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Success Stories on Improving Schools, Libraries and Communities Through Technology

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Come for the All-Natural Resort, Stay for the High-Tech Revival

Bear Lake County, Idaho, Banks on Video Teleconferencing to Bring Education and Opportunities to Students and Citizens

Surrounded by mountains, graced with an ideal recreational climate and abounding in outdoor pursuits, picturesque Bear Lake on the Idaho-Utah border forms the centerpiece of a four-season resort area that boasts lakeshore homes, beaches, a marina, sailing, water skiing, jet skiing, fishing, snow skiing, snowmobiling and more. Known as the "Caribbean of the Rockies" for its unique turquoise color, Bear Lake has proven to be an irresistible draw for vacationers and second-home owners for decades, especially in the summer.

Unfortunately, says Idaho's Bear Lake High School Principal Alan Schwab, the area has had the opposite effect on local inhabitants in recent years. They are moving away.

A local population in decline

Since coming to the district in 1994 to teach and coach, he's seen enrollment at the high school drop from 650 to 316. "It was wall-to-wall students fifteen years ago. We were at capacity. Now we're well under half that."

"There just isn't the industry to keep people in the valley," explains Schwab. "The national economy of the last year or two has played a part, but the larger problem is that there are no jobs to hold them here. Resort jobs aren't enough. For years, the school district was the largest employer in the county. Now it's the hospital." Agriculture once employed a significant number of people, but like everywhere else in the country, Bear Lake has watched small, family-owned farms disappear.

IEN implementation a new source of hope

Schwab is counting on recent technological advancements in curriculum delivery from the Idaho Education Network (IEN)—the new statewide high-speed communications network for education that ENA has partnered with Idaho to install and manage—to help stop the population hemorrhage. In fact, he hopes technology will reverse the trend.

Compliments of the IEN, a new, state-of-the-art video teleconferencing (VTC) system now occupies a once-vacant trailer module at the high school. In coming months, the IEN, with the help of partners ENA, Qwest and OneVision Solutions, will also dramatically upgrade the district's Internet connectivity bandwidth. The T-1 lines the district depends on right now are adequate, but just barely.

"We didn't know what to expect with the VTC system, to tell you the truth," says Schwab. "Not only about how well it would work, but what the district's and community's response would be to it."

With an enthusiastic start, the momentum continues

The initial response was enthusiastic, with many community members attending the introductory meeting with the IEN and the local media covering it. Momentum has been building ever since. The College of Southern Idaho (CSI) "jumped on the chance" to provide a Health and Wellness course to Bear Lake High School for dual college-secondary school credit. Ten students are taking the class now and Schwab is confident that CSI will be willing "to provide whatever course they can" to meet the high school's needs. To introduce the capabilities of VTC to his staff, Schwab took them on a virtual tour of an anatomy class using cadavers. "That was really powerful. Our teachers thought that was really neat." To date, Schwab and three other staff members have completed the free proctor training and certification course offered by the IEN.



Bear Lake High School Principal Alan Schwab proctors his school's video teleconferencing course, Physical Education 155: Health and Wellness. The class is taught by Jamie Tighe from College of Southern Idaho in Twin Falls, who is visible in the video screen.

The community puts VTC to work for them

The community has lost no time putting the new VTC system to work, either. A couple of individuals enrolled at Idaho State University requested permission to conduct a project with their class over VTC. The project was a success and saved the students the four-hour roundtrip drive to the campus in Pocatello. Schwab expects many more people in the community seeking to advance their professional training to take advantage of this powerful new resource. People such as nurses at the local hospital in Montpelier, the county's largest town, and U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service firefighters, who have a hub in Bear Lake County. The Forest Service has already booked the VTC system to help them cut costs. "Not having to travel and pay for accommodations, this is going to help their budget out a whole lot," says Schwab.

"Limited only by our imaginations"

"People are seeing how user-friendly this VTC system is," relates Schwab. "With it, you can literally reach out anywhere, to any college, to anyone, for education, training and collaboration. As much as we've used it, we're just getting our feet wet. We're at the tip of an iceberg and now we're about to find out how much more is waiting underneath us. There are tons of possibilities with this. I do believe that technology can help solve problems that a community such as ours has with inadequate employment. Like I tell my staff, we're limited only by our imaginations."



Bear Lake, known as the "Caribbean of the Rockies" for its turquoise-blue water, sits on the southeast corner of Idaho and northeast corner of Utah. Thanks to an abundance of natural beauty and recreational activities, the lake is a popular, year-round vacation destination.

For more information about ENA, visit www.ena.com or call toll-free (866) 615-1101