

Idaho Statesman, Thursday, Nov. 19, 2009 – Reader's view by Jaime MacMillan (2 pages)

Better education is key to Idaho's future success

In 2007, Gov. Butch Otter addressed the Idaho Business Coalition for Educational Excellence (IBCEE) and gave them a monumental task: Broaden your outreach and bring to reality a vision that makes Idaho a global leader in providing the best education possible to its citizens.

Given such an ambitious agenda, the IBCEE brought together its members gleaned primarily from the business community, but also Idaho education stakeholders including the Idaho Education Association, the State Department of Education, State Board of Education, Parent Teachers Association, School Boards Association and our foundation.

This group - dubbed the Education Alliance of Idaho - immediately began its work by using data to drive decisions on goals and recommendations. They focused on areas that could rapidly improve Idaho's educational systems, and recently the alliance delivered its recommendations to Gov. Otter. These recommendations primarily addressed increasing postsecondary success, high standards and quality data for stakeholders. They are the first set of priority areas, and they will change over time with input from stakeholders throughout the state.

What the citizens of Idaho must recognize is that this type of collaboration is unprecedented in our state's history in regards to education. The task extends to all students, no matter what age, geographic region or socioeconomic class. The governor's vision to make the state of Idaho a global leader in providing high-quality, cost-effective education to its citizens has now come into focus.

It's a great beginning to what is sure to take a lot of hard work and time. But already (and without additional funding), Idahoans are taking the initiative; more students, for example, are taking dual enrollment and advanced placement classes - an affordable way to earn college credit while still in high school. Additionally, more Idaho adults are headed back to school as reported by universities and community colleges.

I am excited about the work of the alliance because I believe it is a strong first step in addressing a quickly changing world where jobs come and go at a fast pace. Idaho's middle school students can expect to prepare for jobs that have not yet been invented. Idahoans will increasingly compete with workers in other states and nations.

Our ability to succeed as a state and as individuals will depend more and more on how skilled and educated we are - and the statistics are alarming. For example, did you know that Idaho is 43rd in the nation for our ninth-graders going on after high school to earn a bachelor's degree? Statistics show that the majority of Idaho students plan and want to go to college, but the reality is different. And, without education beyond high school, students are leaving their dreams behind and dollars on the table. Attaining a postsecondary degree or certificate does result in higher earnings. We know that individuals who earn a bachelor's degree can expect to earn double their lifetime earnings compared to those who stop their education at high school. Idaho's Department of Labor reports that 100 percent of Idaho's 10 "hot jobs" (high pay, high growth, high demand) require education and training beyond high school.

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So, what's the risk? The risk is that next generation of Idahoans will not qualify for jobs that pay a living wage and will struggle to support themselves and their families.

The J.A. and Kathryn Albertson Foundation is proud to have been included as a founding member of the Education Alliance for Idaho. Our foundation pledges to be part of the solution for educational change in Idaho.

Gov. Otter should be commended for his initial vision and Superintendent Tom Luna for his leadership going forward.

To create change and a better life for all Idahoans, it is going to take continued strong visionary leadership, even more stakeholder involvement, continuous measurable improvement and the ultimate realization that this is everyone's responsibility. Let's seize this opportunity to prepare Idahoans for the changing world and secure Idaho's great quality of life. The stage has been set. Go on, Idaho!

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