Opinion: The launch of a smart investment in Idaho

CORTNEY LIDDIARD | Guest columnist

With Idaho’s economy booming and the state continuing to grow, businesses have struggled to find the employees they need. But help is just around the corner.

The application window for the new Idaho LAUNCH program opened on Oct. 3. Idaho LAUNCH will provide up to $8,000 to Idaho high school graduates who pursue “in-demand” careers through education or vocational training. Hats off to Gov. Little for championing Idaho LAUNCH and to the Idaho Legislature for its approval.

The program begins with the class of 2024 and contains enough money to support up to 10,000 students annually. As Gov. Little said, “We’re hopeful that we run out of money.” This anticipated $80 million annual investment will help students attain the education and training necessary to begin their careers and, in turn, help businesses get the employees they so desperately need. Through wise investments in our people, we are building a foundation that will allow our economy and communities to flourish and Idaho students to make a great living in Idaho.
Students assisted by Idaho LAUNCH, and many of those currently enrolled at our local community college, the College of Eastern Idaho, are pursuing careers in fields considered in demand. A great example of this is nursing.

A 2022 report from the Idaho Center for Nursing found that Idaho needed 1,119 more nurses to meet demand. In 2017, CEI had 35 students enrolled in its nursing program. This year, that number is 220.

This past July, Gov. Little came to Idaho Falls to participate in a ribbon-cutting ceremony for the Idaho Healthcare Institute, a partnership between CEI and Mountain View and Idaho Falls Community hospitals. This remarkable new 14-bed facility will significantly boost the number of nursing students CEI can teach.

This is just one example of how CEI, working with industry, is helping Idahoans prepare for careers in fields struggling to find qualified workers.

Clearly, our community is responding to the great work CEI is doing. On July 21, Ball Ventures, and many other companies, participated in the 14th Great Race for Education, which benefits the CEI Foundation. The event raised $102,000. That’s $40,000 more than last year, easily the most money raised in the event’s history.

Just six years after Bonneville County voters made a major investment in themselves by creating CEI, the college is exceeding expectations. CEI issued 95% more degrees and certifications than it did in 2018, and fall enrollment is up 11.1% over last year. With Idaho LAUNCH, even more Idahoans will have access to the tools they need to build a great life and be an important part of our state’s economic progress.
For years, we have talked about Idaho’s workforce development needs, almost always in the context of how we are falling short and what is missing. But now, we find ourselves positioned to succeed because of Idaho’s investment in its greatest asset, our people.

Helping our graduating seniors get the education and training they need to secure a good job with an Idaho business strengthens our communities, economy and future. Now that’s a smart investment in Idaho.

Cortney Liddiard is the CEO of Ball Ventures, a commercial real estate and private equity company based in Idaho Falls, with projects across the United States.