

Office of Performance Evaluations

News Release: Virtual School Operations

March 7, 2007

(BOISE) Virtual schools, a recent addition to education across the country, are often growing faster than the state policies that govern them. Idaho's virtual schools, which are public charter schools, have more than doubled in size since they first opened in 2002. Idaho currently has four virtual schools, Idaho Distance Education Academy, Idaho Virtual Academy, INSPIRE Connections Academy, and Richard McKenna Charter High School. Collectively, these schools serve grades K-12 and enroll over 3,600 students throughout the state.

At the direction of the Joint Legislative Oversight Committee, the non-partisan staff of the Office of Performance Evaluations conducted a study to review the requirements for virtual schools and explore the differences in operations among those schools. In the report released yesterday, staff concluded that the definition of a virtual school is not clear and does not make a distinction between virtual schools and traditional schools that are offering distance learning programs. The report also concluded that the current process for approving a virtual school does not provide any guidelines for how learning should occur in an environment where students and teachers are in different locations.

Because guidelines are not clear, staff found differences in three key areas of virtual school operations: (1) curriculum development—a virtual school's curriculum can vary from a pre-packaged set of materials purchased from a national company to approved materials that a parent selects, (2) delivery of instruction—computers are not always the primary means to deliver instruction, and each of the four schools uses printed materials to some extent, and (3) student and teacher communication—at a virtual school, parents and teacher often communicate more than students and teachers, and in some cases, students and teachers never communicate.

To better explain these differences, the report included profiles of each of the four schools and provided detailed information about how each school operates. The report also explained the process for becoming a new virtual school and what oversight is in place for schools once they are approved. Lastly, the report looked at how other states are managing the recent growth of virtual schools. Some states, including Nevada and Arizona, have implemented additional reporting requirements for virtual schools to provide their state with a better understanding of how and how well these schools are operating.

The 8-member Joint Legislative Oversight Committee is equally divided between the two political parties and the two chambers of the legislature. The committee is co-chaired by Senator Shawn Keough (R) of Sandpoint and Representative Margaret Henbest (D) of Boise.