

National Teacher of the Year inspires CEI educators to embrace connection and stories

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Rebecka Peterson describes the relationship between integrals and teamwork in a presentation to College of Eastern Idaho faculty and staff Monday.

Rebecka Peterson, the 2023 National Teacher of the Year, encouraged educators from College of Eastern Idaho to connect with students and listen to their stories during a fall in-service training Monday at The Waterfront at Snake River Landing.

Peterson began by focusing on the pandemic's impact on education in America.

Citing a Stanford study that scanned 163 adolescent brains, she said, "They found that these brains are scanning, post-pandemic, the same way brains scanned pre-pandemic, only if that student had undergone trauma, abuse or neglect. That's a really

sobering outcome because it suggests that possibly we are treating an entire generation full of different brains — brains that have undergone trauma.”

She spoke of the importance of connection in healing and helping students develop.

“We need to help them connect to content, to each other, to their teachers and to their communities, but also we need to help them connect back to themselves,” Peterson said.

Sharing her experience as an immigrant to the United States, she said that educators should ensure all students have a place, whatever labels they carry. Her father is Iranian, and her mother is Swedish. As medical missionaries, they traveled with her in her childhood, living in four countries including Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, where 80% of the population lives in poverty.

“I think that those experiences that were hard, like moving all over the world as a child, now give me a really beautiful lens to help my students know that they belong exactly as they are,” Peterson said. “There’s no need to fit in — you don’t have to act a certain way, dress a certain way or make a certain grade.”

She was home-schooled, but took math classes at the local community college in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and completed Calculus III before graduating from high school.

After attending Oklahoma Wesleyan University for her bachelor’s degree in mathematics and University of South Dakota for a mathematics master’s degree, Peterson taught for three years at the college level. She then transferred to Union High School in Tulsa, where she has instructed courses from intermediate algebra to AP Calculus for 11 years.

During hard experiences in her first year at the high school, she started writing on “One Good Thing,” a gratitude blog for teachers, where she has since posted 1,400 entries describing positive events and interactions in her classes. She credits the habit of looking for the good in each day with changing her perspective and rekindling her love of teaching.

In April, the Council of Chief State School Officers selected her as the National Teacher of the Year.

“Rebecka plans to use the platform to highlight teachers’ stories of the good that is happening in education,” CEI Vice President of Academic and Student Affairs Lori Barber said. “Teaching is a profession that affords creativity, autonomy and purpose. Rebecka believes that highlighting stories of joy happening in the classroom across the country will help encourage current teachers and attract new educators into the profession.”

As students prepare to return to the classroom, Peterson encouraged them to challenge themselves and embrace the struggle to learn.

“Keep going, don’t give up when something’s hard,” she said. “... Struggling in math is no more the enemy than sweating is in football. It’s proof you’re in the game. ... Just because you struggle, doesn’t mean that you’re not cut out for something, because if you struggle and persevere, then you’re probably going to be quite the leader in your field.”

State of the College

Prior to Peterson’s speech, CEI President Rick Aman highlighted six priorities for the College of Eastern Idaho during a State of the College address — institutional

sustainability, student achievement, student recruitment, programming and facilities, employee recruitment and retention and brand development.



CEI President Rick Aman (far left) and Human Resources Vice President Mary Taylor (far right) present Heidi Moore (center left) and Jill Kirkham (center right) with the college's "Ripple Effect" award.

“Creating skills is one of the major things we do at a community college,” Aman said. “... A community college transfers students as juniors to a university. But in addition to that, our workforce, skills-based training, competency based, micro-credentialing are those things (we offer) that are prior to a degree (or) could roll into a degree.”

In order to achieve its mission, CEI is focusing on “access, speed to degree and affordability,” Aman said.

Ripple Effect Awards

CEI also recognized two faculty and staff members who were nominated by their peers for the biannual “Ripple Effect” award.

Jill Kirkham, Ph.D., was honored for advising CEI’s first-ever debate team and “put(ting) CEI on the map among other community colleges in Idaho and Utah, as well as throughout the United States,” CEI Human Resources Vice President Mary Taylor said.

The debate team tied for first place at the Phi Rho Pi Annual National Tournament held in Washington, D.C., in April.

Director of Procurement Heidi Moore was also recognized for “her dedication to the students evident in her commitment to procuring the best equipment and supplies for students at the best price,” Taylor said.

Moore also helped secure sponsorships for health care students from a local hospital to assist with tuition and fees.

“This sometimes is the difference between being able to attend school or not for our students,” Taylor said.

In anticipation of economic growth in eastern Idaho, the college is looking to expand its STEM programs and accommodate working adults and nontraditional students through more online, evening and weekend courses.