

**Virtual Learning Advisory Committee
Richmond, Virginia
May 20, 2015**

The second meeting of the Virtual Learning Advisory Committee (VLAC) was held on Wednesday, May 20, in Richmond, Virginia. Those in attendance were:

David Rankin for Dr. Marcus J. Newsome, Chesterfield County Public Schools, Region 1
Dr. Ashby Kilgore, Superintendent of Newport News Public Schools, Region 2
Dr. Greg Smith, Superintendent of Richmond County Public Schools, Region 3
Dr. Linda Revia, Superintendent of Staunton City Public Schools, Region 5
Dr. Mark Church, Superintendent of Franklin County Public Schools, Region 6
Roxanne Thompson for Dr. Thomas Brewster, Pulaski County Public Schools, Region 7
Nancy Leonard, Superintendent of Charlotte County Public Schools, Region 8
Dr. Ben Kiser, Virginia Association of School Superintendents
Bert Schmidt, President and CEO of WHRO

Virginia Department of Education staff:

Dr. Steven Staples, Superintendent of Public Instruction
Dr. Billy Haun, Chief Academic Officer/Assistant Superintendent of Instruction
Mark Saunders, Instructional Technology Specialist
Jean Weller, Instructional Technology Specialist

Virtual Virginia staff:

Cheri Kelleher, Virtual Virginia Director

The following committee members were unable to attend:

Dr. Eric Williams, Superintendent of Loudoun County Public Schools, Region 4
Gina Patterson, Executive Director of the Virginia School Boards Association
Gail Warren, Virtual Virginia

Observers:

Lisa Jackson, Office of the Secretary of Education

Review of Legislative Charge to Advisory Board

Dr. Haun reviewed the content of HB 1115 and the responsibilities of the Virtual Learning Advisory Committee (VLAC).

Updates on Current Initiatives

Virtual Virginia

Ms. Kelleher reviewed current numbers related to Virtual Virginia's contribution to education in Virginia, including the blended-learning Economics and Personal Finance course being used by several divisions. She then described a pilot program that will be conducted this coming school year (2015-2016) for a full-time virtual high school program.

- Full-time program for high school students in grades 9 – 12 (students take five courses or more)
- 100 students maximum
- Registering on a first-come, first-serve basis through school counselors; no more than 15 per school; private school and home-school students must register through the public schools

- Tuition is free but drop fees will be in effect

- 13 core courses are being offered (these have not been offered before)
- Accommodations are provided to special needs students (just as they are now)
- Considered as a partnership with public schools who provide support services for students
- First year in a three-year pilot, using core courses from WHRO

Discussion by the advisory committee centered on the need to have a wide diversity of participants from all over the state. It was determined that the first-come, first-serve enrollment strategy might need to be revisited. The Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) might need to look at policy to ensure not all students come from one or two divisions and that we have distribution across the state. Another concern was that the VDOE should try to determine whether or not this new option brings private school and home school students back into participation with the public schools. Finally, although the full-time school would be free to students and schools, this is not a sustainable model and the costs for running the school should be considered for future plans.

General discussion about other issues that Virtual Virginia could address included finding ways to counter the persistent myths around online courses (such as that they can't be as rigorous as face-to-face classes, that they are cheaper, or that students can easily cheat). School divisions need to make headway in looking closely at and amending policies that prevent them from using online courses to their fullest.

There was general interest in encouraging the addition of more blended learning courses, like the Economics and Personal Finance course now offered to school divisions around the state. Ms. Kelleher noted that she is working with eMediaVA to break some of the Virtual Virginia courses into small modules to be placed in the eMediaVA system. Not all of the courses can be used in this way, especially those which use licensed materials. SCORM-compliance also continues to be a barrier.

Members also wanted to ensure that divisions understand that online learning is not the most effective choice for all students. Additionally, research supports the use of blended learning as opposed to online-only learning for the vast majority of students. Ms. Kelleher noted that Virtual Virginia has been working on developing better guidance for students who wish to take online courses, and also looking into using a "flipped" learning model for some of their courses.

Multidivision Online Provider

Mr. Saunders reported on the latest additions to the approved Multidivision Online Providers list, and also provided some basic information about the current status of these providers and their contribution to virtual learning in Virginia.

Broadband pricing project

Dr. Haun and Ms. Kelleher gave an update regarding the joint project with Education SuperHighway (ESH), a national nonprofit organization. The ESH has been conducting face-to-face meetings with school personnel in various areas of the state, attempting to determine the barriers to access and meeting state and national goals for broadband connectivity. They are also filtering through the data they have collected from the divisions, cross-checking for accuracy. It is important to get all the stakeholders to the table as often there are things that might be able to be done through partnerships and sharing costs. A report is due from ESH in mid-June and will be widely distributed.

The committee noted that the ability of technology directors across the state varies from division to division. Many of the smaller divisions have a technology director who also must cover many other jobs. It is important to provide professional development that could help ensure that technology directors have information they need to pursue effective technology contracts and locate funding sources. Finding ways to share expertise between divisions would also help, especially by encouraging regional meetings.

One of the biggest problems, as noted by Committee members, is the lack of community access. Schools have broadband for the most part, even if it needs to be strengthened, but limited access outside of school also limits the schools capability to support virtual learning.

Virginia's Online Textbook Marketplace

Ms. Weller outlined the current status and upcoming pilot of the Online Textbook Marketplace (OTM). Copia, the private company partner who is developing the system, has been working with both pilot divisions and textbook publishers to provide the eTextbooks that divisions want to purchase. A recent Superintendent's Memo (http://www.doe.virginia.gov/administrators/superintendents_memos/2015/106-15.shtml) provided information to divisions who are interested in pursuing digital resources but unsure how to start. The focus continues to be the ability for teachers to easily personalize learning for their students.

One concern raised by the Committee was to remember that several students in one home might have access to only one device and that there needs to be some discussion about how that might be handled.

eMediaVA

Ms. Kelleher provided an overview of current numbers related to eMediaVA, the state-supported (through a grant) open education resource repository managed by WHRO. This is currently a free service to all Virginia school divisions, allowing teachers access to a wide variety of content from a diverse group of organizations. It allows teachers to use materials with their students without having to worry about licensing (Virtual Virginia is pursuing the use of these materials in order to provide textbook-free courses). Materials are constantly being added, and there has been steady growth in the use of these resources by teachers all over the Commonwealth. Free training is offered by WHRO for interested educators.

The Committee believes that marketing eMediaVA will assist in the continued growth in awareness and use of this resource.

Learn24VA

Ms. Kelleher noted the Learn24VA has been launched and is now available at www.learn24va.org and accessible by anyone. The site makes it easier to search for any virtual learning resource available to educators in Virginia. Divisions can provide links to their own resources they would like to share (such as virtual courses), so that these, too, can be easily located. The work on publicizing this system is only just beginning.

The Committee addressed several questions, providing insight, practical suggestions and further questions to explore.

How might Virtual Virginia (and virtual learning) be used to support challenging schools?

There are limitations to the use of virtual courses in challenging schools. Many of the students may not be able to handle purely online courses (often high reading levels, lack of home Internet access, many other demands on their time, etc.). Virtual Virginia only addresses high school levels, so K-8 grades would be unserved.

However, a blended approach that supports a teacher by providing alternate instructional means (following an in-classroom flipped model) and also providing mentors to new teachers would help tremendously. This addresses the two most important issues being faced by many schools (not just those who are challenged): finding quality teachers and quality content. It was noted that the General Assembly might investigate the usefulness of providing funds for improving content rather than adding devices during the next budget cycle.

Another idea might be to find a way to support students who move in and out of systems with “just-in-time” learning modules for either catching up or staying current. In those cases, it would be helpful to move away from “hours” to competency, using short modules of instruction in a blended learning model. Academic progress could be demonstrated throughout the year rather than one end-of-year test.

Can Virtual Virginia be used to deliver high-quality professional development for teachers and staff?

Currently various entities offer online courses for teachers, with the VDOE offering 6-week focused courses (provided by Intel). These are good courses, but they tend not to have any follow-up. Research shows that teachers learn new skills best when they are taught over time, with support as needed. The support requires local mentors (such as ITRTs) or virtual mentors (though these mentors should not be exclusively online teachers—blended teaching is different from online teaching).

Professional development should be looked at as an ongoing practice with Personal Learning Communities, rather than just an event (as has been done in the past). Also, it is important to remember that not all teachers learn well in a virtual course and that other options also need to be available; it is not what Virtual Virginia does best. Additionally, schools need to look at time devoted to professional development and make sure it is adequate.

One area that could be very much supported by short training videos would be specific skills all teachers need to learn that aren’t necessarily related to instruction, such as recognizing child abuse.

How might we leverage Virtual Virginia to support on-demand, individualized learning?

This was addressed during the discussion on support for challenged schools.

Can Virtual Virginia be used to address critical teacher shortages in areas like mathematics?

The Committee explored various ways that virtual learning could help when schools do not have a qualified teacher to fill a position (many have to hire long-term substitutes). It is becoming a larger problem each year, especially in core content areas. The issue cannot be solved with virtual learning, but at this critical point it can be possibly alleviated. It is important to convey to everyone that this is not the ideal solution to teacher shortages, but a “Plan B” based on an emergency situation.

It would be possible to have prerecorded video lessons or a live video instruction module provided to schools who are lacking teachers in certain subjects but who have teachers who are not qualified in that subject who can follow-up with student learning in face-to-face environment. It would be difficult to have much interaction with the virtual teacher, as there are many different school schedules throughout Virginia so it would be impossible to find a time convenient to all students. However, virtual teachers might have “office hours” in an online forum, during which time students could ask questions.

The Committee also noted that it would be great to have different areas of the state follow the model being used in the Hampton Roads area, where teachers can teach across division boundaries. It’s important to create awareness around the state about how various divisions are addressing issues, and what resources are available.

The meeting was adjourned at 2:00 p.m. and the next meeting was tentatively scheduled for October 13, 2015.