

Center looks to improve Idaho's science, math efforts

By KIMBERLEE KRUESI, Associated Press

BOISE, Idaho (AP) — Business and governmental officials say Idaho must unify statewide efforts in order to fatten the pipeline of students choosing science, technology, engineering and math careers.

Board members with Idaho's STEM Action Center met for the first time Wednesday to begin drafting recommendations on how to improve the growing shortfall of Idaho's technological workforce.

The center is housed in the office of Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter, who appointed the nine-member board. The board still needs to approve hiring an executive director and program manager for the center.

Idaho lawmakers approved setting aside nearly \$650,000 earlier this year to create the center. The push came after two Republican state lawmakers, Sen. Bob Nonini of Coeur d'Alene and Rep. Reed DeMordaunt of Eagle formed a STEM caucus in the Legislature, which quickly attracted more than two dozen lawmakers on both sides of the aisle.

Department of Labor Director Ken Edmunds said Idaho's demand for technological employees is nearly twice as high as the national average, but lags behind in the number of STEM-related jobs the state offers.

Overall, Idaho will need to fill 109,000 new jobs in 2022 but will only have 14,000 people in its workforce because of its increasingly aging population, Edmunds said. Most of those jobs are expected to require some sort of STEM education.

"We now recognize that workforce development is our number one challenge," said Edmunds, a board member for the center. "We're trying to figure out how to staff our businesses appropriately and fully."

Idaho's center is based off a similar one in Utah. In 2013, Utah lawmakers greenlighted \$10 million to help STEM education programs thrive. The center's budget has expanded to \$30 million over the past two years to help train math and science teachers and provide grants to students attending STEM competitions.

During Wednesday's meeting, Idaho education officials listed multiple programs that ranged from providing more resources to math and science teachers to helping students pinpoint job prospects. But while STEM education has been a common talking point for businesses and education officials, there has not yet been a unifying group to help oversee and push the activities forward.

"It looks like many activities are incoherent and incoherently coordinated," said Dave Hill, a board member representing the State Board of Education. "That's not to diminish any of those efforts, but maybe we're here to coordinate those efforts."

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