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## **The Push to Bridge Idaho's Digital Divide**

By Debbie Critchfield, President, Idaho State Board of Education

The COVID-19 pandemic prompted educators to suddenly face challenges that quite honestly, seemed insurmountable.

“Last spring, we had every student in the state in a virtual environment and it became painfully clear that the school districts and the state weren’t prepared to deliver education in that environment,” Board member Kurt Liebich recently recalled. “We have a little over 300,000 kids attending public schools and an informal survey we sent out to districts and charters last spring suggested we were short about 180,000 devices between students and teachers.”

Liebich took the lead on behalf of the Board, working with Greg Wilson, Governor Brad Little’s education policy advisor, to pull together a committee of educators, district technology officers and private sector partners to develop strategies to close the “digital divide” – between students who have access to devices and internet connectivity, and those who do not.

Tapping \$30 million in federal coronavirus relief funds, the Board established a grant program administered by the State Department of Education to provide money to districts and charters to purchase laptops and tablets. Idaho Business for Education also organized a “Close the Divide” campaign collecting thousands of donated devices across the state and provided them to schools. And Governor Little’s Strong Families, Strong Students program is distributing \$50 million in

federal funds to families throughout Idaho to purchase devices, connectivity and other services benefitting over 24,500 students.

Liebich estimates the digital divide has narrowed from 180,000 needed devices last spring, to about 30,000 at the start of the new year. Closing the connectivity gap is proving to be more difficult.

“Kids need to have connectivity in order to learn remotely and each situation is unique depending on where you live, how many kids are in the house and whether their parents are working remotely too,” he said. “Early data estimated between 28,000 and 45,000 students didn’t have adequate internet connectivity. We don’t know how accurate that is, but I believe it’s a safe bet to say we still have a lot of work to do – especially in our rural areas.”

There is also work to do to better prepare our teachers to conduct online instruction.

“One of the things we learned about remote learning is that maintaining student engagement becomes really difficult and part of that is tied to professional development,” Liebich said. “We need to work with our teachers to give them the tools and skills they need to support students in this type of instructional delivery.”

Thanks to the efforts of the Governor’s Office, Board member Liebich and the digital divide committee, Idaho’s public education system is far better positioned coming out of the pandemic from a technology standpoint than we were a year ago.

Liebich says the challenge now is to effectively utilize these new resources in the classroom.

“Now that we have this technology platform, how can we support teachers in leveraging this once we get back to something resembling normal? The pandemic has reminded us that there is no substitute for a caring qualified teacher in the classroom.”

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