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Baesler, School Leaders Give Progress Report on Education Innovation

WEST FARGO, N.D., Sept. 25, 2019 – State Superintendent Kirsten Baesler and a group of school administrators outlined the progress they’ve made on education innovation, in the wake of the North Dakota Legislature’s approval of a landmark bill that made options available for school transformation.

The changes will focus on students’ mastery of skills and knowledge, rather than how much time they spend in class. They will make it easier for students to identify ways of learning they are passionate about and to design ways to explore subjects in depth. They will allow students time in their later high school years to accept internships and other projects outside of school that will enrich their education and give them real-world experience.

“In North Dakota we are striving to do school better and make our students better prepared to adapt to a fast-changing world,” Baesler said during a Wednesday news conference in West Fargo. “We have five school districts in North Dakota that are in the vanguard of this effort, and I want to recognize and thank them for their efforts.

“We have much work left to do, but we have accomplished much together. As our new school year is well under way, it’s appropriate to provide information for our North Dakota families and taxpayers about the progress that we’ve made, and our plans for continuing to move forward,” Baesler said.

As part of a partnership with KnowledgeWorks, an education nonprofit, five North Dakota schools and districts are devising and implementing innovation plans that are designed and led by local educators, families, and communities. The work is being supported by a grant from the Bush Foundation.

They are West Fargo Public Schools; Northern Cass Public School, of Hunter; Oakes Public Schools, in Oakes; the New Rockford-Sheyenne Public School, about 40 miles southwest of Devils Lake; and Marmot High School, which is located at the Youth Correctional Center at Mandan.

Baesler emphasized that the innovation ideas come from local educators, with KnowledgeWorks providing support. The education nonprofit, which is based in Cincinnati, has worked with schools across the country and has deep expertise in helping schools to build foundations for innovation, Baesler said.

“We are grateful to receive support from the Bush Foundation. They are focused on making education more relevant for all students in our region, to truly help each learner succeed. Their tremendous investment and commitment to North Dakota will provide greater learning opportunities for all our students.”

(Continued)

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Cory Steiner, Northern Cass' superintendent; West Fargo Superintendent Beth Slette; Oakes Superintendent Kraig Steinhoff; Michelle Pfaff, principal of Marmot High School at the Youth Correctional Center in Mandan; and Jill Louters, superintendent of the New Rockford-Sheyenne Public School in New Rockford, provided updates on the progress of their reforms at Wednesday's news conference.

North Dakota's education innovation effort gained significant momentum during the 2017 Legislature, when lawmakers overwhelmingly approved SB2186, a bipartisan measure that allows schools to obtain waivers from the Department of Public Instruction to promote innovation efforts. The legislation gives the NDDPI superintendent authority to waive provisions of state law that would hinder innovative education practices.

For example, Northern Cass Public School received, a waiver to shorten one school day each month during the 2019-20 school year to provide more time for teacher professional development about personalized learning. The one affected day each month will have 5 ½ hours of student instruction, instead of 7 hours. This waiver will help support Northern Cass' teachers as they integrate personalized learning into their classrooms.

Baesler said the ongoing work in the five schools will inspire other education innovation efforts to take root across North Dakota.

"These districts are gaining valuable knowledge, learning best practices, and identifying pitfalls to avoid," Baesler said. "It is our hope that their pathbreaking work will ignite more education innovation across North Dakota."

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