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Newly Released Test Scores Show Significant Gains in Early Literacy, Losses on Idaho Standards Achievement Test

(BOISE) – New data from spring assessments show that Idaho students are outperforming their national peers in early literacy. It also shows losses in proficiency levels on the Idaho Standards Achievement Test (ISAT).

“The mixed results we’re seeing on these two assessments offer us a chance to pause and look at the variables that went into the equation,” said Chief Deputy Superintendent Ryan Cantrell. “One of our priorities is to ensure that the time and energy that goes into these assessments yields an accurate representation of what our students are learning and where we as educators can focus additional support for our students.”

Each spring and fall, Idaho students in kindergarten through third grade take the Idaho Reading Indicator ([IRI](#)). The assessment is used to gauge how well Idaho students are reading. Educators use the results to identify students who may need additional instruction and interventions to support their learning.

“When 2023 Idaho Reading Indicator data is compared against previous years using the same norming scale used for the assessment in 2021 and 2022, Idaho students show significant growth in early literacy,” said Cantrell. “Though the initial 2023 data shows a drop in numerical scores compared to previous years, this dip is due to the assessment vendor, Istation, applying new data norms to proficiency scales in 2023.”

Data from the spring IRI 2023 tests shows that:

- Idaho’s early literacy scores outperformed national averages by 23 percentage points in kindergarten, 18 percentage points in first grade, 18 percentage points in second grade and 18 percentage points in third grade;
- using previous norms for comparison, 66 percent of kindergarteners scored proficient, up one percentage point from 65 percent in 2022 and five percentage points from 61 percent in 2021;
- using previous norms for comparison, 75 percent of second graders scored proficient in 2023, up from 72 percent-in 2022 and 69 percent-in 2021; and

- using previous norms for comparison, 75 percent of Idaho’s third graders scored proficient, up from 72 percent in 2022 and 70 percent in 2021.

“Idaho’s public school educators have helped our students recover early literacy learning loss at an exceptional rate,” Cantrell added. “In 2020, our kindergarteners did not participate in the IRI due to school closures. In 2021, these same students scored 60 percent proficient as first graders, 72 percent proficient as second graders and 75 percent proficient as third graders in an apples-to-apples comparison.”

Since taking office in January, Superintendent of Public Instruction Debbie Critchfield has instituted several areas of focus to improve early literacy in Idaho students, including:

- Facilitating and supporting review of both Idaho standards and curriculum;
- providing high-quality, research-based professional development and fostering collaboration throughout Idaho;
- implementing the K-3 SMART program in which instructors can sign up for two years of programming that includes monthly book studies on the science of reading as well as on-demand collaboration and support in the classroom from a state coach;
- tapping into expiring federal funds to provide evidence-based supplemental reading interventions at no cost to schools; and
- requesting necessary funding to hire a state Early Literacy Coordinator to support schools and districts in their instructional efforts.

Other factors, such as the expansion of full-day kindergarten, combined with Governor Little’s historic \$72.8 million investment in early literacy, are also supporting Idaho’s ongoing progress.

“The trends are generally positive, and I’m encouraged by the increased focus we’re placing on making sure more Idaho students are solid readers early in their academic careers,” said Critchfield. “Reading is central to a student’s success and we’re doubling our efforts to make literacy a hallmark of what we do.”

Idaho students were also administered the Idaho Standards Achievement Test (ISAT) in the spring. The ISAT assesses how well Idaho students are performing in math, science and reading and is given to students in various grades each spring.

“This year’s ISAT scores are lower than what we saw in 2021 and 2022 when our students were showing improvement coming out of the pandemic,” said Cantrell. “The 2023 decrease may be due in part to Idaho students participating in a longer ISAT rather than the shortened version used in 2021 and 2022. In some instances, very young students were taking tests for long periods more appropriate for high school and college students. This can lead to lower scores based on testing fatigue.”

The full ISAT blueprint asks students to respond to twice as many sections in the English Language Arts (ELA) assessment and requires significantly more time to complete. The state

plans to return to the shorter ISAT blueprint in 2024, which Cantrell says should reflect a more accurate assessment of students' progress.

Data from the 2023 ISAT show that:

- Overall, 52 percent scored as proficient or better in ELA/literacy. Of those, 22 percent scored in the highest category, advanced. These figures are down from the previous year's scores which showed 56 percent of students assessed as proficient; and
- in math, 42 percent scored as proficient or better with 19 percent being assessed in the advanced category. These results are down from the previous year's 43 percent of students assessed as proficient.

The SDE is in the process of implementing a variety of resources and professional development programs focused on supporting math instruction. These include:

- Renewed focus on essential Idaho math standards in cooperation with the Office of the State Board of Education;
- supporting Regional Math Centers to foster regional collaboration while improving systems and instruction and to fulfill the obligations set forth in [Idaho Statute 33-1627](#);
- providing districts with the Imagine Math curriculum resource free of charge. [House Bill 623](#) provides funding for an online, adaptive math program for all Idaho school districts; and
- establishing the Idaho Council of Teachers of Mathematics to increase statewide leadership and collaboration.

Ongoing goals for improving ISAT ELA and literacy scores are also addressed in early literacy improvements. The SDE will also:

- Continue to provide dyslexia professional development to equip Idaho teachers with effective interventions and support for all students;
- implement statewide Professional Learning Communities (PLC) designed to ensure all students learn at a high level. PLC's guide teachers to evaluate achievement and to provide effective interventions for Idaho students; and
- as discussed in early literacy, the SMART program will continue to provide classroom support and coaching for K-3 literacy instruction.

These statewide efforts, among others, are part of a multi-pronged approach to addressing Idaho students' achievement in the coming years.

There are also some significant bright spots in this year's ISAT data for both ELA and math:

- Rockland School District increased ELA scores by 16 percent to reach 78 percent proficiency district-wide;

- West Ada School District's nearly 20,000 students collectively increased their math ISAT proficiency by 2 percent;
- Syringa Charter School increased its math proficiency scores by 13 percent to 70 percent; and
- Cascade School District increased its science proficiency scores by 38 percent.

Idaho State Department of Education staff will be working with these and other successful Idaho schools to better understand what strategies and instructional methods led to improvement on this year's assessment so they can be replicated statewide.

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