

Idaho Public Charter School Commission Site Visit Report

School	Idaho Virtual Academy (IDVA)
Address	1965 S. Eagle Road, Suite 190, Meridian, ID 83642
Date of Site Visit	January 7, 2014
PCSC Staff Present	Alison Henken, Charter Schools Program Manager
Board Member(s) Interviewed	David Malnes, Board Chair Kerry Heninger, Member
Administrator(s) Interviewed	Kelly Edginton
Business Manager / Clerk Interviewed	Allen Wenger
Other Stakeholder(s) Interviewed	Teachers and Staff (15)

Board Member(s) Interview

David Malnes, Board Chair, and Kerry Heninger participated in the interview. Both are long-term board members for the school. The board members reported on some of the changes that have occurred at IDVA in the past year. IDVA has a new Head of School, Kelly Edginton, who was transitioned from interim to full status on May 1, 2013. Additionally, the school has a new High School Principal, so they now have three principals (elementary, middle school, and high school). IDVA has also changed their onboarding process for high school students to make sure that families understand the virtual learning model and how to be successful within it early on; a student cannot “officially start” at IDVA until they complete the five (5) steps of the onboarding process.

The members believe the board has a “really good” relationship with the school’s administrator, Kelly Edginton. They described it as one of mutual respect and a high level of trust. They feel that Ms. Edginton has good communication with them and that the board provides perspective in conversations since they can bring a new way of looking at things they don’t live with every day. In describing the division of roles at IDVA, the members stated that K12 is contracted to provide curriculum, management employees, and training. The board oversees the contractor (K12) and the management staff, has the final say in making decisions, and helps to advise and counsel the administration while making an effort not to micromanage or push individual agendas. The administrator is given the responsibility of running the school on a day-to-day basis.

The board has worked to improve board training. Last year, each board member was assigned a topic on which to educate the other members at the monthly board meetings. The board also spent last year discussing how they could improve as a board and revamping the policy manual. Board members can also access outside training through the ICSN and conferences. Each year, the IDVA board conducts a self-evaluation. They evaluate themselves as individuals and the board as a whole, the administrator, and K12 and then integrate all of those surveys into a discussion.

When asked about their concerns regarding the school’s operations, academics, or finances, the members responded that they do not have any major concerns. They are comfortable with the school’s finances and feel they have a great relationship with K12. The board members identified academic outcomes (test results / Star rating) and retention as areas of improvement for the school.

The school’s service agreement with K12 expires in summer 2014, so they will be evaluating how the school and K12 have evolved and will revisit the roles of each.

Administrator(s) Interview

Kelly Edginton, Head of School, participated in the interview. Ms. Edginton is a K12 employee who became the Interim (and later permanent) Head of School at IDVA in spring 2013. In updating the PCSC staff member about the school, Ms. Edginton spoke about the board's and administration's work to revise the school's mission statement and charter (in preparation for work on their performance certificate), the school's application for an alternative program and plan to apply for alternative accreditation, and the addition of the new High School Principal. This year, the school is going through their five-year accreditation process, and Ms. Edginton was happy with the results of the surveys that were completed by parents and students.

Ms. Edginton believes she has a strong relationship with the IDVA board. She feels comfortable calling the board's chairman at any time and believes he provides her with good advice, and overall, feels that she has open, good communication with the board.

Data is a focus for Ms. Edginton in measuring success at IDVA, with indicators of success including students' academic achievement and growth, the school's graduation rate, and student retention. She looks for students to be college and career ready when they graduate.

Ms. Edginton believes that IDVA is making great progress in implementing the Common Core State Standard; the school has been working on it for approximately two and a half years. She's expressed some nervousness about the logistics of transitioning to the Smarter Balanced Assessment (SBA), since it's longer than previous tests. She will be doing a professional development session focused on the SBA test in March.

When asked about her concerns about IDVA, Ms. Edginton responded that getting new students oriented to the school and on track to where they should be is a challenge and she recognizes that consistency of programming is important. Additionally, she is concerned about engaging students who have struggled in school in the past and are academically behind and ensuring they have an academic growth rate of more than one year so they can get caught up and on grade level.

Business Manager / Clerk Interview

Allen Wenger, Business Manager, participated in the interview. As a result of the school's contract with K12, IDVA ended FY13 balanced and Mr. Wenger anticipates the school will end FY14 in a similar manner. He noted that enrollment this year is lower than they had hoped and expected; their goal was to get to 3,500 students and they currently have between 3,100-3,200 enrolled. IDVA budgeted for 139 support units and currently is at 135; Mr. Wenger believes they may get to 139 by the end of the year based on their best weeks.

Mr. Wenger meets with Kelly Edginton, Head of School, on a monthly basis when he receives the financials from K12 to review the reports that will be going to the board. At monthly board meetings, the board receives cash flow and budget reports.

Teacher Meeting

The PCSC staff member had the opportunity to meet with fifteen (15) IDVA teachers and staff. When asked for open and honest feedback, teachers gave the following responses:

How can IDVA improve?

- The enrollment process could improve – sometimes students come into the school and they don't know what to expect and they may think they can be in school whenever they want to be; it would help if they were told they have to attend every class every day.
- The number of late-start cohort students and the overall number of cohorts and frequency of new starts (every couple weeks) makes it tough to focus on our duties and teachers and means that we have to keep getting new students caught up while trying to keep current students on track.
- It would help if we provided training for learning coaches during enrollment so they can better understand their role.
- We're not fans of K-mail and would prefer to use another e-mail system (though we do know that K-mail keeps a permanent record, and that's good).
- We could offer more varied types of classes.
- We would like more flexibility to open Blackboard collaborate sessions early (10 minutes) so everyone can get logged in and we can start classes on-time.
- For teachers and students up north, vacations and spring break matches the Boise area, but not our part of the state, which can be difficult for families.
- The scan-tron test is very buggy for some folks (it crashes); it would be good to remove bugs from testing.

Describe your professional development. Do strategies and ideas learned through professional development get applied?

- We participate in professional learning communities (PLCs).
- For a while, departments were meeting weekly (for CCSS), which was helpful.
- Training as a new IDVA teacher was very intense; it was a little overwhelming at the time, but looking back, I know that it was necessary.
- I like our professional development program; we have the flexibility to choose courses ourselves and IDVA helps pay for them.

How prepared to you feel for Common Core implementation (CCSS) this year, and later, for the transition to the Smarter Balanced Assessment (SBA)?

- We have gotten quite a bit of training on CCSS.
- We've working on making sure the curriculum aligns and have discussed / worked on it in our PLCs.
- We're continuing to work on it.

What is going well at IDVA? What do you like about working here?

- We have a responsive administration; when teachers or parents voice concerns, they're really listened to; they are supportive, value our input, and encourage us to try new things.
- We have the opportunity to make one-on-one contact because we have the flexibility to be proactive and work with individual students as needed.
- We have a lot of communication with parents.
- The staff – we work as a team; we communicate and collaborate; the teachers here are problem solvers.

- Students learn to be self-motivated through this model.
- Students feel like they can engage and participate here.
- We think we have a very responsive SpEd team.

Documents Review

Finances

The FY13 end-year and FY14 year-to-date finances were not available for review at the time of the visit. Allen Wenger sent them via e-mail to the PCSC staff member within 24 hours. IDVA's financial processes and documentation vary from those submitted by other schools (types of forms, etc.). **However, because IDVA's contract with K12 includes a deficit protection clause, the PCSC staff member who visited does not have significant concerns about the school's finances at this time.**

Special Education Files

Since the IDVA special education files are kept electronically, Tara Ball, Special Education Administrator, allowed the PCSC staff member to randomly select three (3) students and review their files on her computer. All three files included up-to-date IEPs, including accommodations and LRE documentation. All files included current eligibility reports. The electronic files appeared to be organized, though staff does use two separate systems to look at documentation. At this time, the PCSC staff member does not have any significant concerns about the files that were reviewed.

The PCSC staff member also had the opportunity to speak with Ms. Ball briefly regarding the process she uses to ensure that IEPs are appropriately implemented, as virtual schools face unique challenges in this regard. Ms. Ball reported that they have put new systems in place this year, including monthly data conferencing with teachers. The school's special education teachers turn in their progress monitoring regarding the students they are serving on a monthly basis and Ms. Ball reviews it with them to ensure they're working through the students' IEP goals. Additionally, Ms. Ball does observations of special education instruction.

Classroom Observations

Since IDVA is a virtual school, there was minimal opportunity for classroom observations. The PCSC staff member toured the facility, which consisted of staff offices, technology labs and workstations for students, and areas for teachers to interact with students when they come in-person. Additionally, the IDVA administrator sent the PCSC staff member some links of recorded virtual courses. The PCSC staff member watched five to ten minutes each of five recordings, with grades and subjects varying (elementary through high school, English language arts, math, journalism, etc.). The pacing, level of interactive activities, and engagement of students varied by class, but was generally quite strong. However, given that the administrator selected these courses for observation and the PCSC staff member had minimal opportunity for in-person observations of students, it is difficult to make generalized statements regarding the quality of instruction or learning.

Summary

Strengths

- Teachers report that they feel supported by the school's administration; they believe the administration values and is responsive to feedback.

- Board training and evaluation processes have improved.
- The deficit protection clause in its contract with K12 continues to lead to balanced budgets and financial stability.

Challenges or Areas for Improvement

- Teachers report having challenges with K-mail and scan-tron testing.
- IDVA's administrator and teachers reported feeling that the school's enrollment and/or onboarding / orientation process for students and learning coaches could benefit from additional improvement.

Concerns

- The PCSC staff member who visited does not have any significant concerns about IDVA at this time.

Possible Charter Amendments

- IDVA has informed the PCSC staff member that the school intends to submit charter amendments to clarify and update information about the school's programs and services.

Recommendations

- PCSC staff recommends that the IDVA administrator work with school's teachers to identify and addresses technology issues (K-mail, scan-tron testing, etc).
- PCSC staff recommends that the IDVA administrator work with the school's to develop additional strategies to further improve the school's enrollment and onboarding process for students and learning coaches.

Materials or Follow-up Requested of the School

No additional follow-up was requested of the school.