

Program to give teachers tech training

By Twila Van Leer
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Strengthening Utah's capability for producing engineers, computer scientists and general scientists has to begin in junior high and high schools, Gov. Mike Leavitt believes.

"We need more junior high school and high school students exposed to these disciplines and grounded in the prerequisites," Leavitt said in an interview. Preparation of students at that level would speed Leavitt's initiative to double the number of college graduates in engineering/computer/science fields over the next five years.

Tuesday during a news conference at Whittier Elementary School, he announced a schol-

arship program that will help junior high and high school teachers earn master's degrees that would in turn assure more high school graduates ready to take on the college courses related to the initiative. The master's degree in learning technology will be presented through Western Governors University. Courses are delivered online so teachers in any part of the state can take them without having to take a prolonged break from their classrooms or travel to a college campus.

"It's hard to find teachers who can take time out to pursue an additional degree," Leavitt said.

Teachers approved for the program will receive scholar-

ships worth some \$8,000 over the two-year course of study, Leavitt said. The advanced training also can mean raises of as much as \$5,000 to \$7,000 a year for teachers. That may discourage them from leaving education for better-paying jobs in industry, a perennial problem in retaining teachers with science and math training, the governor said.

To supplement money provided by SB61, passed last year to define and fund the initiative, scholarship money also has been raised from private sources, the governor said. There is enough now available to accommodate about 35 teachers. Convincing business and industry leaders of the initiative's value in building a strong

work force is an ongoing commitment of his administration, Leavitt said.

"Our goal over the course of several years is to have 500 more teachers with master's degrees in learning technology." These teachers in turn would be expected to add to the training of others in their districts, he said.

The WGU courses are competency-based, so teachers may start at any time and move at their own pace through the materials.

Already in process is training for 206 public education superintendents and school administrators who also can affect the drive for better-prepared high school graduates to fuel the ini-

tiative, Leavitt said. Again, SB61 funds were increased by a grant from the Gates Foundation to make this training available to the administrators.

Leavitt acknowledges that the programs being designed for the WGU format are good for the virtual university as well. They are helping to build the "critical mass" of students needed to make the university successful. Building a student base has been a slow process, but Leavitt, a confirmed proponent of technologically delivered education, believes that ultimately the competency-based approach will force other institutions of higher education into the same mode.

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