

Wired for education

By MAUREEN DOLAN/Staff writer | Posted: Thursday, December 15, 2011 12:15 am

ST. MARIES - A health education instructor at Saint Louis University School of Medicine in Missouri gave a live lesson Wednesday to science students at St. Maries High School, and there was no traveling involved.

The 1,800-mile distance between North Idaho and St. Louis was bridged by the Idaho Education Network, a statewide high-speed broadband network that now connects every school district in the state.

Gov. Butch Otter and Idaho Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Luna were in St. Maries Wednesday to sit in on the lesson. St. Maries is one of the last high schools in the state to be fully hooked into the new system.

"It's bigger than I ever dreamed it could be," Otter said, to local education leaders and elected officials who gathered at the school.

With completion of the first phase of development of the network, there are now 210 "IEN" rooms in communities throughout Idaho, 194 of them in schools. The rooms are wired and equipped with cameras and audio gear that allows for two-way interaction between instructors and students.

Ray Vollmer, the educator who spoke from Missouri with the St. Maries students, used human specimens to illustrate the effects of lifestyle choices - smoking, drinking, drugs.

"This opens up a whole new world for you," Vollmer told the teens.

He said he rarely sees students from other states able to use this type of distance learning technology.

"I hope you students appreciate what you've got," Vollmer said before signing off.

It was high school senior Marlee Masterson's first learning experience in her school's IEN room. They rely on textbooks for their anatomy and physiology lessons, she said.

Masterson, 17, was impressed by the technology.

"To see it live is a whole different experience," Masterson said.

The network is aimed at opening educational opportunities for a broad range of community members, beyond the traditional classrooms.

In Weiser, Idaho, Otter said emergency medical technicians and real estate agents are taking classes at the local high school, rather than driving to Boise or Pocatello.

The North Idaho Police Reserve Academy, typically hosted by the Coeur d'Alene Police Department, announced in November that it is going online next year.

Much of the training through the Idaho Peace Officers Standards and Training (POST) Academy will now take place over the IEN, produced by instructors at the academy in Meridian.

The Coeur d'Alene Police Department anticipates a savings of thousands of dollars using the new format.

Otter commended the state Legislature for supporting and approving the plan to develop the network, and seek funding for it.

"It was the smartest big decision I think we could make," he said.

The first phase of the project was expected to cost \$50 million, but it came in at \$42 million. It has been funded through federal stimulus and E-rate dollars, and through a donation from the J.A. and Kathryn Albertson Foundation.

Idaho public schools chief Tom Luna said the network represents "what online education is." It's not just students sitting at a computer, he said.

Earlier this year, students in Blackfoot took a virtual field trip over the network, to the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C.

Last week, students at Lakeland High School in Rathdrum, were able to witness the announcement that their school had won a \$100,000 grant from the Albertson Foundation. They received the news over a live video feed from Meridian.

"It's really become that umbilical cord to the world, through your community," Otter said Wednesday to the group in St. Maries. "There are no limits to what can be done."

Otter to seek re-election in 2014

Idaho Gov. Butch Otter announced to a Governor's Ball crowd of about 200 Wednesday night in Coeur d'Alene that he'll seek re-election in 2014, The Press has learned.

Sources told The Press that Otter twice confirmed to the audience that he will be on the 2014 ballot for governor.

Attempts to reach the governor for comment late Wednesday were unsuccessful.