

The Idaho Digital Learning Academy in jeopardy

The Idaho Digital Learning Academy serves 8,500 students, many of whom want to supplement their schedules with otherwise unavailable classes.

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When Timberline High School senior Jared Kelly came to Boise in 2007, he brought a credit for taking U.S. history from a high school he attended in Fresno, Calif.

Kelly wasn't able to count that credit toward his graduation this spring in the Boise School District. So Kelly, who plans to join the Navy after graduation, signed up for a U.S. history course with the Idaho Digital Learning Academy.

He usually works on the computer-based class at home. That gives him time in his school-day schedule to fit in precalculus and physics, classes he said Navy officials told him would be useful if he intends to work with aircraft in the Navy.

"To me, it's a lifesaver," Kelly said.

The Digital Learning Academy, begun in 2002, is a virtual school for Idaho's middle and high school students. They can supplement their in-school classes with online courses in everything from algebra to Mandarin Chinese.

Supporters say the academy has a national reputation and expands opportunities to small school districts that may not have instructors for classes some students want to take. It also helps students get classes they must retake. And it provides an avenue for students to earn both high school and college credits.

But the academy is also one of the agencies in Gov. Butch Otter's crosshairs to wean off state coffers over the next four years.

State officials complain that the academy's budget continues to rise.

The school's state budget request for next year is \$6.6 million, up from about \$5 million this year, driven largely by the growth in the number of students. The academy also earns an estimated \$560,000 from fees districts and students pay for academy classes. The budget increase request comes as Otter and legislative leaders are telling agencies to cut every dime they can to ease the state's budget crunch.

Otter recommends holding academy spending at \$5 million in 2011 and then phasing out spending over the succeeding three years. His plan to change the funding formula would require new legislation.

Otter also says it's likely the academy could end up duplicating the work of the Idaho Education Network, an agency established by the Legislature in 2009 to bring a dedicated broadband network to all 200 Idaho high schools by 2012. Broadband access would eventually allow schools in rural parts of the state to take classes in real time with instructors in other districts and even colleges. Otter says he doesn't want to duplicate spending.

State schools chief Tom Luna, who supports the academy, agrees the funding mechanism needs work. The state pays the academy for teaching classes but also pays school districts for some of the same students who are enrolled in those classes. That duplication needs to be corrected, he said.

But Luna said the Idaho Education Network doesn't duplicate the academy. The network is building the broadband infrastructure for high schools, and the academy could be one of the agencies to use that network to bring its classes to students, Luna told the Legislature's budget committee last week.

The budgetary concerns that worry state officials are a reflection of the academy's growth, said Donna Hutchison, the academy CEO. In fiscal 2008, the academy had 6,619 enrollments (an enrollment is one student taking one class). This year, that has mushroomed to 14,000 enrollments, she said.

The academy saves schools and families money, Hutchison said. She estimates the digital academy's net savings to the state - after spending \$5 million a year - is \$3.8 million a year. The savings come largely from:

- Salaries districts would have to pay teachers.
- Districts' cost for student remediation in preparation for statewide achievement tests.
- Out-of-pocket costs for taking online classes from providers outside the academy. Those can average about \$125 a course. Academy students pay \$50 a class. In some cases, students pay the \$50, and in some cases, districts do. Some classes are free, and the academy offers scholarships to many students.

"It's certainly a very meritorious program, and it saves local school districts a ton of money," said Senate Education Committee Chairman John Goedde, R-Coeur d' Alene.

The academy has legions of supporters inside and outside of Idaho.

The International Association for K-12 Online Learning, headquartered in Virginia, wrote Otter earlier this month urging him to continue support for the academy. "IDLA has provided a model for the nation in its ability to respond to the needs of students and school districts with cost-effective online curriculum and instruction," wrote Susan Patrick, the association's president and CEO.

At the high school in Leadore, a ranching country 118 miles northwest of Idaho Falls, most of the school's 33 students are taking at least one academy course. The tiny school can't meet all of the interests students want to pursue, said Sandra Noland, superintendent of the South Lemhi School District.

The academy is "absolutely essential to be able to give kids more than just the basics," she said.

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