

Rural patrons, students seek more education options

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Jackie Brownlee attends the College of Eastern Idaho in Salmon, Idaho, with the goal of receiving a nursing degree. Ilona McCarty / For the Post Register

Salmon resident Jackie Brownlee, a 30-year-old mother of two, is taking college nursing classes in hopes of improving her career opportunities.

She says there is no future for those Salmon residents and children who lack some form of post-secondary education.

Some people feel stuck at their jobs and “aren’t happy,” Brownlee said.

But that outlook could be changing soon.

Brownlee is one of 29 students taking college-level classes in person from College of Eastern Idaho in Salmon, a rural town three hours north of Idaho Falls and two-and-a-half hours south of Missoula, Mont.

Brownlee takes Certified Nursing Assistant classes at the Salmon Valley Business and Innovation Center because she doesn't feel online courses help her enough. Moving to Idaho Falls, Pocatello or Twin Falls to get a better education would not be ideal for her husband and their children, she said. And because she's rooted with a family, she can't easily just pack her bags for college like many graduating high school seniors will do.

"I've talked to some high school students, and they say they leave or they get a job at the small (businesses) here," Brownlee said. "And that's it."

A group of Salmon area education advocates is pushing for Lemhi County residents to vote on joining the College of Eastern Idaho's taxing district.

A planned May 21 election has been delayed by a paperwork snafu. A replacement date has not been selected. To be approved, the measure requires a simple majority.

Joining the taxing district would make CEI classes even more affordable for Lemhi County residents. Tuition is \$50 more per credit hour for students outside a community college taxing district. Students can request assistance from their counties to cover the extra cost, however, which means that money comes in large part from county coffers.

Currently, CEI provides two general education courses as well as certified nursing assistant and licensed practical nurse programs through the Lemhi Education Project. The Lemhi Education Project is a sub-committee of the [Lemhi County Economic Development Association](#) advocating for higher education in the county.

Earlier this month Lemhi Education Project director Dana Cotton told the Challis Messenger that the Lemhi Education Project is beyond its capacity and has maxed out its ability to provide services.

Cotton said the Lemhi Education Project expects to offer English, biology and math introduction courses this fall.

If approved by Lemhi County patrons, CEI could provide more dual enrollment courses and could potentially have a larger satellite campus in an area that doesn't have a college within 110 miles, said Todd Wightman, CEI's communications and marketing director.

"We're trying to make education easier and more affordable for people," Wightman said. "Especially in places like Lemhi and Butte County."

The desire for post-secondary education is increasing in the area, Cotton and Salmon Junior-Senior High School principal Doug Owen said. And the need for post-secondary education is rising as well.

College graduates, on average, make almost double the hourly wage of high school graduates, according to data compiled by the [Economic Policy Institute in 2017](#).

Workers with just a high school diploma are less likely to have a job, get married, own a home and be a member of a labor union, according to [USA Today](#).

"It's tough when there isn't something sitting right in town," Owen said. "A 2- to 3-hour drive is a rather difficult drive for kids to take, especially if they want to stay closer to home. The more kids in college courses, and getting college credits, the better off the students are."

Salmon isn't the only rural Idaho town that lacks education options and resources for students who want to take classes in person. Students at [Mackay](#), Leadore, [Challis](#) and Butte high schools are more than an hour away from Idaho public universities such as Idaho State University and community colleges such as CEI.

Of the 10,334 students that enrolled at Idaho State University in the fall of 2018, 34 were originally from Salmon — more than Teton (10), Ririe (11) and Firth (21). Four students were from Mackay. Two were from Leadore.

"I think the biggest factor is isolation," Cotton said. "Some students are able to move to a city with a college, but that doesn't include having to pay for housing, food ... There are no other options other than making a drastic move."

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