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Superintendent's Corner

Soon we will begin a new school year together. During my time in our public schools, I looked at the start of classes as a renewal of hope. We begin each year with a clean slate, and a fresh chance for us to take what we've learned about teaching during our careers and to apply that knowledge anew in our schools.

It's also exciting to see our students and colleagues again, to see how they've changed, to sense their enthusiasm, and to hear their stories about a summer well spent (and maybe ending a bit too soon!)

Our summer at the Department of Public Instruction has been as busy as it is during the school year. Let me tell you

a little bit about it.

My Student Cabinet, which has 20 student members – from the fifth grade to a former high school senior who is attending North Dakota State University this fall – is providing a wealth of useful ideas.

They're supportive of changing the structure of classes to allow students to work more with classmates who are learning at the same pace. In my opinion, students who have mastered a learning standard should be able to move on to the next one and if they haven't, they should be able to stay with it until they do. We held a breakout session at this summer's administrators' conference to learn about this competency-based education model, and the Department of Public Instruction is working on ways to make this available to more schools in the state.

In response to the teacher shortage crisis, I formed a task force to offer short- and long-term solutions for North Dakota's schools. It includes administrators, teachers, and representatives from career and technical education, regional education associations, and other key associations.

The group presented several recommendations to the Education Standards and Practices Board. The board endorsed one of the short-term solutions, a "hardship waiver." The one-year waiver would allow a person who does not have a teaching license, but who has background and experience in a subject area, to teach in the classroom.

I approved new physical education standards that go beyond learning basic skills that are useful in sports. They focus on teaching our students the habits they need for healthful, lifelong physical activity.

We had our second annual Indian Education Summit at the state Capitol. One of the highlights was a panel discussion by a group of ten American Indian high school and college students from both North and South Dakota.

Some spoke candidly of their learning difficulties, and how high school didn't prepare them for the workload they encountered in college. They also talked about the importance of supportive teachers, who worked with them on their lessons and called to check on them when they were absent. One student who lived 30 miles outside of McLaughlin, S.D., spoke

Superintendent's Corner, continued

of how fortunate she was that she could get a ride to and from school from one of her teachers. Even the attitudes of the hall monitors who welcomed them to school was noticed and appreciated by these young people. This is the type of difference educators make in students' lives!

Last month, dozens of teachers attended new, intensive training sessions on math, science and English instruction in Bismarck and Fargo. This began a five-year initiative by the Department of Public Instruction and the National Math and Science Initiative (NMSI), which is a public and private training partnership that made its debut in North Dakota this summer. I have worked for two years to secure this partnership with NMSI, and I was successful in getting the Legislature to put \$1.25 million into DPI's budget to support the initiative's work. This training got rave reviews from our teachers, and we're expecting it to be even bigger next summer.

We have worked with the Department of Commerce to draft the application form and guidance documents for the early childhood education community grants that were approved by the 2015 Legislature. We have begun implementation of our "Leveraging the Senior Year" plan, which offers additional support for students who need it, and more Advanced Placement courses.

Internally, there has been a significant change in our organizational structure at DPI, which is to put more focus on student support services and educational innovation. I have formed a new division of student support and innovation to accomplish this.

It has been an exhilarating summer at DPI, and I'm sure the fall and spring will be even better, both at the Capitol and in our schools across North Dakota.

I look forward to visiting your schools during the coming year, and drawing renewed strength and enthusiasm from our great North Dakota educators and students. There is no experience like it.

Until next time,



Kirsten Baesler

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