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## Med school plan suffers big setback

*State Board of Education rejects ISU's proposed model*

BOISE — The State Board of Education dealt a significant blow to Idaho State University's efforts to establish a statewide medical education program Monday morning. In a 6-2 vote, the board rejected the university's proposal to further develop its business plan for creating a medical school that would utilize the so-called distributive model.

Rather than advancing an Idaho medical education, the board opted to double the number of seats the state subsidizes for Idaho students who study medicine at the University of Washington from 20 to 40.

Under ISU's proposed distributive model, an Idaho medical education would be spread throughout the state to utilize existing resources, with the first two years of studies based in Pocatello. The board based its decision on a list of recommendations made by its subcommittee on medical education.

Some of the subcommittee's suggestions included increasing the number of Idaho seats at out-of-state medical schools, giving the board oversight in a future collaborative effort among state universities to develop a four-year medical degree program and expanding residency programs.

Although the final report initially made 10 recommendations, a subcommittee member later requested to add ISU's pitch to the list. Opponents of the ISU proposal argued the concept would cause Idaho's universities to compete with each other because it would allow other schools to create their own business models.

Sue Thilo, a board member from Coeur d'Alene, worried the state's other universities would begin pitching medical programs requiring funds from an already shrinking state budget. Thilo, one of the members who voted to exclude ISU's plan, was among a number of state officials who listened to health experts during the fall when an interim legislative committee on medical education voted in support of further developing the university's distributive model.

"For one thing, we had a committee that worked hard and received recommendations from a broad (group) of stake holders," Thilo said. "And it was loud and clear that a collaborative approach was more cost-effective (than allowing each university to pitch its own medical degree program). ... We don't have enough funds right now."

Other board members who voted in support of excluding ISU's plan also argued that medical education became a controversial topic among the major state universities. The University of Idaho's president backed the Wyoming, Washington, Alaska, Montana and Idaho Medical Program, which allows a limited number of students from those five states to attend the University of Washington's School of Medicine in Seattle.

During his farewell address last summer, former UI president Tim White spoke sharply against the establishment of a medical degree program at ISU, which he deemed to be too expensive at a time when the state could save more dollars by expanding WWAMI. Boise State University also told lawmakers during the fall that it

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mostly supported expanding WWAMI. Board member Kenneth Edmunds said it is the board's responsibility to reduce unnecessary competition between the state's three largest universities.

"The approach (to establishing a statewide medical degree program), I still believe, has become highly political," Edmunds said.

But in recent months, a growing number of supporters of a state medical school have noted the state's dire need for doctors. Medical program backers have included a group of 12 Idaho mayors, lawmakers such as state Sens. Bob Geddes, R-Soda Springs, and Diane Bilyeu, D-Pocatello, and the ISU Faculty Senate.

Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter also previously told the Interim Legislative Committee on Medical Education that there was an increasing number of doctors nearing or working within retirement age.

While Otter supports WWAMI, he said the program hasn't been efficient recently at returning doctors to the Gem State. And the two board members who voted to further explore the ISU proposal — Richard Westerberg and Blake Hall — said the plan was cost-effective for the state.

They noted ISU didn't request state funding to create the business plan for its model. ISU's distributive model, which sought to enroll up to 240 students in a medical school, requested total start-up costs of about \$32 million, with \$11 million of the total being one-time money from the university. The rest would be covered by a loan to offset the program's operational costs during its first few years.

ISU President Arthur Vailas welcomed state and federal dollars, but said the model's financial plan was drawn out with the assumption that the university wouldn't receive money from any outside sources during the program's early years.

"I think it was a good proposal at no cost," Westerberg said. "I think it was well-considered by the legislative committee. It was not exclusive to ISU, and in my mind, it was at no cost to the state."

Vailas said after the vote he hopes to return with an ISU-specific proposal some time in the future.

"I think the State Board and the Legislature and the governor want to have an Idaho-based medical program," Vailas said. "There may be some differences in how we go about doing that, but I think in the end everybody is behind doing that. It's a matter of when, and it's a matter of how. And I think that's what I got out of this meeting. I'm not disappointed."