Accountability Recommendations of the VSBA Virtual Learning Task Force
***Highlights of Interim Virtual Learning Report for Virginia Board of Education* Work Session on Virtual Schools**

Background

As Virginia's 134 school divisions innovate and collaborate to foster student achievement, the Virginia School Boards Association recognizes the import of virtual learning within the portfolio of academic options provided throughout the Commonwealth. In July 2012, VSBA convened a Virtual Learning Task Force, comprised of local school board leaders and school superintendents, to study and review state and national best practices in virtual learning, local practices and policies, and current relevant Virginia laws and regulations. The Task Force drafted an interim report in November 2012 to recommend a policy framework for local school boards and to suggest next steps and future areas of work.

Finding: Accountability Key to Quality

The Task Force report recognizes the need for accountability in virtual learning offerings, noting, "With clear metrics to assess and maintain quality and increased flexibility to expand successful virtual learning practices, school systems can advance promising virtual learning approaches and accelerate achievement for all students." As one of four key recommendations, the report concludes "accountability is essential to ensuring quality in virtual learning options."

Focus on Accountability

According to the report, all virtual offerings must be accountable for more than proficiency on standards; measures should also focus on student growth, graduation/completion, and skills needed for college/career readiness. The report recommends additional research on the effectiveness of all types of virtual learning offerings, including: the characteristics and needs of online students, student progress compared to progress in traditional learning environments, the impact on challenged or at-risk students, and the effect of virtual learning offerings on the achievement gap between student groups.

Quality Accountability Measures

The report includes two types of virtual learning accountability measures for local boards to address in policy:

1) ***Participation accountability measures*** include records of attendance that show log-on activity, time spent online, and numbers of students who start and complete a virtual program.
2) ***Academic accountability measures*** for online providers should include formative assignments and assessments to reflect concept mastery, interim and final grades, satisfaction surveys, and other measures comparable to those of traditional schools and courses.

In addition, the report provides a sample course evaluation matrix for assessing the quality of potential virtual offerings. ***Course quality accountability measures*** are comprised of: 1) course design, 2) instruction and assessment, and 3) technology integration. Within these three categories, staff can rate proposed offerings based upon alignment to state and local standards; content accuracy; alignment among objectives, assessments, instructional strategies, content and technology; measurable goals and objectives; syllabus adequacy; variety of learning activities; content effectiveness (critical reasoning and abstract thinking, and scaffolding of concepts); teacher-student interactions; student-student interactions; use of external links and technical features that enhance learning; ease of use of technology and embedded media; and technical requirements.

Conclusion

The VSBA Virtual Learning Task Force recognizes that ensuring student achievement requires a commitment to accountability within virtual programming. Every virtual course offering, whether part of a stand-alone virtual school or a traditional school system, must meet quality accountability measures prior to being made available. In addition, virtual learning must demonstrate--through participation and academic accountability measures, assessed regularly and transparently—student engagement in meaningful learning opportunities and demonstrated progress that meets expected goals and objectives.