaine County spent \$15,347.

I have two answers to your question. First, the legislature must provide adequate funding for each school each and every year, and second, legislators and the public must express and model the respect for teachers and educational support personnel that those professionals need and deserve.

This is the issue: Up to 70% of all Idaho schools are challenged in myriad ways, including lack of internet connection, over-burdened teachers, lack of resources and spotty funding, and an inability to hire both professional and support personnel, including bus drivers. Our students want and deserve more.

I came to know the determination students displayed when I first started teaching, and it is the same determination students express today. They want a safe school, where they know teachers care about them and their progress; they want courses to help them transition from school to college or work and employment so they may live a productive and fulfilling life; they want to be the pride of their family.

Yes, school in the modern era has changed. Unfortunately, we have lived through decades of underfunding of Idaho schools, including and especially rural schools. Families are stressed and overburdened, and many families are fractured, so more than ever, schools need to be a place of stability, opportunity, and attention. Class sizes are far too large for individual instruction so class sizes must be reduced so teachers have time to teach. Too many demands are placed on teachers so those demands must be reduced and personnel hired to support teachers. Countless teachers are leaving to teach in other states where, unlike in Idaho, wages allow them to provide for their families. And too many school districts are forced to hire teachers who are not fully qualified to teach. The answer is not to lower the standard for entering the profession, but to raise our funding levels. (See www.Gilbert4idahoschools.com)

Q7

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

I have two answers, both connected to what we can do: first, adopt a state policy requiring that 50% of Idaho's surplus go to our public schools, and second, adopt a state law to allow impact fees for new growth.

One district, the Vallivue School District, has attempted to find legislators willing to carry an impact fee law to the legislature. Has the legislature responded to this problem? No. But government has a moral obligation to control growth and to ensure that our tax system is fair. Idaho's government has not met this moral demand. Too many Idahoans are struggling to stay in their homes.

We are not controlling growth. Our tax system is not fair.

At one time, our communities were separate from each other and were divided by rural landscapes where farmers tilled their fields and cattle chewed their cud in peace. Now, our communities encroach on each other. We are fast becoming like California, and the impact is serious.

Idaho voters are frustrated with the legislature increasing their property taxes and rents. This is the same legislature that has approved unending sales tax exemptions for Idaho businesses.

One legislator alerted Idahoans in 2019 that the total amount of exemptions to individual interests or industries was greater than the entire 2019 education budget. The grand total the legislature chose not to collect was \$28.8 billion in revenue. Such neglect is irresponsible and damaging.

Since then, the annual amount of exemptions in 2020 and 2021 was over \$2.5 BILLION for each year (an additional \$5+ billion exempted).

Months ago, after the legislative session, I realized that our budget surplus was growing to over \$1.3 billion. Eventually, the surplus grew to \$2 billion! I concluded I had a moral obligation to raise my voice about this situation.

I called for spending of money on our public schools and the adoption of a policy that 50% of a surplus each year go to education. The Idaho Press created a headline for an interview that read "Idaho is awash in money. Use it." What did my opponent say? "We can't just say that education needs more money. For what? And where?" I was dazed by this response from someone who wanted to be the head of Idaho's struggling school system. We need to invest in infrastructure, in teacher pay, in personnel hires, training, and more.

A poll by a Republican-leaning research firm provided at least two answers for my opponent, including demanding funding for early literacy programs and raising the salaries for Idaho teachers to keep their talent in the state. The results of the poll were available before my opponent made the revealing remark. (See www.Gilbert4idahoschools.com)

Q8

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

I have been concerned for years about the harmful way some American citizens treat each other, and this is seen in our schools as much as anywhere else. It is no surprise that our youth experience anxiety and depression, that they commit suicide, that they kill their classmates and teachers in school shootings. Uvalde, Sandy Hook, and Columbine, where former students killed their teachers and classmates, must not happen again anywhere. We do not want our Idaho schools and communities to experience this grief and trauma.

Medical professionals have seen a sharp increase in reports of children struggling with mental health. Our students have also been deeply affected by COVID and will be for years to come.

Suicide is the third leading cause of youth death. Nearly 10% of Idaho high school students overall and 13% of Latino high school students attempted suicide in 2019.

Yet, very few schools meet the recommended ratio of 1 school psychologist to 500 students and 1 school counselor to 250 students. To improve student mental health, schools must have the resources to hire more counselors, psychologists, and social workers.

We need a partnership between Idaho and the Federal Government. The Safer Communities Act signed into law in June 2022 can help states adjust their Medicaid programs to make it easier for schools to bill for student's mental health services. If states make those changes, it could help schools provide clinical care to students who need it most. And parents should be involved in seeking mental health services for their child, of course.

The fact is we have the tools to help parents and students. Let's save the lives of our children.

I also believe that the Cornerstone Movement I propose can give students an opportunity to be of service, to have purpose, meaning, and connection in their communities, to learn leadership, civics, and history. I believe that such a movement will have a positive impact for years to come, and, along with more staff to provide mental health care and support, it will improve student's overall health and give them a brighter future. (See www.Gilbert4idahoschools.com)

Q9

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

When attending conferences or meetings with my State Department of Education colleagues, as well as with students, parents, and teachers. I will listen carefully. I will be a listener, a reader, and a servant leader. Listening seems deceptively simple, but it is an underrated and often underutilized skill, a powerful and vital tool, and recognized by the world's best leaders as a vital tool of peace-making, prosperity- and coalition-building, and problem solving. Being a wise and skillful leader never means having all the answers and dictating them. It means bringing people together and listening.

I will sponsor student educational days where the State Department of Education highlights the exceptional work of students, their teachers, and paraprofessionals.

I will commend publicly the work of the State Department of Education, as well as the support work of school districts and school boards.

As with any large organization, communication and process between the superintendent, expert staff, the schools they serve, and the public is the key.

So I will establish a regular newsletter reaching State Department of Education staff, schools, and families that communicates the education department's goals and progress, I will educate parents about the channels that exist for them to communicate criticism and praise, and I will strengthen those communications channels. I will strengthen community and pride within the State Department of Education itself.

Guided by the insight and expertise from within the State Department of Education, I will speak out on important issues in the legislature and share the results to parents and teachers. I will keep the community informed through a relevant and vibrant State Department of Education and its communications. (By the way, the public should be encouraged to explore the SDE website, which contains a prosperity of information.)

And again, I'm excited to form a movement — not just a task force, but a movement — of citizens, including students around the truth that "Public Education Is the Cornerstone of Our Democracy." This will also give students, parents, teachers, citizens, the State Department of Education, and the Superintendent of Public Instruction a deeper and more meaningful relationship and opportunities for communication and collaboration. (See www.Gilbert4idahoschools.com)

Q10

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

The short answer is an emphatic yes!

Just as the pandemic impacted the literacy rate for our students, it also impacted the graduation rate. This is not surprising since the virus disrupted both the junior and senior years for these students. So graduation rates, which needed to be improved before the pandemic, are even more depressed today.

Under my administration, the State Department of Education will assist school districts struggling with their graduation rates, offering resources and guidance in creating a long-term plan to raise those rates.

Graduation from school is a doorway to one's future, be it in higher education or one's vocation. Research suggests that students are more likely to graduate if they can successfully adjust to high school. This should counsel us to track the dropout rate early in high school and determine effective ways to keep the students in school, because the learning there is modeled by teachers who illustrate the joy of learning.

I will encourage practical course offerings tailored to students' interests, including STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) and life skills such as shop, mechanics, home economics, parenting, all areas of arts, digital literacy, and financial management, to mention a few. These courses appeal to the interests of young people and encourage them to stay in school beyond their first year in high school. (See www.Gilbert4idahoschools.com)

Q11

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

Under my administration:

- Public money will stay in public schools;
 - The State Department of Education will be a service center to every district;
 - Idaho students and citizens will support a Cornerstone Movement to strengthen democracy and citizenship through our schools;
 - The involvement of a wide variety of Idahoans will be enlisted to improve the literacy skills of our students;
 - The passion of our youth will be tapped as they work to save our planet from the impact of climate change; and Idaho will have revolutionize its education system to that Idaho education will be renewed and become the pride of our nation. (See www.Gilbert4idahoschools.com)
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