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An Incremental Approach to Measuring Performance

By Kurt Liebich, President, Idaho State Board of Education

Measuring performance is integral to any organization, be it a private company or a public education system. Improvement occurs when realistic goals are set, effective strategies put in place, and people and institutions are held accountable.

The State Board of Education spent more than two hours discussing strategic plan performance outcomes during its regular Board meeting last month and whether public education should focus more attention on incremental improvement, rather than aspirational goals.

“What we want is to give the people working in the system an understanding of how to create incremental growth,” Board member Bill Gilbert said. “Any institution that is doing that doesn’t get there by setting targets or goals out of the gate that are effectively unattainable. This is about creating continuous improvement and if we can do that, we will get there.”

The 60-percent goal, set by the Board more than a decade ago, is probably the best example of an aspirational goal that quite honestly, may be difficult to reach. The goal was for 60-percent of young adults in Idaho ages 25-34 to hold or attain a professional certificate or a college degree. The Board has worked hard to promote the goal and encourage young people to think beyond high school. The Board set the goal in 2010, based on Idaho’s projected workforce demand in 2020.

The goal was set as a focal point that policymakers and stakeholders could rally around in support of Idaho's public education system.

The ensuing campaign resulted in specific initiatives focused on improving Idaho's college going on rates, retention rates and completion rates.

The 60-percent goal is, however, a population goal, and Idaho's population is not static. Thousands of people move in to, or out of our state every year for reasons that are not directly associated with Idaho's education system and cannot be directly impacted by Board actions.

A maxim in business states "you can't manage, what you can't measure." In the wake of diminishing resources, the Board is shifting its focus on measuring impacts that are directly related to the Board's policies and actions of our public colleges and universities.

What we can measure are incremental targets for certificates and degrees conferred at each of our institutions and incremental performance growth targets in the K-12 education system. Incremental targets have to be realistic and attainable in order to achieve buy-in from administrators, teachers and professors who will be responsible and accountable for progress.

The Board was presented with various factors for considering certificate and degree targets by the postsecondary institutions and directed staff to develop benchmarks for measuring progress and bring them back to the Board for discussion at its next regular meeting later this month. We'll also discuss the Board's overall priorities for higher education in Idaho. There is growing industry demand for a trained workforce at all levels and the Board's strategic plan performance measures will reflect that.

Research shows that effective education strategies can move the needle over time and keep more young people on track for success. A case in point involves a new approach to math remediation. Six years ago, more than half of Idaho community college graduates, and well more than a third of the graduates at our four-year institutions needed to take remedial math before they could take a college-level math course. Students taking remedial math do not earn college credit and many become frustrated, fall behind, and drop out.

In 2014, the Board launched its Complete College Idaho Initiative, which included strategies such as "corequisite remediation" which is making a difference and helping students who struggle with math succeed in college. "What we saw at

Boise State is that if you work with students and instead of putting them in a remedial setting, by creating additional support structures in regular math classes, you can put those students in those classes where they actually earn college credit,” said Boise State President Dr. Marlene Tromp. “Instead of feeling like they are drowning, they tend to actually perform much better as long as you are providing those supports.”

The numbers bear that out. In academic year 2014-15, more than 50 percent of Idaho community college graduates needed remedial math. By the 2019-20 academic year, the percentage figure dropped to less than 30-percent. At the four-year institutions, the percentage of remedial math students dropped from more than 35 percent to less than 27 percent.

Our institutions already generate more than \$4 billion annually in Gross State Product. Their graduates are helping to fuel our state’s strong economy across business and industry. Like my fellow Board members, I believe the incremental approach to measuring performance is how we make even more progress. By setting realistic expectations and targets and holding ourselves and our institutions accountable, we can improve performance and make an even bigger difference through the remainder of decade and beyond for Idaho, its citizens, and its employers.

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