

Boom & Bust Explosive job growth, severe labor shortage on collision course in Idaho

Kaitlin Maroney/Lewiston Tribune

Idaho could add 16 percent more jobs to the economy in the next decade. The bad news is the state could be missing up to 88 percent of the workers needed to fill those jobs.

“The reality is we are going to be going through a time in the next 10 years as the baby boomers roll out where we are not going to be able to meet our workforce needs,” Ken Edmunds told the Idaho State Board of Education Wednesday in Lewiston. “That’s why we want to provide any assistance we can to you in designing your educational process to make sure we maximize our capacity to meet those needs.”

Edmunds, director of the Idaho Department of Labor, and state research analyst Craig Shaul gave a presentation during the state board work session on Idaho job projections between 2012 and 2022.

Shaul said nearly two-thirds of the 109,000 jobs projected to be added to the economy — at a 1.5 percent growth rate — will be in the construction, health care and hospitality industries. And while the population of Idaho is expected to grow at a rate of a little more than 1 percent, the demographics of that growth contribute very little to the workforce.

“We’ve got a collision coming here,” Edmunds said. “I don’t know what the answer to that is.”

Edmunds stressed the importance of engaging kids in the classroom and providing them with opportunities to learn the skills necessary to fill the needs in the state labor force.

Board member Debbie Critchfield said she sees a disconnect between what industries need and what schools are providing. Edmunds responded by saying improving career counseling could help, especially since most young people who receive counseling are either already going to college and only seeking scholarships or are struggling to pass classes at all.

“The vast majority are not getting valid career counseling,” Edmunds said. “So that parents get exposed and kids get exposed ... the overall approach seems to be inadequate.”

Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Luna said what Edmunds presented is just another example of what the board has been dealing with for some time.

“My experience is that this isn’t a kid’s problem, this is an adult problem,” Luna said. “We have a system that is rigid. You know — we’re willing to make changes as long as we don’t have to do anything different.”

He said it's easy to keep focusing on students, but the needed changes require far more from adults than children.

Board member Bill Goesling had a different concern, highlighting outdated infrastructure that doesn't adequately serve today's students.

"Because the kids are not going to get into (computer-assisted manufacturing) work if they don't have that machine there to practice on," Goesling said. "Where do we get the funds for those kinds of materials?"

Edmunds said he doesn't want to see this become a funding issue.

"I think there are employers — if we could properly engage our employers — who have the equipment, they have the ability to do that," Edmunds said. "I would hate for this argument to become based on bricks and mortar, because I don't think that should be the barrier to accomplishing this. There are other ways to do it."

Emma Atchley, state board president, said the big question is where Idaho is going to get the 90,000 extra people needed to fill the workforce gap projected for 2022. She said one option is looking at a different approach to tuition to attract more students to the state.

"Another thing we could do ... the board has always said that industry partnerships are important, but we haven't brought them to the forefront of our strategic plans," Atchley said. "Maybe that's another way we can help address the issue."

Edmunds said officials have started using what the Department of Labor calls "industry sector grants" to facilitate those partnerships and cited a \$1 million grant given to Boise State University's computer science program where they saw a \$317,000 cash match from the industry.

"Is it a back-door way of funding education? Maybe," Edmunds said. "But it's working and it's getting industry involved in a productive way ... And we're seeing real results."

Edmunds said he wants to see the state board utilize its data and tools to take the recently mandated program prioritization process to the next level. That process — where universities throughout the state ranked their programs and presented them to the board — could be made even more useful if the state board knows where future job growth is happening.

"That's what we want to do," Edmunds said. "We would like to help you reconcile that, and the only way we can start is a top-down, push-down expectation of this board that prioritization is now one step that we've taken toward making what our institutions do relevant to the workforce needs."

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