

**Virtual Learning Advisory Committee  
Charlottesville, Virginia  
July 29, 2014**

The initial meeting of the Virtual Learning Advisory Committee (VLAC) was held on Tuesday, July 29, in Charlottesville, Virginia. Those in attendance were:

Dr. Ashby Kilgore, Superintendent of Newport News Public Schools, Region 2  
Dr. Greg Smith, Superintendent of Richmond County Public Schools, Region 3  
Dr. Eric Williams, Superintendent of Loudoun County Public Schools, Region 4  
Dr. Linda Revia, Superintendent of Staunton City Public Schools, Region 5  
Dr. Mark Church, Superintendent of Franklin County Public Schools, Region 6  
Nancy Leonard, Superintendent of Charlotte County Public Schools, Region 8  
Gina Patterson, Executive Director of the Virginia Schools Boards Association  
Jena Collins, Manager of Strategic Initiatives at Apple  
Bert Schmidt, President and CEO of WHRO

Virginia Department of Education staff:

Dr. Tammy McGraw, Director of Digital Innovations & Outreach  
Cheri Kelleher, Virtual Programs Coordinator  
Gail Warren, Supervisor of Curriculum and Student Services, Virtual Virginia  
Jean Weller, Instructional Technology Specialist

The following committee members were unable to attend:

Dr. Marcus J. Newsome, Chesterfield County Public Schools, Region 1  
Dr. Thomas Brewster, Pulaski County Public Schools, Region 7  
Dr. Ben Kiser, Virginia Association of School Superintendents

### **Review of HB 1115**

HB 1115 does not specify the frequency of meetings or the level of commitment of the members. Dr. McGraw suggested that two face-to-face meetings each year with other virtual meetings as needed might be sufficient. Dr. McGraw also reviewed the purpose and responsibilities of the committee and noted that it is charged with advising the Department of Education (DOE) on online courses, in-service training, and digital instructional resources that school divisions need to meet the Commonwealth's graduation requirements. The committee is also charged with advising the DOE on strategic planning to expand blended and online learning opportunities in Virginia's public schools, including cost-effective access to high-need and low-demand courses, training, content, and digital resources. Dr. McGraw noted that it is time to update the state technology plan and this committee's work might inform the new plan, or result in separate projects and documents. In discussing the committee's responsibilities, VLAC members noted that there needs to be special guidance and support for blended learning as many staff still consider it a threat, rather than an adjunct, to their job.

Dr. McGraw also asked if the members had any additional comments about the bill that should be considered, such as the requirement that divisions put information about their online program on their Web pages. Having conducted an informal review of division Web sites, the DOE discovered that it is difficult to find this information and in some instances, school divisions appear to not to have implemented this requirement. Several members noted that this was anachronistic, as online learning has become a regular part of their instructional offerings and not something particularly special.

Dr. Kilgore noted that the language in the HB 1115 that exempts contracts with multidivision online providers from the Virginia Public Procurement Act should be reconsidered.

### **Updates on Current Initiatives**

Dr. McGraw invited DOE staff to provide updates on various initiatives relevant to the committee's work. Cheri Kelleher provided the update on Virtual Virginia.

### **Virtual Virginia**

- Offers supplemental courses to school divisions
- 28 full-time teachers and about 38 more adjunct/part-time
- 54 courses
- Local mentors
- 3 prongs: traditional teacher-intensive courses, hosting of courses for school divisions, and developing well-designed courses to be used in blended learning by schools

Mr. Schmidt asked about how Virginia might work with school divisions/entities to provide their own courses to the wider state, and Dr. McGraw noted this would be addressed as part of a later agenda item—the Learn24VA portal.

Dr. Smith noted that the Economics and Personal Finance course developed by DOE is an exceptional model and that we should make more of these type of courses available to school divisions. Others agreed.

Dr. Williams asked if DOE has considered charging tuition to enable Virtual Virginia to expand. Dr. McGraw indicated that the topic has been discussed; however, she has not pursued it because she did not want to burden schools that have been dealing with difficult budget issues in recent years.

### **Multidivision Online Providers**

Cheri Kelleher provided the update on multidivision online providers.

- The purpose is to improve access to course offerings and to ensure quality. Virginia was one of the first states in the nation to put a process in place.
- The criteria were approved in November 2010.
- Providers are beginning the fourth year in offering approved courses.
- There are 20 providers, including 2 school divisions in Virginia, approved as multidivision online providers.
- 1,127 courses have been reviewed and approved.

Dr. McGraw stated that one of the biggest challenges her staff faces is getting accurate data from multidivision online providers. Among the reasons this has occurred has been the providers' lack of understanding of the information being requested, turnover in personnel, and buy-outs and mergers between companies. This has resulted in inaccurate and inconsistent data.

Some VLAC members added that because multidivision online providers are exempt from procurement rules, they may not feel an urgency to supply the information requested. Also, pricing varies widely, and state or regional purchasing would be very helpful for some divisions. They suggested that it would be beneficial for the state to facilitate regional or statewide procurement. Superintendents have found that the range of courses available varies widely in quality and that the licensed teachers provided are not always very accessible. Dr. Williams questioned if divisions can provide courses to students in other divisions with agreements. Dr. McGraw confirmed they could. Dr. Smith noted that we have to remember that

these multidivision online providers often supply services to alternative students—and some seem to do that well.

Dr. McGraw addressed the Department of Education’s Web-based information about multidivision online providers. She acknowledged that the system is not particularly user-friendly and does not provide information in a format easily used by divisions wanting to compare various options. The system was originally developed on a limited scale because it was not known if the need for a database would continue and there was concern that the Office of Educational Information Management did not have the resources to develop a robust system given the time constraints. Dr. McGraw suggested that there is clearly a need to improve the system and the course catalog being developed as part of the Learn24VA site is the first step in this process.

It was generally agreed that school divisions need more help in making informed decisions. Divisions need more information about the providers, perhaps beyond what is covered in the yearly report. Is there information there that is not being shared or easily accessible? Are large contracts from various school divisions available in which smaller school divisions can participate? DOE could help make it easier for schools to access information about existing contracts.

Dr. Kilgore noted that Newport News Public Schools provides an online school for homeschoolers (about 30 students in K-8). They issued an RFP for a provider and have a growing program. Parents do not pay or have to shop around for a good option and the division gets ADM. Newport News also offers credit recovery or alternative virtual courses to students at the end of each quarter rather than waiting for the end of the year. This way the students are still motivated to learn.

Dr. Smith suggested that Virtual Virginia should think about alternative education courses (especially credit recovery) that could be blended as the need is very high for this type of virtual learning.

Dr. McGraw summarized by stating that language in the bill around procurement should be revisited. Other suggestions about support for school divisions need to be addressed.

### **State Broadband Pricing Project**

Gail Warren provided the update on the state broadband pricing project.

- All recognize that both schools and families need broadband access.
- The Commonwealth is partnering with EducationSuperHighway on the broadband pricing project.
- The purpose of the project is to discover the key drivers of high-cost bandwidth in Virginia and to identify strategies to lower the cost of Internet access in communities across the state.
- DOE will be providing guidance to divisions to help with procurement gap and policy issues (especially using e-Rate to maximize effectiveness).
- EducationSuperHighway is providing assistance at no cost to the Commonwealth.
- Telecom providers have committed to actively participating in the project. The project will also consider their challenges and limitations as well.

VLAC members discussed the importance of broadband access and Wi-Fi networks to make virtual learning initiatives successful. Dr. Williams noted that low-cost programs promoted by telecom companies to disadvantaged families are not the long-term answer. He cited problems such as complicated qualifications, documentation required, actual reliability of the service, and the guarantee of only two years at the discount rate. Dr. Smith stated that it is important to remember that access and availability are problems, and they don’t just apply to small school divisions. Jena Collins also suggested

that the broadband message be expanded to establish a statewide goal for school-level Wi-Fi access. Dr. Smith suggested that the message be shaped to describe broadband as a utility.

Other entities around Virginia are also working on this issue, such as the Virginia School Boards Association (VSBA) and the Virginia Association of School Superintendents (VASS). It was suggested that we connect with these groups to coordinate our efforts. Additionally, members of this committee expressed a willingness to participate in monthly calls with the EducationSuperHighway project team once the information has been gathered and is being analyzed. It was also suggested that the VASS Blueprint reflect the broadband work underway.

### **Digital Content**

The digital content update was provided by Jean Weller, Gail Warren, and Cheri Kelleher.

Various free resources provided by the Virginia Department of Education were presented to the members:

#### *Infinite Learning Lab*

DOE is currently partnering with the Professor Garfield Foundation to develop the Infinite Learning Lab—an engaging, comprehensive, research-based digital learning solution featuring Garfield and friends. It is designed primarily for students in grades three through six and is an online educational suite of standards-based, interactive animated lessons. The lessons reinforce core curriculum concepts in mathematics, science, and English as well as life skills development on topics ranging from diversity to online safety.

#### *EduWidgets*

EduWidgets is an authoring platform for students and teachers that enable them to develop, share, and customize widgets that can be used in virtual courses, multitouch iBooks, with interactive whiteboards, or deployed independently. The platform currently enables users to create interactive timelines and sequences, interactive graphs, and interactive images.

#### *eMediaVA*

Developed by WHRO, eMediaVA is a digital distribution platform. It provides teachers and students with digital learning objects, video, audio, and interactive and graphic elements all correlated to the Virginia Standards of Learning and available at no cost to every student and teacher across the Commonwealth.

#### *Learn24VA*

Learn24VA is an initiative of the Virginia Department of Education and the Virginia College Savings Plan. This portal aggregates digital tools, content, and resources to support teaching and learning 24/7.

Members were pleased to learn of these materials that are available to schools and requested that superintendents receive a short newsletter that highlights such resources and other educational technology news.

Dr. McGraw offered a brief overview of the digital textbook marketplace project where school divisions will be able to purchase e-textbooks and other digital materials to support learning. The project is just now beginning to take shape, and we are hoping to have a pilot in a few divisions this fall. Members expressed the belief that the marketplace could be transformational from an instructional as well as a financial perspective. Dr. Revia indicated that some textbooks currently in use are older than the students using them. It was also noted that digital rights end sooner than print rights and that the issue would need to be considered as we move forward.

### **Discussion: What can be done to maximize virtual learning for students?**

There is a significant amount of work to be done for the community to understand how education needs to change. Many communities are very comfortable where they are generally, and the present school schedule is taken for granted. The population is becoming older but also more technology literate. How can we leverage that? We also need to continue to work with teachers because many find it very hard to change.

The group agreed that we need to move away from time equals mastery idea. How do we define mastery now? How do we define success so students can move from level to level without waiting for an end of year test? We are successful at testing now but we can be successful with other work once it is embraced. Criteria-based systems have promise. Can we eliminate the Carnegie unit? Virtual learning may be an excellent place to experiment with assessment—for example, who approves and evaluates performance tasks? Do we have stories to tell about multi-age grouping, mastery learning, etc.?

The committee suggested that guidance and leadership is needed from the state—official support for superintendents and school boards so they are willing to try new things. It is too intimidating at the moment and many superintendents believe the stakes are too high. One immediate small step might be to provide greater flexibility as to when Standards of Learning (SOL) tests can be taken, so that students can pursue mastery learning at their own pace.

Another positive step forward might be to grant waivers for school start dates easier for divisions with virtual learning students and allowing courses taken during the summer to count as part of a school year. There was consensus that every teacher should be a blended teacher which has tremendous implications for teacher licensure and teacher preparation programs. Also, differentiation is a skill that should be a major part of teacher preparation programs.

### **Discussion: What are the things this committee can and should do?**

- Improve data regarding online providers so divisions can make informed choices.
- Work with other organizations currently examining related questions. One of DOE's primary contributions might be a focus on infrastructure, while VSBA could focus on best practices, and the innovation committee could pull this together and serve as the vehicle to address the issues. Other organizations to contact: VASS, National/Virginia Parent Teacher Association (PTA), Virginia Education Association (VEA), Virginia Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (VASCD), Chambers of Commerce, and other professional business associations.
- Find ways to communicate the importance of extending broadband and Wi-Fi to families as well as schools. DOE should set minimum standards (including load on network) and set goals for schools and communities.
- Focus on the issue of seat time recognizing that it is also an interest of the Governor's Innovation Committee.
- Come to a consensus on virtual and blended learning; develop a shared definition for divisions.
- Expand awareness of the free tools already available in Virginia.
- Pursue additional state funding for digital content.
- Compile examples of innovative teaching, learning, and assessment in Virginia (check with VSBA regarding their compilation).
- Find ways that divisions can use better metrics on their resources to help make further purchasing decisions.
- Ensure that committee members distribute information as well as solicit information in their own regions.
- Work with VSBA to craft model policies for flexibility in testing scheduling.

- Examine textbook policies and funding streams for instructional materials.
- Maintain a focus on the pedagogical aspects of virtual and blended learning.
- Determine how to make the online course requirement portable for students who move during their high school years.
- Identify other states that have similar committees and examine their work.

The next face-to-face meeting will be held in January.