



GUEST OPINION

Finding ways to improve reading scores

By LAUREN NECOCHEA

Idaho is dedicated to having a strong educational system that will prepare our children for successful futures, ensure economic opportunities come to Idaho and keep our communities safe. Making sure our children read well by third grade is fundamental to achieving our goals.

Public servants and nonprofit leaders in our state are examining ways to build stronger schools, communities and families to help improve reading skills. And in Idaho we are doers, not just talkers. That is why we are already taking steps in the right direction.

Idaho's promising success stories include the P16 project in Caldwell. This partnership of dedicated nonprofits and the Caldwell School District offers preschool to more children, which we know improves their chances of succeeding when they reach grade school.

New parent education programs will soon be implemented in Kootenai, Shoshone, Twin Falls and Jerome counties to teach families how to support their child's learning from birth. These pro-

grams have been shown to result in higher kindergarten readiness tests and improved reading and math skills in later grades.

We all agree that we still have a long way to go. Only 33 percent of Idaho's fourth graders scored proficient or higher on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (36 percent scored basic and 31 percent below basic). Children need to read well by third grade so that they can begin reading to learn. Otherwise they may fall behind and never catch up.

Reading scores have important implications for later achievement. Basic readers are more than twice as likely as proficient readers to fail to graduate from high school. Below basic readers are almost six times as likely to fail to graduate.

Idaho's average scores are on par with U.S. averages. The United States, in turn, is outperformed in reading skills by some surprising competitors, including Hungary, the Russian Federation and Singapore, among others.

I am pleased to see that the Idaho Press-Tribune is paying great attention to Idaho's latest reading scores and sees how we all benefit

when children who are proficient readers grow up to be productive, capable citizens. We know we have work to do, and research has given us some great ideas.

The Idaho Kids Count report, "Reading Matters: Read to Learn, Read to Earn," summarizes the research on reading and presents a variety of potential approaches that Idaho should consider. Examples include: reexamining teacher credentialing and professional development, using data systems to alert teachers and schools to attendance and performance problems, increasing kindergarten participation and increasing participation in the voluntary IdahoSTARS program, which helps child care providers use more effective educational techniques.

In Idaho, we value innovation and ingenuity. When we come together, we accomplish great things. I look forward to seeing how we can take action now to make sure all of Idaho's children are prepared for productive futures.

■ Lauren Necochea is director of Idaho Kids Count