

## IDAHO'S EDUCATION REFORMS AND THE NATIONAL AGENDA

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**T**hank you so much for inviting me to come here for what has so far been a lovely day. I think that would be true in any case, but it is *especially* true since it gets me out of Boise and away from the Legislature for a day.

Is Tom Morley here? If you want any war stories about what state offices are like during a legislative session, ask Tom. He's been there and done that.

Yesterday was a big day. The Joint Finance and Appropriations Committee set next year's public school budget. This isn't what I was asked to talk about, but I thought I'd spend a couple of minutes on JFAC's decisions and what they mean for our elementary and secondary schools this coming year.

One of my staff members asked me what word I'd use to describe the budget. I'm torn between "dismal" and "mediocre." I'd say "mediocre" because it allows us to keep on keeping on, but with no real forward movement or improvement. I'd say "dismal" because it has a few odd quirks in it that are going to make for some difficulty down the road.

Because this is a brief report, I'll just focus on three things:

First, teacher salaries. Idaho ranks low among the states in beginning teacher salaries. The legislative budget proposal is obviously an attempt to rectify that by boosting the starting salary from \$25,000 to \$27,500. It also generally rewards teachers based on additional education but not for additional experience. Put most simply, the longer someone teaches, the more of a financial liability that teacher is to the district.

Second, the legislative budget attempts to keep the support unit amount the same next year as this year. What that means in English is that districts will receive what we call "discretionary" money to be used for heat, lights, health insurance, band uniforms, textbooks, or whatever. The problem with holding the amount the same is that many of the costs districts have to pay are going up—so staying even is really falling behind.

Third, the budget committee added roughly \$5 million to the governor's proposal for technology spending, which I appreciate. But it ignored my request for \$5 million to start a remediation program to help students who are in danger of not passing the Idaho Standards Achievement Test,

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which is a condition for graduation. Instead, the committee authorized the State Board of Education to support a computer-based system of tutoring and assistance as a remediation program.

Here's the problem: last week I polled school district superintendents and not one of them wants that computerized program. So a good deal of money is going to be spent on something districts don't want, while other needs go unmet.

I know state funds are limited. But I'd rather see those limited funds spent to greatest effect. That's why I'm a little torn on my one-word description.

Before I go any farther, let me see a show of hands: How many of you plan to become teachers?

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Despite what I said a moment ago, let me be the first to welcome you to a career that is challenging, frustrating, fulfilling, scary, exciting, exhausting, and, in the end, deeply rewarding. If I have my way, teaching will once again be recognized as a true profession with a professional salary to boot—although I'll have to wait a year to try again. I know some of you young men may hesitate to enter teaching because of your responsibility to provide for your family. I don't want to lose your talent and your passion for teaching young people because you can't afford to become a teacher.

Let me warn you: public schools have their critics. One of my predecessors, Jerry Evans, used to say that anyone who ever went to a school considers himself or herself fully qualified to judge how a teacher is doing, how subjects should be taught, how much testing is right, and who ought to be playing varsity football.

But the payoffs are enormous. You all know how a cartoonist shows an idea coming, with that little light bulb going on over someone's head? It really happens: as a teacher I have literally seen that light go on when a child finally gets it. There's nothing more rewarding, and I want all of you who plan to teach to know that you will truly change the lives of others, and for the better.

My topic for today is "Idaho's Education Reforms and the National Agenda." The more I thought about what I wanted to say, the more I decided to reverse that and talk about what the national reforms have meant for the Idaho education agenda.

To get there I had to do some research into 19th century education in America—because despite what some of you may think, I wasn't there myself.

But I began to see why history majors enjoy their work. When you're living through an event, it's hard get a perspective on how all the events that came before led up to this. It's our own version of "50 First Dates." We start each new reform from scratch.

But the luxury of hindsight lets you put a shape and order to the events and decisions, and see the natural progression from one thing to another. As I talk to you today, I want you to think about these issues in the context of their time in history. It's easier for me—the fact is, I was there for many of these things—but you will have to rely on your own images from books and movies and perhaps the stories you heard when you were a child.

The history of public education in this nation is a history of reform. The American system of education differed from the educational systems of other nations in three important respects.

First, Americans tended then, and still tend, to regard education as a solution to social problems. Schools are a crucible for developing literate and responsible citizens. Those words are familiar to me because I used them, or something similar, in a videotape I just filmed as part of our emphasis on character and civic education in our schools. And just a few months ago, an “Education Week” article noted that our school system is still our most important democratic institution – by the way, that’s “democratic” with a small “d,” in case any of you think I’m trying to slip a political sound bite in on the sly.

Second, Americans gave the major responsibility to local authorities, rather than federal. That’s also true in Idaho: any school decision not delegated by law to the state is retained by locally elected school trustees. *That* applearcort seems to have been upset by the “No Child Left Behind” Act, which I’ll say more about later.

And third, because early Americans had great confidence in the value of education, they provided more years of schooling for a higher percentage of the population than other nations did.

I don’t want to bore you with a lot of numbers, but it’s worth thinking about what’s happened over the years. In 1901, when my father was born, one out of every ten youth between the ages of 14 and 17 was enrolled in school, and about 8 percent graduated. By 1940, when I was born, it was seven out of ten, and just over half graduated from high school. As of the last census, about 96 percent of all 14-to-17-year-olds were enrolled in school, and the graduation rate is roughly 84 percent.

As far as we know, Idaho’s first school was established by Presbyterian missionaries in 1837. The first nonmission school was at Franklin, opened in 1860 by the Latter-day Saints. If I had to guess, I’d say the first reform movement began the day after those schools opened their doors.

Two educational historians, David Tyack and Larry Cuban, have studied educational trends, and they see a link between what was happening in the nation’s social and economic fabric, and what was expected of the nation’s schools.

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In the late nineteenth century, for example, Americans were concerned about industrializing and competing with nations like Germany. Thus there was a push to standardize a basic curriculum to prepare students to live and work in that complex society. Nothing too fancy, you understand: remember, it was Henry Ford who said you could have a car in any color, as long as it was black.

In the 1920s and '30s, as more immigrants arrived and the nation endured its Depression, schools were expected to turn out homogenous classes of students prepared to be healthy, ready for a vocation, and fully prepared for the requirements of citizenship.

The big winner in the 1946 Oscars was *The Best Years of our Lives*—the post World War II equivalent of *Return of the King*—and it stressed the values of loyalty, duty, home and family life, and making the difficult transition from a wartime to a peacetime economy.

By the 1950s we moved into the Cold War era, punctuated by the shock of hearing about the Russian launch of Sputnik. And this *was* a shock: the space race had hardly begun, and already we'd lost it. Almost immediately there was a lot of hand-wringing over our watered-down curriculum, and reformers called for a boost in the basics of math and science.

Then came the 1960s and early '70s. You know the old joke: If you can remember the '60s, you weren't there. But the great issues of the time—civil rights, the war on poverty, and America's involvement in Vietnam—came to school every day, and every night we watched protests and civil unrest on our televisions as the nation struggled with matters of conscience. Again, reformers saw the American high school as the best place to foster racial and economic equality and participation.

In the late '70s and the 1980s, we began to feel pressure from Japan and its booming economy and seemingly successful schools, even as we went into a recession here at home. Ironically, today the Japanese are looking at the American system of education because they are convinced their own rigorous, regimented school system is not preparing its students to be creative thinkers in a rapidly-changing world.

As an aside, an educational magazine ran a cartoon not long ago that showed a teacher listing qualities needed in a competitive society: creative thinking, independent judgment, problem-solving ability, and so on, while in the back of the room a student raises his hand and asks, "Is this going to be on the test?"

Through all of this, one idea has had staying power. I wish I had a dollar for each time I heard someone say that we ought to run our schools more like businesses. People seem to like that idea, even though, as the "New Yorker" magazine noted last fall, if schools were factories, America

would have solved its educational problems a century ago. We're great at turning out widgets. Unfortunately, our children aren't widgets.

I like to reverse the question: What if we ran businesses like schools? Think about it:

Most businesses would shut down over the summer because they would still run on schedules developed during a more agrarian time in our nation's history. Factories would have to accept all the raw material sent to them, even if it didn't meet the required quality specifications. They would have to hire everyone who showed up, regardless of knowledge, skill, or even interest.

Some time would be siphoned off for non-factory purposes—for example, to teach all employees how to fill out tax forms or how to give CPR—but the business would still have to keep up its production schedule. If too many employees showed up and the business had to expand, it would have to ask its neighbors to tax themselves to build a new wing, and it would take two-thirds of the neighbors' approval to make that happen. If the idea was defeated, the factory would just have to keep cramming them in.

And all the while, the factory would be expected to turn out more and better widgets, widgets for today's world and tomorrow's needs, and all those widgets would be tested by standards developed by the really big factory in Washington, D.C. If the widgets weren't up to snuff, it would be a failing factory.

Schools are not businesses. Our children are not products. Public education is both a science and an art, and its practitioners must have a healthy dash of the artist to challenge and even inspire youngsters.

Back to reform and 1983, when the big event was publication of *A Nation at Risk*, a report prepared by the U.S. Department of Education's National Commission on Excellence in Education. Incidentally, the U.S. Secretary of Education at the time was Dr. Terrell Bell of Idaho. His was a new position: the department had been created during the Carter presidency, and Republicans didn't like it much because they thought education was a state responsibility rather than a federal one.

Dr. Bell understood that part of his assignment was to eliminate the department. Instead, he issued the *Nation at Risk* report. I want to quote from one memorable passage:

If an unfriendly power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war. As it stands, we have allowed this to happen to ourselves. We have even squandered the gains in achievement made in the wake of the Sputnik challenge. Moreover, we have dismantled essential support systems which helped make these gains possible. We have, in effect, been committing an act of unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament.

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Strong words, aren't they? Reams and reams have been written about that report, including whether its criticisms were valid. At its heart, it offered four recommendations:

First, that *graduation requirements be strengthened* so that all students would have a foundation in what the report called the five new basics: English, math, science, social studies, and computer science.

Second, that *schools adopt high standards* for academic performance.

Third, that *the amount of time students spend engaged in learning be significantly increased*.

And fourth, that the *teaching profession be strengthened*.

Sound familiar? It should. You can almost draw a line between the *Nation at Risk* report of 1983 and the No Child Left Behind act of 2002. It would have ups and downs, but we can see the genesis of our work today in that report of two decades ago.

*A Nation at Risk* was intended to shock, and it did. From national news shows to teachers' lounges, everyone had something to say about it.

And in recent years, it's common to hear that not much practical came out of it. Yet, I think there were two important results. For one, our nations schools and our expectations of them became a topic of conversation. For another, elementary and secondary education began to be seen as a *national* issue, as well as a state concern.

That national emphasis picked up steam in 1986, when the first President Bush convened the governors of the states and territories for a national education summit. This was only the third domestic summit in our history and the first on education. Idaho's chief delegate was then-Governor Cecil D. Andrus, a Democrat, and he took with him our then-Superintendent of Public Instruction, Jerry Evans, a Republican. They got along well, for the most part, because both had a strong commitment to improving public schools.

Two things came out of that summit. At the national level, the governors developed six national goals for education to be achieved by the year 2000. Those goals were:

First, that every child start school ready to learn.

Second, that the high school graduation rate be increased to 90 percent.

Third, that students demonstrate competency in challenging subject matter, including English, math, science, history, and geography.

Fourth, that American students be "first in the world" in math and science.

Fifth, that every adult American be literate and prepared for lifelong learning.

Sixth, that every school be free from drugs and violence, and that classrooms be disciplined and conducive to learning.

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In 1990, Congress adopted these goals and added two more: professional development for teachers and improving parental involvement.

To monitor progress, Congress created a National Education Goals Panel. Again, Idaho was involved: State Representative Doug Jones of Filer, who is a member of our House Education Committee, was one of the members of the national panel. Its job was to find ways to measure progress and report annually on how we were doing. The “what” was known; the “how to” was pretty much left up to states.

So let’s cut back to the 1986 summit and the homebound trip of Governor Andrus and Superintendent Evans. Both men routinely flew in coach—or, as one of my friends puts it, in “steerage” —because they didn’t want anyone to think they were wasting state money on first-class seats. I’m told it was pretty funny to see Governor Andrus walk past Boise businessmen in the front of the plane as he made his way to the back.

In any event, the governor and superintendent huddled in steerage and decided to jointly appoint a task force to look at ways to improve Idaho’s schools. That task force spawned others. A group of 25 Idaho businesses commissioned another report on educational improvement from *their* perspective, and the State Board of Education appointed a Task Force on Hispanic Education. By 1991, all of these reports were presented at a statewide educational summit, held in Boise but televised throughout Idaho. The Legislature caught the spirit and appropriated nearly \$1 million to allow Superintendent Evans to implement the best recommendations of the three reports.

I’m told by people who were involved that it was a wonderful time in education. All things seemed possible. Dr. Terrell Bell had left his cabinet post and turned educational consultant, and he was hired by Idaho to lead our efforts here. Dr. Bell worked with yet another state committee to develop a package of plans that included recommendations in areas of early childhood, student achievement and motivation, teachers, technology, parental involvement, school governance, and, not least, development of what was called a performance-based system. That was Idaho’s term. Other states used outcome-based, or standards-based, but the idea was the same: measure achievement against predetermined expectations.

I want to emphasize that last item because this was something of a transition from asking students what they knew to asking them what they could do with that knowledge. Idaho was a leader in this area. If you graduated from an Idaho high school, then you took the Direct Writing Assessment in the 4th, 8th, and 11th grades. Idaho’s writing assessment is about 20 years old now, and it’s one of the great granddaddies of performance assessments. In fact, one of my staff members attended a seminar at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and listened to

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the lecturer praise Idaho's writing assessment. Imagine: an Idaho idea as part of a Harvard lecture.

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All of that came to a halt in what I suppose you could call a perfect educational storm: a collision between what was happening in Idaho and what was happening nationally, and in a local sense, a collision between the philosophies of the outgoing superintendent, Jerry Evans, and his elected successor, Dr. Ann Fox.

The national story begins with Bill Clinton. He was governor of Arkansas at the time of the first summit, and when he ran for president he made education a key issue. After he took office in 1993, he proposed what came to be known as the federal "Goals 2000" Act, an effort to integrate some of the previous work on educational reform. Goals 2000 offered grants to states for promoting the eight national education goals, raising expectations for students, and supporting state and local reform efforts.

Almost immediately, Goals 2000 came under heavy criticism. Just as an example, Phyllis Schlafly of the Eagle Forum issued a report in which she charged that Goals 2000 was "part of a coordinated national plan to impose federal mandates, bypass local control, and eliminate accountability." Frankly, I think the real shock was that the federal government had taken a big step into what had traditionally been a state area, and no one was sure what the effect would be.

In Idaho, outgoing Superintendent Evans also had some reservations about the new federal law. He said he wasn't sure he wanted to apply for a federal grant because – and I quote – "if it appears in the minds of the people of Idaho that we've sold out to the feds for half a million dollars...that's not where I want to be."

When Dr. Fox took office as State Superintendent, she took the next step and announced that she would *not* ask for the federal funding. The State Board of Education overruled her and accepted the money, but as time went on and more states expressed qualms, Congress decided to let states use their Goals 2000 money for technology, which is mainly what Idaho did.

Dr. Fox also established a moratorium on performance-based work underway and pulled back copies of the curriculum framework documents.

In effect, much of the work of the previous few years came to a halt during Dr. Fox's four-year term.

Goals 2000 also gave impetus to renewed calls for elimination of the U.S. Department of Education. That was one of the items in the list of priorities outlined in the "Contract for America," devised in large part by Congressman Newt Gingrich as a way to unify the Republican party in the wake of President Clinton's election. It worked: in 1994, the Republicans took control of the U.S. House of Representatives for the first time in 40 years. And while the U.S. Department of Education survived, all this discussion brought up those old concerns about where responsibility for public education should really lie.

Meantime, back in Idaho, the Legislature decided to take a more assertive role in public education. For example, in 1999 it adopted the Idaho Reading Initiative, which is significant because it was the result of work by a *legislative* committee rather than a school or educational committee.

As it happened, the Idaho Reading Initiative coincided with my election as State Superintendent of Public Instruction. I had one thing going against me: I'm a Democrat. But I had a big plus on my side. My professional background is in reading and reading research, and that helped us get the Reading Initiative off to a strong start.

The initiative is built around three principles:

- that we need to set expectations for what constitutes grade-level reading and then measure children's performance to see whether they are at, near, or below grade level;
- that we should offer extra help to students who are below grade level; and
- that teachers should have the benefit of the best training possible on how to teach reading.

I had spent years as a school principal, and I often heard teachers say things like, "I did everything I know how to do, and I *still* couldn't help that child." I believed them: I believed those teachers *did* do everything they knew how to do. So our solution was to give them even more strategies.

The initiative has been a great success. More important, it prepared us for what was to follow.

When President Bush the Second ran for office, he called education the most important item on his agenda. No longer was the U.S. Department of Education an endangered species; it was now ground zero for President Bush's education plans, which were eventually incorporated into the No Child Left Behind Act, signed into law just over two years ago.

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About that time, Duke University hosted a leadership summit that drew five of the six living U.S. Secretaries of Education. The current secretary, Rod Paige, said something that caught my eye. He acknowledged that many of his fellow Republicans had supported elimination of the department, but now he understood that their real goal was that as much as it was restoring local control of schools to the parents of America. And, he said, the No Child Left Behind Act would do just that.

Well, I beg to differ. More than ever before in my 40-plus years in education, the federal government's tail is wagging the educational dog. Anyone who truly believes American parents are going to run schools needs to read the 1400 pages of the No Child Left Behind Act and the 11,000-plus pages of guidance. Put most simply, the No Child Left Behind Act is driving most of what we do these days at the state *and* local levels.

Basically, the federal law requires every state to develop academic standards for its students and then decide what constitutes proficiency in those areas. Each state must implement a testing program in math, reading/language arts, and, beginning in 2007, in science. Every state must decide what constitutes "adequate yearly progress" or AYP for schools. If a school fails to make "adequate yearly progress" for the first year, it is simply put on a list. Among ourselves in the department, we call this "going to AYP jail."

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If the school fails for a second year, its students can transfer to other schools in the district. If it fails a third year, the students must be offered—at district expense—supplemental or tutorial services. Teachers in core academic areas are to be "highly qualified" —meaning they must have majored in the area in which they are teaching. Every state must have a technology plan. It must have a policy on what constitutes a "persistently dangerous" school. And it must issue report cards so the public can see what's happening in schools.

These are just highlights, but I mention them simply to say that Idaho already had a leg up on much of this by virtue of having gone through all the hard work on our Idaho Reading Initiative. We already knew how to set standards and decide what kind of score shows proficiency. We already knew how to test students. We had already trained teachers. And our whole system was what we call transparent: we release reading scores to the public at the state, district, and individual school levels.

So I am comfortable saying I agree with the obvious goals of the No Child Left Behind Act. And I certainly agree with the idea of not leaving any child behind. But, as with everything else in life, the details matter.

Take the "highly qualified teacher" requirement. It sounds great on paper, but it's causing headaches for Idaho's small, rural schools. A small

school might hire someone who majored in biology and ask that teacher to also take classes in general science and zoology. Under the “highly qualified teacher” requirement, that teacher is qualified for biology, period. So either the school will be out of compliance or its electives will be cut, because it’s highly unlikely small schools will be able to add new faculty to cover every subject.

Another problem: Let’s say a child in a rural district attends a school that has not made adequate yearly progress for two years. Where does that child transfer to if there isn’t another school in the district—or if there is, but it’s a two-hour bus trip up over a mountain?

Another concern has to do with how “adequate yearly progress” is calculated. Here’s the quick version.

For a school to make AYP, 95 percent of the students enrolled have to be there on testing day, and so does 95 percent of each subgroup, such as special education students or non-English speaking students or Asian students. If your school has 37 special education students and three are absent on testing day, then the entire school fails to make adequate yearly progress.

The same is true for determining proficiency. This year, to make AYP, 61 percent of the school’s enrolled students must be proficient in reading/language arts and 50 percent in math. The same is true for each subgroup. So if 32 of your school’s 50 non-English speaking students fail to make proficiency in reading, the entire school fails to make AYP – even if all other students are proficient.

The Idaho legislature has spent a lot of time discussing the No Child Left Behind Act and just last week it introduced a memorial to Congress asking for more flexibility in these areas. I certainly appreciate that show of support.

As a practical matter, Idaho is probably as well positioned as any other state to make the No Child Left Behind Act work. We’re a small state; we can get word out quickly to teachers, administrators, and parents. The Legislature supported our plan to spend three years preparing teachers and administrators to work within a standards-based system. We’ve invested a good deal of time teaching educators to analyze test data and use those results to improve instruction and thus improve student performance. And, as I said, we’ve gotten used to transparent reporting.

And yet, as I look at this latest wave of reform, I wonder whether it will be more successful than its predecessors.

We’re not really very patient about making change. One year after the Idaho Reading Initiative was adopted, and just four months after our first round of testing, a legislator chewed me out in public because the scores weren’t up yet. Of course, we had only one set of scores, so

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it was hard to say they were either up or down, but my point is that he wanted results *now*.

Four years later, we can show a history of progress and steady improvement in the skills of our youngest readers. But it took time – and patience.

The problem is exacerbated by the sheer size of what we’re trying to do. Turning a nation’s schools around is like doing a U-turn with an ocean liner. It simply requires a lot of time and space to get the job done. And, as a colleague of mine likes to say, you can’t pull the carrot up every couple of days to see if it’s growing.

Second, there seems to be a disconnect between what the policy-makers want for schools and what the public seems to want. That was nowhere clearer than in last year’s Gallup poll done for the *Phi Delta Kappan* magazine on the public’s attitude toward schools.

Let me give you just a few examples:

Asked about which level of government ought to have the greatest influence on schools—federal, state, or local—61 percent of respondents believe that should be the local level; 22 percent, the state level; and only 15 percent, the federal level. But, as we know, the strategy of the No Child Left Behind Act is to have the federal government directly involved in the important areas of standards, curriculum, and assessments.

About 66 percent of the respondents said a single test cannot show a true picture of a school’s progress. That, however, is what is required by the No Child Left Behind Act.

Asked about judging improvement, 84 percent of respondents said students should be measured by how far they have come from a starting point. But the No Child Left Behind act makes that determination based on whether a fixed percentage of all students and then each subgroup achieves a grade rated as proficient.

The No Child Left Behind Act focuses on math and reading/language arts. Eighty-three percent of respondents want a broader measurement to include other subjects.

To summarize, the public seems to want a broad curriculum that measures improvement over time in schools that are locally controlled. The No Child Left Behind Act sets up a system of narrow focus measured against a fixed point under federal directives.

Finally, it may be that the real problem has to do with the use of the word “reform.” That suggests moving backwards and trying again. And it also implies that what came before is of little value.

I prefer to call it “continuous improvement.” We have much to learn from the past, even in public education, and we ought to take those lessons and the best of those results forward into the future. That means a constant process of monitoring what we do, deciding what works best,

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and focusing on successes. That applies not just to the system but to every individual teacher.

From the day I took office, long before the No Child Left Behind Act was a gleam in George Bush's eye, I had my own motto for my expectations of Idaho's educators. It is simple: "Every child learning every day." By that I mean every single child, on every single day, with no excuses about home life or bond issues that didn't pass or crowded classrooms.

Those things have always been with us. So have students, and they come to us wanting so much to succeed. It's our job to nurture and encourage and give them the best we can in the way of help and support and solid information.

One of my daughters, who happens to be a talented seamstress, did a special piece of needlework for me. It hangs in my office where I can see it every day, and it says, "A school is a building with four walls and a tomorrow inside."

That's what I want all of us to remember: the work we do today is an investment in a better tomorrow, and for me, that makes my work in public education a true joy.

You have all been very patient during this brief history of educational reform and what it's meant for Idaho.

Now I would like to pause, take a drink of water, and answer your questions. I know you must have them—either that or rumors you want to check out. Feel free: I'm at your disposal. ☺

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