

Facing budget ax



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Ethan Struhs graduated from Blackfoot High School in November, but was back in the school's Career Center on Friday to take a college exam.

Struhs, 18, is enrolled at BYU-Idaho in Rexburg, but was using the Idaho Digital Learning Center program, an online facility at his former high school, to take the exam.

He began using the program last summer to take American Government and Mandarin Chinese, a language he was interested in learning but wasn't offered at Blackfoot High School. His use of the online program aided him in graduating from high school early.

"I have always had a desire to learn other languages, especially from the East. One-fifth of the world speaks Chinese," he said before rushing to his laptop to take his final exam.

Vicki Johnson, head counselor at Blackfoot High School, said Struhs is among the more exciting examples of just how the Idaho Digital Learning Center can help students.

"Initially we used it as a recovery program," Johnson said. "It didn't take long for it to blossom."

But even as usage of the Idaho Digital Learning Academy, often referred to as IDLA, grows at Blackfoot High School, the specter of all the excitement being snuffed out looms large.

During his State of the State address last Monday, Idaho Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter included the IDLA among seven agencies and programs for which he would like to phase out state funding by the fiscal 2014 budget.

“There has been a lot of effort to create this program. It’s proven to be an effective program,” said Blackfoot School District Superintendent Scott Crane. “I would hate to see a proven program lost.”

The IDLA was established in 2002 in an effort to offer online learning to students in Idaho’s 113 school districts.

“In essence, it’s part of the public education in Idaho,” said Donna Hutchison, IDLA’s chief executive officer.

Hutchison said the program grows by 40 to 50 percent annually. During the 2009 school year, there were about 9,600 enrollments, or classes taken through the IDLA. During the 2010 school year, for which some IDLA classes are still open for registration, there has been about 14,000 enrollments so far. Hutchison said most students take just one course per trimester and the 14,000 enrollments equate to about 11,000 students using the program.

IDLA has 220 part-time teachers — many of whom are among the best currently teaching in Idaho schools — who teach the 170 courses available through the online system. That includes Aaron McKinnon, a 9th grade physical science teacher at South Junior High School in Boise who was named winner of the 2009 Milken Educator Award for Idaho.

About 25 of the courses are dual credit courses, meaning students receive high school and college credit for the same class.

“The entire course offering consists of what you might find in a large high school, but they aren’t always available at a smaller, rural high school,” Hutchison said. “We close that opportunity gap. This is the school districts working together to provide an online option for what they need in their schools.”

IDLA is growing so fast that it’s becoming one of the most used programs of its kind in the nation.

Idaho is one of 24 states in the country with a full-time statewide online school, according to a November 2009 report from Keeping Pace with K-12 Online Learning, a group that reviews state level policies and practices in online learning. Idaho is one of only 14 states with both a virtual school and state-led online initiative.

The report touts IDLA as among the largest state virtual schools in the country based on per capita participation. Idaho’s 9,600 students participating in the program put the state 9th overall in the nation in pure numbers and ahead of everyone else in the Intermountain West.

A separate report, conducted by the Center for Digital Education, places Idaho third overall in the country in a ranking based on the “vision, policies, programs and strategies” that the state has in its online learning effort.

“There is more opportunity for online learning in Idaho than in most other states,” said Hutchison, who has been with IDLA since its inception. “Idaho, and the Idaho Legislature were very innovative and thinking about what was going to be needed for the future. I think we have done something with this program that we should all be proud of.”

Blackfoot High School began using IDLA about three years ago as a tool for students in jeopardy of missing graduation.

There are several ways to recoup credits from a class a student has failed, including the use of an accelerated 9-week course to make up for a class the student is failing the very trimester they are due to graduate.

“If there is a student who is in jeopardy of failing and not graduating, and they know this by March 4, they can take an accelerated course and still graduate,” Hutchison said.

At Blackfoot High School, Johnson said participation from the students in jeopardy of missing graduation was so good, and interest from students already doing well was high enough, that the school decided to see what could be done if the option was more widely available.

The demand for the program was so great, the district has outfitted Blackfoot High School's Career Center with 21 computers and a full-time person to aid in the use of the IDLA programs.

"These students love using the computers. It's second nature to them," Johnson said. "This moves them right into the 21st Century."

IDLA has a \$5 million impact on the state's budget, and should those funds be cut, Hutchison said she isn't sure where she would find funding, but believes one possibility is that it could fall on the program's customers.

"Districts are going to have to determine a value they place on this," she said. "I believe whoever is using the service is going to be critical to how it's funded and how it continues to service the districts."

Johnson said there are other, for-profit options similar to IDLA, but over the years they have been priced out of range for the average Blackfoot student. She said students pay \$50 for each IDLA course they want to take. But she said the district reimburses some students upon successful complete of the course.

She anticipates that if the IDLA was forced to go out and fund itself similar to for-profit ventures, prices would likely increase.

"If it were to go up dramatically, we wouldn't be able to have more than a handful of students using it," she said.

Idaho Rep. James Ruchti, D-Pocatello, sees the IDLA from two perspectives — as a legislator who takes responsibility for the state's educational offerings, and as a father whose oldest son has taken courses through the program.

"It was rigorous academically," said Ruchti of his 10th-grade son's IDLA coursework. "But it gave him a richer education and opened up some elective opportunities."

Ruchti called the program an important aspect of Idaho's overall educational program, and one that also enhances higher education opportunities. Because his son took IDLA courses prior to starting the 9th grade, he now qualifies to take dual credit courses.

"It's something special that our students are offered in Idaho," he said. "It would be a step backward if we eliminate or downsize that program."

Blackfoot is taking a methodical approach to expanding the use of the career center for students who want to take IDLA classes there. During the first trimester, one or two students per class period were allowed to use the facility.

During the second trimester, that was kicked up a bit. She said fourth period was the top with 11 students using the career center for an IDLA course.

"We have 21 computers ready to go," she said. "My goal is to have all 21 going. I anticipate having that by next year."

