

# Coeur d'Alene Press

## Eliminating E-learning?

Chance of cuts to Idaho Digital Learning Academy draws concerns

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**Photo by SHAWN GUST/Press Taylor Riddle, a junior at Post Falls High School, searches the internet for reference material Wednesday while working on a writing assignment in an Idaho Digital Learning Academy English class. The online curriculum, that is currently serving more than 700 students in Kootenai County, is at risk of being cut by the state due to funding problems.**

By BRIAN WALKER/Staff writer | [4 comments](#)

North Idaho high schools and students are concerned over the possibility of Idaho Digital Learning Academy funding being cut by the Legislature.

The IDLA, the state-sanctioned online school created by the Legislature eight years ago, serves more than 700 students in Kootenai County and about 80 in Benewah County.

School coordinators say cutting the IDLA would limit student class and college choices.

“It hits both ends of the spectrum — those who are at risk as well as those who are more advanced and need more of a challenge,” said Stafani Hoffman of the Plummer-Worley School District.

Students and districts use IDLA for myriad reasons, including credit recovery during the summer, dual enrollment, advanced placement courses, classes not offered in their district, early graduation, schedule conflicts and help for students struggling with Idaho Standard Achievement Tests.

Hoffman said students in her district only have access to a Spanish class through IDLA because it can’t afford to hire a foreign language teacher. Having that class available broadens students’ options for college, she said.

“If you go to an out-of-state college, it generally requires at least two years of a foreign language,” Hoffman said. “Without our IDLA Spanish class, our students would all be limited to our state colleges as their only choice of post-secondary education.”

Hoffman said the district pays \$50 a semester per IDLA student, which is cheaper than hiring full-time teachers, especially during a time of budget cuts.

Students take IDLA classes either in their school computer labs, libraries or at home. The focus has been on high school students, but offerings are set to be expanded to some middle schools.

Larger districts have many of the 175 IDLA class offerings, but smaller districts don't. IDLA is different than other online education options because when students enroll it doesn't take away from the maximum amount of state funding that school districts receive.

#### Expanded student options

Lakeland High junior Blake Alfson is taking an IDLA science course in conjunction with NASA that allows him to have the chance to continue his studies this summer at NASA's Ames Research Center in California. He's also taking an AP history course as Lakeland doesn't offer such classes due to them not being cost-effective to the district. It will beef up his resume for college, he said.

"IDLA allows students to be in control of their schooling; that's what I love about it," Alfson said. "It allows students to take more advanced classes if they want or to take extra classes."

Mike Arnold, the IDLA site coordinator at Post Falls High, said students there mainly use IDLA for schedule flexibility purposes and to get help on the ISATs.

"It supplements the districts," Arnold said.

IDLA CEO Donna Hutchison said the Legislature is considering flattening funding for IDLA next year, which would mean increased fees for students and districts and a capped enrollment, and phased-out funding the following three to four years. If state funding is phased out, the IDLA would need to search for alternative funding sources to survive.

Hutchison said online education through the IDLA is softening the funding blow to schools by about \$3.9 million this year because textbooks and full-time teachers are not required, online meetings save on travel costs, ISAT preparation, overhead savings and other reasons. That number doesn't include values for results such as reducing drop-out rates.

It also bridges the rural equity gap by offering a variety of courses and prepares students for 21st century learning, Hutchison said.

"Several states require online learning for their high school graduation," she said. "Some companies train their staff through e-learning. It is a life skill, not just a nice-to-have."

Hutchison said IDLA has already been affected by state budget cuts — just as school districts have — because it is funded through the same state formula as the districts.

#### Growing demand

IDLA enrollments have increased both locally and statewide each year with 14,000 enrollments statewide this year. Region 1, which includes the five northern counties, has had 1,472 enrollments this year with more expected this spring. Ninety-eight percent of the state's school districts have students enrolled in the IDLA.

As more programs and classes have been cut, more students have turned to the IDLA, Hutchison said.

"It makes sense economically," she said.

The impact would be especially felt at smaller districts because with budget cuts, they need the IDLA more, school officials say.

At the Bonners Ferry alternative school, IDLA is the school's entire science and speech departments. Bonners Ferry High had an unexpected enrollment increase of about 70 this fall, so IDLA was used extensively to fill the gap.

Kootenai High has a lab dedicated for IDLA purposes throughout the day. At Wallace, the goal is to have a third of their students take an online class this year, two-thirds next year and all of them taking an online class after that. About half of the 100 Clark Fork students are taking a course through IDLA.

Carl Morgan, Avery superintendent, said out-of-state online options don't have Idaho-certified teachers who can tailor instruction toward state standards. With IDLA, he said, the money stays in state, which is critical during a recession.

"Perhaps Idaho needs to market its program to places such as Florida, Montana or Oregon rather than throwing away a good thing," Morgan said.