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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Compton leads Idaho STEM Ecosystem at new host IBE

New students, schools encouraged to join Chief Science Officers program

BOISE, Idaho (Sept. 12, 2023) — The Idaho STEM Ecosystem recently named nationally recognized STEM education leader Erica Compton as its new director. Simultaneously, Idaho Business for Education has become the new home for the Idaho Ecosystem, which was previously hosted by Idaho STEM Action Center.

The Idaho STEM Ecosystem is a statewide network of engaged individuals and organizations invested in strengthening the science, technology, engineering, and math pipeline from cradle through career. Founding members of the initiative include Idaho STEM Action Center, Micron Foundation, Idaho National Laboratory, University of Idaho, Idaho Workforce Development Council, Idaho Out-of-School Network, and many more organizations.

According to Rod Gramer, president and CEO of Idaho Business for Education, the Idaho Ecosystem is a natural fit with IBE's mission.

"The Idaho STEM Ecosystem is well aligned with Idaho Business for Education's mission of creating the workforce our employers and state needs and setting our students up for success in school, work, and life," Gramer said. "STEM education is extremely important to the future of Idaho's workforce and economy. Many of the most demanding careers in our state require education and skills in science, technology, engineering, and math."

Idaho STEM Action Center executive director Caty Solace concurred.

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“As a founding member of the Idaho EcosySTEM, the STEM Action Center team is excited to see it find a promising new home with Idaho Business for Education that will allow the network — and STEM literacy throughout the Gem State — to grow and flourish,” Solace said. “I had the honor of participating in the Idaho EcosySTEM’s very first convening in my previous role at the Workforce Development Council, and it’s exciting to see how quickly the Idaho EcosySTEM has reached this major goal we set for it just a couple of years ago.”

As the STEM Action Center leans into its role as the statewide coordinator for STEM education, the Idaho EcosySTEM and its membership now play the key role of providing access to an engaged statewide membership made up of employers, educators, community organizations, and parents. This partnership will create a fertile environment where the center’s statewide coordination and strategy efforts turn into “boots-on-the-ground” local and regional action through the Idaho EcosySTEM’s programs, activities, and grants.

Established and accepted as a member of the STEM Learning Ecosystem Community of Practice in 2019, the Idaho EcosySTEM is one of more than 100 ecosystems worldwide sharing resources and expertise among education, industry, nonprofit, and philanthropy leaders collaborating in the initiative.

Compton is a nationally recognized leader in STEM learning with more than 30 years of experience in hands-on STEM education and training. She helped launch the STEM Action Center and said she is thrilled to take the Idaho EcosySTEM’s reins.

“I am honored and excited to lead the Idaho EcosySTEM through this important transition,” Compton said. “My experience in building strategic partnerships and connecting diverse organizations through common goals will serve the organization well as we enter this next stage of growth. I’m looking forward to leveraging partners such as the STEM Action Center to build an even more robust statewide network of passionate and effective STEM advocates.”

As a part of this strategy, several STEM Action Center programs have moved with Compton to the Idaho EcosySTEM, including IDX, the Idaho Exhibition of Ideas that showcases 3D design and fabrication skills, and the Chief Science Officers student leadership program. She said there are a wealth of opportunities for cross-pollination and deep partnerships between the two organizations.

Leadership at the STEM Learning Ecosystem Community of Practice were excited by the news.

“TIES, as the backbone for the STEM Learning Ecosystems Community of Practice, applauds the work of the Idaho STEM Ecosystem and its move to sustainability with Idaho Business for Education,” Jan Morrison, founder and CEO of TIES, said. “We expect to see continued great work from the Idaho STEM Ecosystem under the brilliant leadership of Erica Compton.”

STEM Action Center partners and Idaho EcosySTEM members also commended the move.

“As a founding member of the Idaho STEM ecosystem, Idaho National Laboratory recognizes the critical work of building a strong network of partners to provide equitable access to STEM learning opportunities in every Idaho community,” Jennifer Jackson, INL’s STEM program manager, said. “The partnership with Idaho Business for Education adds value to an already thriving STEM Ecosystem. We’re excited to see the results by taking STEM education to the next level and preparing a workforce for the future.”

Wendi Secrist, executive director of the Idaho Workforce Development Council, which champions strategies to prepare Idahoans for careers that meet employers’ needs, agrees.

“The Workforce Development Council recognizes the importance of the Idaho EcosySTEM,” Secrist said. “We’re excited to see it grow and continue to connect Idahoans to in-demand careers.”

Ashley Schaffner, hub coordinator at Idaho South & East EcosySTEM, one of Idaho EcosySTEM’s three regional hubs that support local needs and leverage local resources, is also excited about the transition.

“It will be great to be able to engage with more partners, especially those beyond the K-12 scope,” Schaffner said. “I am excited to dive into new opportunities, such as the post-secondary apprenticeship space and career pathways. I look forward to opportunities to fund, serve, and support some of the more rural and remote areas in my region.”

Susan Stauffer will also continue in her role as hub coordinator for the Idaho North & North Central Ecosystem. Meanwhile, the Idaho EcosySTEM hired ReBekha Lulu as the hub coordinator for its third regional hub, South West Idaho STEM Hub. Prior to taking the new job, Lulu served as a teacher, the STEM coordinator, and middle school-high school assistant principal at Basin School District in Idaho City.

New partners, student Chief Science Officers sought

Compton and her colleagues at the Idaho EcosySTEM are busy seeking to raise awareness about the organization and its programs.

In collaboration with CBS2 and the STEM Action Center, the Idaho EcosySTEM’s South West Idaho STEM Hub hosted STEM Day at the Fair at the Western Idaho Fair’s opening day Aug. 18. And the Idaho STEM Ecosystem’s Idaho North & North Central STEM Hub will host the Latah County Fair’s Passport to STEM event Sept. 14-17 in Moscow. They also made presentations at the Idaho Association of School Administrators Summer Conference and the 2023 Idaho STEM Conference earlier this month.

The Idaho Ecosystem is also seeking to bolster the state’s Chief Science Officers program. The international initiative immerses youth in grades 6-12 in developing educational science, technology, engineering, and math activities in and out of the classroom. CSOs are students elected by their peers or selected by classroom teachers to serve as ambassadors for STEM and innovation.

At least a dozen U.S. states and a growing number of countries participate in the CSO program, which Dr. Jeremy Babendure, executive director of the Arizona Technology Council Foundation and an assistant research professor at the Arizona State University School of Molecular Sciences, founded in 2015. The SciTech Institute, a collaboration between ATCF and the Arizona Commerce Authority, oversees the CSO initiative.

Chief Science Officers attend state cabinet meetings, interact with their fellow CSOs online, and support STEM awareness activities both at their school and in the community during the academic year. STEM professionals in the field who serve as mentors provide workforce and career connections.

Eleven Idaho schools participated in the program during the 2022-23 school year and were represented by 74 CSOs.

“The Chief Science Officers program amplifies student voices regarding STEM learning and careers,” Schaffner said. “It gives them an opportunity to get involved and empowers them to shape what STEM looks like at their school and in their community. CSOs don’t just give input, they literally run the programs they envision, gaining powerful leadership skills as they share their love of science.”

Schaffner said the Idaho EcosySTEM is looking for more schools and students to participate in the CSO program during the 2023-24 academic year.

Schools must enroll in Chief Science Officers at chiefscienceofficers.org and assign a teacher as a mentor before students can engage in the program. Schools can have multiple CSOs — usually two or three the first year and afterward up to one or two per grade depending on the size of the student body.

Each student CSO develops an action plan outlining their yearly project or projects and must attend a leadership training institute. CSOs generally don’t have term limits, with positions typically filled by attrition.

Each school has one teacher assigned as mentor that requires a commitment of about one-half hour every other week.

The program operates based on the school's calendar.

About Idaho Business For Education

Idaho Business for Education is a group of more than 250 business leaders across the state. It seeks to create the highly-educated and skilled workforce Idaho employers need for businesses to thrive in the 21st century. IBE strives to be a driving force in the development of an Idaho education system that results in graduates who have post-secondary credentials and are workforce ready. Visit idahobe.org for more details.

About Idaho Stem Action Center

Idaho STEM Action Center is an education and growth catalyst helping educators, businesses, families, and communities prepare the workforce of tomorrow through statewide strategy and coordination of policy and programs related to science, technology, engineering, math, and computer science. It provides a point of organization, resources, support, and problem-solving that spark innovation and offer paths to prosperity based on Idahoans' shared values of hard work, collaboration, self-determination, family, and community stability. Learn more at stem.idaho.gov and visit stem.idaho.gov/support-us/foundation to make a tax-deductible donation to its 501(c)(3) nonprofit foundation to enhance the investment the state has made in Idaho's STEM community. Contributions provide greater access to STEM camps for children, student competitions, and many other life-shaping programs.

About Idaho National Laboratory

Battelle Energy Alliance manages INL for the U.S. Department of Energy's Office of Nuclear Energy. INL is the nation's center for nuclear energy research and development, and also performs research in each of DOE's strategic goal areas: energy, national security, science, and the environment. For more information, visit www.inl.gov. Follow us on social media: [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#) and [LinkedIn](#).

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