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For Immediate Release

July 16, 2020

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Idaho Online will Improve Distance Learning in Higher Education

By Debbie Critchfield, President, Idaho State Board of Education

Last spring's quick transition from in-person to remote instruction as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic was a wake-up call for those of us who are involved in public education at all levels. There are barriers making remote learning difficult, particularly for rural students.

At the college and university level, our presidents looked at the career technical and academic courses offered online at their respective institutions and discovered limits to how far students can progress through online instruction and what could be accessed in a timely way.

“What the presidents uncovered through their inventories is that no one institution offers all of the programs, courses and services needed to offer a comprehensive learning environment for all students, but together, they can,” said Jonathan Lashley, the State Board of Education's Associate Chief Academic Officer.

That is the premise behind Idaho Online, a State Board of Education initiative designed to consolidate online courses, streamline pathways to degrees and certificates and improve digital learning infrastructure for all of Idaho's eight higher education institutions. These resources will be offered as part of a unified digital campus, making them accessible throughout our state.

“If I were a student in Challis for instance, and decide to enroll in a specific degree program at one of our colleges or universities, a state digital campus would enable me to take classes online from multiple Idaho institutions en route to my degree,” Lashley said.

Governor Brad Little’s Coronavirus Financial Advisory Committee approved a State Board of Education request to use \$4 million in federal coronavirus relief funds to begin the process of putting the infrastructure in place for Idaho Online. This process includes purchasing technology for teaching and learning, building a digital “storefront” where students can peruse courses, programs and pathways from all eight of our institutions and provide training for faculty to adapt and deliver effective online learning.

Many general education courses should be available to students through Idaho Online in time to register this fall for the spring 2021 semester. Our four-year institutions also plan to start offering Idaho Online courses in cyber-security, a new program being developed and administered jointly. Once the infrastructure is in place, Idaho Online could transform how higher education is delivered throughout our state.

Imagine living, working and raising a family in a remote area of Idaho and being able to earn a college degree or a career technical certificate from one of our institutions without leaving home.

Idaho Online is based on successful digital campus models in Florida, Texas, Georgia, and New York.

“Statewide online initiatives cannot account for all gains in student success in those states but a collaborative approach to scaling online learning across institutions has definitely created more options for students who want to go on and maintain progress to their certificate or degree no matter where they live,” Lashley said.

I believe Idaho Online will fill a need, particularly in rural Idaho where many of our citizens live several hours away from the nearest college campus. By building on what our institutions already offer online, rather than starting from scratch, the new digital campus will improve the entire system, making higher education more accessible and affordable for more Idahoans.

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