



Idaho State Capitol Virtual Tour



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Executive Summary

Faced with stark cutbacks in their budgets, many Idaho schools have been forced to eliminate funds for field trips and other outside educational activities. The loss of these programs inspired staff from the Idaho Legislative Services Office (LSO) and Idaho Public Television (IdahoPTV) to discover innovative ways to provide a new option for students to learn about and explore Idaho's state government, with funding from the Idaho Commission for Libraries (ICfL) from a Broadband Technology Opportunities Program (BTOP) grant in the amount of \$30,000. The newly created Idaho State Capitol Virtual Tour allows students and citizens of all ages to explore the beauty and history of Idaho's best-known architectural landmark in a highly interactive and engaging manner without having to actually travel to the Capitol. This unique interactive virtual tour program allows Idaho legislators to speak live from the Capitol, with students in classrooms in their home district. It also gives the students and other community members the chance to ask their legislators direct questions about the state Capitol and how their government works.

The virtual tour includes eight pre-recorded video segments that showcase various parts of the Capitol, and provides some history and background on the building itself as well as several aspects of the legislative process. The majority of the tour is live and allows legislators to talk about the Idaho Legislature, how bills become laws, and the different steps in the legislative process. The legislator is joined by an LSO staff member, with a staff person from Idaho Public Television on hand for event and technical support. Students have the opportunity to ask questions of the legislator and can have an informal conversation via live video teleconferencing. The interactive video equipment is mobile, allowing the tour to take place from five different locations in the Capitol, including the public galleries of the House and Senate. Although many students and teachers have an opportunity to visit the Capitol, there are far more students and teachers who do not have that opportunity, so we have brought the Capitol, the Idaho Legislature and the legislative process to them. The program is available to all schools connected to the Idaho Education Network (IEN) and to other locations with teleconferencing capabilities. In the very near future, by loaning out a special tour computer to groups, this opportunity will be expanded to include any site with sufficient broadband access to the Internet, including local libraries, nursing homes and other community gathering places, as well as schools not connected to the IEN.

Having this virtual option greatly decreases the costs involved for travel expenses, and expands the opportunity to many more students and to those who find travel difficult. Also, because the tour has been so carefully developed and is responsive to individual questions and concerns, it makes for a more engaging and positive experience for everyone involved. There are no distractions and the students can be much more focused on learning. Plus, any group participating can discuss with their legislator the issues directly relevant to their lives with immediate responses in an informal conversation.

An overview video clip can be seen here. <http://youtu.be/rym7YaOv500>

Business Problem and Solution

Idaho's public schools receive some of the lowest levels of financial support from state and local governments, ranking between 48th and 50th nationally for the last several years. Recent funding cutbacks have hit especially hard in rural areas around the state. These schools have eliminated many programs, especially for non-traditional learning activities like field trips. The Idaho State Capitol Virtual Tour offers these students the opportunity to examine an important part of their state's history and governance in a highly interactive and engaging manner, without additional expense for their schools. It also offers state legislators a new way to interact positively with their constituents, many of whom live in remote places, where frequent visits pose geographical challenges. The virtual tour could free up funds for the state, the legislators and the schools to use in other ways, while providing a high-quality learning experience for children and citizens in Idaho. Idaho is currently the only state that offers an interactive virtual tour of its Capitol.

There were several aspects of this project that were critical to its success. First, the close partnership between LSO and IdahoPTV allowed them to draw upon the professional skills of both organizations to produce the highest quality interactive program. Staff from LSO contributed a deep knowledge about the Capitol, its day-to-day operations and the governing process, having led tours of the facility for decades. They were also engaged in a close working relationship with the legislators and their staff, making it easier to gather feedback and support for the project.

IdahoPTV supplied a large quantity of excellent video resources on the history and architecture of the Capitol, since the organization recently completed an award-winning documentary on the subject. Production staff were assigned to produce the tour, including videos. IdahoPTV also offered technical knowledge and equipment needed to provide live video access to various parts of the building, as they already make available video streaming and broadcasts of the Legislature when it is in session. Additional equipment was purchased using funding from a BTOP grant overseen by the ICfL.

LSO and IdahoPTV worked together to develop a script and determine the flow of the tour.

The tour was organized as a floor-by-floor study of the building, with eight short video clips providing additional background to various focal points. The script covers important items that are not included in the videos and offers legislators engaging ways to interact with the off-site students and other users. An outside history research firm was used to check the accuracy of the information that was included.

Staff at LSO work with the legislators to schedule and participate in the tours, while IdahoPTV staff provide technical and event support. The effort has also been enhanced by the contributions of other organizations such as the Idaho Education Network, which provides private network broadband connectivity and video to many of Idaho's junior high, middle and high schools, and the ICfL, which provided funding for the project

through its BTOP grant. The grant's focus was to increase bandwidth and public access computers to over 60 locations throughout rural Idaho.

Significance

Idaho is the only state offering a live interactive tour of its state capitol to classrooms throughout the state. Although the state of Idaho requires a tour program for the Capitol under Idaho Code 67-1612, and on-site tours satisfy this requirement, LSO and IdahoPTV recognized that for students and citizens who could not easily access the Capitol, there was an unmet need, which the Idaho Capitol Virtual Tour fulfills. The ICVT also provides a unique opportunity to have a personal dialogue with a legislator or staff member that provides a greater understanding of the intricacies of the building and legislative process. American Government and Civics classes around the state can participate in an active discussion of how their state government operates with one of its own citizen legislators. Students, unable to attend a legislative session in person, can learn what it means to have an active and vibrant state official representing them in government. Many tough questions have been asked and answered during tours; questions that students sometimes have and do not feel they get adequate answers for. In this format, they are able to better understand what goes into making the laws we all live by in our state. From Bonners Ferry to Franklin, Homedale to St. Anthony, this tour provides both education and a personal touch to participating classes around the state.

There are many beneficiaries of the virtual tour program, from some of Idaho's youngest citizens to its oldest and everyone in between. Not only do students benefit from this fun and educational opportunity but teachers do as well. Educators are given a teacher's packet in conjunction with scheduling the tour that can be used to heighten the children's learning experience. The teachers then have the ability to work current classroom curriculum into the question and answer sessions of the virtual tour.

The state legislators are also beneficiaries of this program, as they are able to connect with their constituents in an informal setting. They are able to talk about a building and a process they love and serve. Many part-time citizen legislators do not get to spend as much time as they would like directly contacting their constituents; this program allows them more flexibility in their schedules to speak directly with different groups. This also puts a personal touch and a "face to the name" of the state legislature that may not be otherwise possible.

The virtual tours allow many more people to tour the Capitol, no matter how far they live from Boise, or regardless of their own physical or economic limitations. It is cost-effective and easy to use. The tour includes many innovative solutions, which make it very effective and enjoyable for participants. These include the way the tour utilizes local legislators to lead the program; how the tour moves from one floor to the next, giving participants a sense of movement throughout the building without disrupting the flow of the activity; and the effective use of video clips, interactive questions, fun facts, an integrated PowerPoint presentation, and other prompts from the virtual tour guides.

Students, teachers and legislators have benefited greatly from this activity and have expressed their enthusiastic support for the endeavor.

“Our school so appreciates you! What a fantastic tour. Thank you for making it work for us, and for accommodating our time schedule. The fourth grade class wanted me to convey how much they loved it.” Sarah Droegemueller, Taylors Crossing Public Charter School, Idaho Falls

Benefit of the Project

The Idaho Legislature is a citizen’s legislature, meeting only a few months a year and dependent on ordinary citizens who are willing to dedicate their time and energies to make it work. Without the knowledge of how our government works and individuals who have an interest in participating in this government, our system will fail. This project gives students and adults the chance to become engaged and excited about our state Capitol and the government activities it houses in a positive and cost -effective manner.

The tour that was developed includes many innovative solutions to make it run smoothly and effectively. First, there is an easy-to-follow script for the legislators to use, interspersed with video clips and other activities, designed to help make their interactions with the classrooms engaging and informative. The video clips are key because they help communicate important information to the students, and also provide time for the tour leaders to move from one location to the next. By moving from one floor to another, the participants get the sense that they are moving through the building and it allows the tour to focus on different aspects of Idaho’s state government, since each portion of the building has a different function.

A teacher’s packet is emailed out prior to each tour that helps prepare students for the interaction. It includes additional websites, a historical timeline of the Capitol, architectural terms, the “story of a bill,” a mock bill with all iterations and Capitol floor maps. An overview video is also available for teachers and administrators to watch and learn what the tour is and how it can be used in their classrooms.

In addition to the educational value of the tour, it can also be seen as a cost savings for the state. Travel is expensive not only in terms of the money it would take to send teachers and students to Boise on buses but also the cost in lost class time. Teachers and students could engage more than once during a school year or legislative session with their legislator.

Other benefits include having LSO staff organize the meeting with legislators. It is their job to communicate with legislators and help organize them to be more efficient while in session. Teachers will not have to take time to organize any part of the tour except the video teleconference-enabled classroom and the students. LSO and IdahoPTV staff will communicate with them prior to the tour regarding their needs and what they desire from the event.

Also, the additional Web components at idahoptv.org and other websites allow teachers and students to view the videos and building tour content as often as they like, or do additional research about the building and its history. They can also learn more about the underground wings and restoration of the main building.

There is no real replacement for visiting the Idaho Capitol in person, but this really is the next best thing to being there. Please click here to watch the Idaho State Capitol Virtual Tour overview video clip. <http://youtu.be/rym7YaOv500>

Here is some of the feedback we have received from participants in the virtual tour:

“As one of the first participants to conduct a virtual tour of the Idaho State Capitol building, I can attest that the technology worked as promised, was user-friendly, and was easily adaptable as we ad-libbed during the tour. The students in Oakley were engaged and interested in the interactive live tour ... I later talked to the government teacher, who confirmed that the kids thought it was a great experience.”
Idaho State Speaker of the House Scott Bedke

“I thought that the virtual tour worked quite well. It presented a good opportunity to talk about current political issues in the context of the Capitol and the various governmental functions it houses. I was surprised by how easy it was to interact with the kids in Kamiah. And given the distance between Boise and their home up north, I believe that it might be the only chance to see the Capitol or talk to their legislator.”
Idaho State Representative John Rusche

“We've just completed the virtual field trip between the Capitol and Longfellow Elementary in Idaho Falls, and the feedback was outstanding! The original plan was for the trip to be with Mrs. Davis' class of 4th graders, but with the... help of some valuable man-power and technical know-how from the Idaho Falls School District, they were able to increase the trip to include all three 4th grade classes (over 70 students)!

As usual, it started a bit slow as the students got used to the idea of being able to interact with "the man on TV", but once they figured out questions were welcome, it unleashed a tidal wave. As we wrapped up, Mrs. Davis commented that the virtual trip may have actually been better than the physical trips they took years ago. Instead of planning a 12-hour day for a trip to the Capitol, they were able to experience a more focused trip inside of 90 minutes hosted by a member of the Legislature!

Thank you to everyone who made this possible, the kids and teachers loved it!”
Mike Costa, Idaho Education Network

“I think overwhelmingly the virtual field trip was a success and I can only see great things coming from this program. The outreach potential is huge and the content was well received. You did a wonderful job and the kids were very engaged.”
Julie Best, Idaho Education Network

“The virtual tour is the next best thing to actually being in the classroom with the kids, and it is the next best thing for those students who cannot physically come to the building. The script and program are much easier to use than I originally thought when first approached about the project. The Legislative Services Office and Idaho Public Television provide all the support needed.”

President Pro Tempore Senator Brent Hill

The tour is a work in progress and will continue to be upgraded with new materials and updated information. In the future, we plan to add special laptop computers that can be loaned to schools and other locations that do not have access to video conferencing equipment so they can participate as well. We also plan to expand this unique service to other entities such as senior citizen centers, civic groups and service organizations. We feel the potential for outreach to the citizens of Idaho is limitless.