

Students could be turned away from IDLA without more funding

By Brad Iverson-Long
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Idaho Digital Learning Academy

Proponents for the Idaho Digital Learning Academy (IDLA) say the online education program will falter if it doesn't see a funding increase in the next budget, due to increased demand from public school students. Gov. Butch Otter's budget calls for holding IDLA's budget at \$5 million, its current line in the budget. He also recommended phasing out funding for IDLA during the next four years.

"I was shocked by the recommendation to phase out funding," IDLA CEO Donna Hutchison told lawmakers Monday. She said she's in effect being asked to do more with less because that \$5 million total is meant to cover 11,000 students, but she expects to have 14,300 students this school year and 18,000 next year. Without an additional \$1.66 million in funding next year, there would be consequences. "Classes would be capped," she said. "Students would possibly be turned away." Another possibility is that the \$50 fee that IDLA charges schools per student could rise, which may lead to schools stopping their involvement in the program. Hutchison said IDLA will take cuts along with other state programs, but that the demand from students will go unfulfilled.

Two educators told lawmakers that IDLA is helping their high schools. Notus High School Principal Ben Merrill said expanded offerings with IDLA allow his school to stand on even footing with larger schools. "Just because my kids live in Notus shouldn't have any impact on the quality or equity of education that's available to them," he said. "My kids at Notus can compete with Boise High kids and they can compete with Emmett kids, but we have to give them the opportunity to do that." Notus students take Advanced Placement and college level classes, as well as remedial classes that help struggling students. Without those, Merrill said many students would drop out. He said he could give names of some kids on track to graduate because of IDLA. "Those are kids that normally in a lot of school districts would have cashed it in and said 'I'm not going to do this anymore. I'm going to get a job.'"

Glenns Ferry Superintendent Wayne Rush said IDLA is a digital form of another much-discussed school reform idea. "This program is a great opportunity for district consolidation," he told lawmakers. Rush explained that he combines two of his students looking for a trigonometry class with students in others schools across the state to take a "consolidated" class. Rush also said that IDLA offers more opportunities for students to take classes than the state's other online learning initiative, the Idaho Education Network (IEN). IEN offers synchronous video classes, where all the students engage with a teacher in real-time, while IDLA has asynchronous classes, where students can pick up the next lesson anytime throughout the school day. "It just works for a small school district," Rush said.

In difficult economic times, it will be difficult for lawmakers to find extra money for the program. “There has been quite a bit of confusion,” said Otter’s budget chief, Wayne Hammon. “There is no cut to IDLA in the governor’s budget. What the governor’s proposed doing is not increasing the funding.” Hammon said IDLA currently has a funding increase tied into its formula whenever a new student signs up for a class. The governor recommends changing that, but not reducing funding. “What we propose doing is funding it at the same level it was funded in the current year.”

Hammon also said lawmakers need to address a problem with IDLA called “double dipping,” which can give schools extra funding. If a student takes some classes in a standard classroom and some dual-credit coursework at IDLA or at a community college, they can get state funding for the student both as a full-time classroom student, and fund IDLA for that coursework. “The problem isn’t that IDLA is doing a poor job—they’re doing a great job,” Hammon said. “However, we’re double-funding this activity over and over again.” Hammon said some of the increased demand for IDLA classes could be in school districts using the program to get extra funding and avoid additional staffing reductions.

“IDLA isn’t necessarily double dipping,” Hutchison said. She said 81 percent of students taking IDLA courses take four classroom courses, which is the minimum amount needed for state funding. “This is an enhancement, an additional option for students to fix the equity.”

“This debate is all about money,” Rush told lawmakers.

Hammon didn’t offer a solution to the double-dipping problem. He and Hutchison both said the solution for funding IDLA could come from forming a taskforce to figure out how best to fund IDLA, but that process might not even begin until budget writers set spending for the next school year.