Joint Committee to Study the Future of Public Elementary and Secondary Education in the Commonwealth

Subcommittee #1: Virtual Learning and Educational Technology

Meeting Summary: September 11, 2017

The Subcommittee on Virtual Learning and Educational Technology held its second meeting of the 2017 interim on Monday September, 11, 2017 in House Room 1 at the Capitol. A quorum was present and consisted of Delegate Bell (chairman), Senator Cosgrove, Senator Suetterlein, Mr. Maddox, and Ms. Harrington. The subcommittee took up six agenda items.

1. Discussion of Virginia and United States History course offered by WHRO Education.

Members of the subcommittee had the opportunity to take a virtual Virginia and United States History course offered by WHRO Education in August. The course instructors, Mrs. Blankinship and Mrs. Fehl-Seward, appeared before the committee and answered questions about course content development. There was consensus among subcommittee members that the course experience was worthwhile and helped dispel myths that exist about the rigor of virtual course work.

2. Discussion of SB 1335 (2017).

Senator Surovell appeared before the subcommittee and delivered a brief history of his SB 1335 (2017), a bill that has existed in some form for the past five sessions and that, in its current form, prohibits local school boards from requiring the use of any electronic textbook in any course in grades six through 12 unless the school board adopts a plan to ensure that (i) each student enrolled in such course will have access to a personal computing device capable of supporting such textbooks and (ii) the relevant school has adequate connectivity, which the bill defines as bandwidth of at least one megabit per second per student.

The bill has received support in the past: previous versions of it were (i) vetted and recommended by a work group of stakeholders convened by the Joint Committee on Technology and Science and the Broadband Advisory Committee and (ii) passed by the Senate (SB 740 (2016)).

Senator Surovell cited Article VIII, Section 3 of the Virginia Constitution in support of the argument that the General Assembly is obligated to provide free textbooks to students and does not fulfill this mandate by permitting schools to purchase electronic textbooks when students do not have access to the devices or broadband connectivity necessary to use such electronic textbooks. He clarified that the bill does not require students to have adequate broadband connectivity in their homes, although internet access still remains a concern in rural portions of the Commonwealth.

The subcommittee's main concern with Senator Surovell's proposal is the issue of cost for localities to provide the devices and school building connectivity necessary to comply the bill's

provisions. Staff will provide the subcommittee at its next meeting with any available cost-benefit analyses that school divisions have performed to determine whether to purchase electronic textbooks and devices for students.

3. Virtual Loudoun program.

Supervisor Stacie Ahrens-Mininberg provided an overview of the Virtual Loudoun program. The Virtual Loudoun program, established in 2014, offers 36 virtual courses (developed by and purchased from other entities and offered through a Moodle-based Learning Management System) to students during three terms: fall (high school), spring (high school), and summer (high school and middle school).

The program is supplemental, and students choose to take virtual courses for a variety of reasons, although Ms. Ahrens-Mininberg reported that the most common scenario is that students enroll to take courses that aren't otherwise available to them at their home high schools, such as Advanced Placement courses. The program serves many students with special circumstances such as athletes, although there is still an expectation that students attend their high school of residence full-time. Student with disabilities who take virtual courses through the program are provided with the appropriate supports and accommodations according to their IEPs. The program has adopted a "try before you buy" approach in acknowledgement that virtual education is not for every student: there is a penalty-free four week drop period for every course. Parents are very involved in the enrollment process and receive progress reports and other communications from teachers.

The program employs a base group of teachers who are trained in online teaching methodology and receive continued professional development in order to meet program standards (currently, iNACOL's online teacher quality standards). Teachers make themselves available to students through a variety of media.

Courses are entirely asynchronous, meaning that students are not required to be logged in at any specific time. There are no late work penalties. Students simply have to have completed all course content and assignments at the end of the course.

Student enrollment has been steadily growing since program inception and is expected to reach 2500 for the 2018 school year. Ms. Ahrens-Mininberg acknowledged some demographic trends that might need correcting in the future. For example, Hispanic student make up roughly 17% of the school division's population but only represent 9.5% of the virtual program's enrolled student population. Student outcomes on Standards of Learning assessments are slightly better than those of the high schools in the division as a whole.

Other challenges facing the program include (i) building strong relationships with school counselors at Loudoun's high schools so that all students are encouraged to try out the program and don't predetermine themselves to be a poor fit for virtual education and (ii) managing the growth of the program with limited staff (currently 2) and funds. Plans for expansion and improvement include providing courses in certain identified high-needs areas such as American Sign Language.

4. York County Virtual Learning program.

Coordinator of Online Learning and Virtual High School Principal Reginald Fox and Online Learning Specialist Kristin Wood provided an overview of the York County Virtual Learning Program. The program, now in its fourteenth year, employs 12 teachers who offer over 72 virtual high school courses in three ways (to students outside of the school division as an approved multidivision online provider (MOP), through Virtual Virginia, and to students within the school division as York Virtual High School). Mr. Fox and Ms. Wood primarily focused on York Virtual High School in their presentation, but they did note that as a MOP, their enrollment has fluctuated over the years. The high water mark was 32 students in 2007.

While York Virtual High School is similar to Virtual Loudoun in many ways (same Moodle Learning Management System; strong commitment to teacher preparation, professional development, and support; high degree of teacher-student interaction; high student achievement; and growing enrollment, especially in the summer program), there are some key differences in the programs, namely that York has developed all of its own course content (some of which is blended) and delivers its content in both a synchronous and asynchronous fashion. Another distinctive of the York program is that its leaders have invested heavily in relationships and partnerships with public libraries to ensure that any student who wants to enroll and take virtual courses has adequate access to the requisite equipment and connectivity.

Mr. Fox and Ms. Wood reported that like Loudoun, York does not currently have the budgetary or staff capacity to permit the unlimited growth of the virtual program and demand may one day outstrip supply.

5. Using online learning and educational technology to advance personalized, competency-based learning.

Maria Worthen, Vice President for Federal and State Policy at the International Association for K-12 Online Learning (iNACOL), zoomed out the lens of the subcommittee's current focus on specific programs and encouraged the subcommittee to think critically about how virtual and blended learning fit into the broader concept of student-centered learning. Student-centered learning is personalized and competency-based (focused on mastery rather than seat time), can take place anywhere and at any time, and promotes student agency and ownership over their learning experience. The subcommittee will take these broader concepts into consideration in its deliberations on how virtual learning fits into the overall learning experience and the Profile of a Graduate.

6. K12, Inc. national course offerings and CTE offerings.

Suzanne Sloane, Head of School at the Virginia Virtual Academy introduced two of her colleagues to provide the subcommittee with information about K12 Inc.'s national presence and its focus on virtual career and technical education. First, Dr. Perry Daniel, Deputy Regional Vice President, provided the subcommittee with facts and figures about K12's programs from a national perspective (programs offered in 33 states and the District of Columbia that include over

70 schools offering over 1 million courses taught by over 7,000 teachers to over 100,000 students). Next, Mr. Patrick Kenney, Director of College and Career Programs, provided information about K12's Destinations Career Academies (currently in 7 states, but expanding), comprehensive virtual career academy high schools that encourage students to engage in meaningful career exploration in a variety of ways. Finally, Dr. Daniel provided the subcommittee with a snapshot of one such Destinations Career Academy, the Georgia Cyber Academy, a virtual high school at which students have achieved success based on a variety of metrics such as dual enrollment rates, graduation rates, college acceptance, and scholarship awards.