



Illinois State Board of Education

James T. Meeks, Chairman
Tony Smith, Ph.D., State Superintendent

Illinois Review Committee on Virtual Education

Meeting Summary

Tuesday, January 12, 2016

1:00 p.m.–3:30 p.m.

Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE), V-TEL Conference Rooms, Chicago and Springfield, Illinois

Attendees

Task Force Members

Bryce Cann

Tim Dohrer

Ken Dunkin

Cindy Hamblin

Jessica Handy (Chair)

Kimberly Lightford

Scott Martensen

Joanne Osmond

Dr. Nicholas Polyak

Monique Redeaux Smith

Mathew Rodriguez

Chaya Rubenstein

Kate Shutter

Sarah Slaughter

ISBE Staff

Jason Helfer

Brian Houser

Sarah Ogeto

Jamey Baiter

Midwest Comprehensive Center (MWCC) Staff

Nicol Christie

Don Doggett

Jeremy Rasmussen

Rachel Trimble

Presenters

Dale Frost

Jay Heap

David Lefkowitz

Joe Sosnowski

Meeting Objectives

- To understand the concept of virtual online education (in Illinois and other jurisdictions).
- To understand course-access programs, including the ability of students to enroll in online coursework and access technology to complete courses.
- To establish norms and processes for working together, making decisions, and reaching consensus.

Opening

Our Charge

Ms. Jessica Handy, chairman, called the meeting to order at 1:10 p.m. Fourteen members were in attendance and a quorum was present.

Ms. Handy stated that the task force's charge is to review virtual education, school choice, and virtual course access programs and the ability to enroll in them. She also said that the task force will be discussing best practices and potential hurdles that will be reported to the Illinois General Assembly. She then asked task force members to review and approve the minutes from the last meeting on November 19, 2015.

The motion to approve the meeting minutes was approved by Senator Lightford and seconded by Cindy Hamblin.

House Bill 3307

(Presentation by Representative Sosnowski and Mr. Dabrowski)

Representative Sosnowski talked about the mechanics of House Bill 3307. In summary, this bill would create a separate Illinois virtual school for K–12 as a supplement or complement to a district and provide greater access to coursework that might not be available to more rural districts. Fundamentally, the idea was to address needs of quality, access, and affordability as well as equitable access. Also, it allows for more professional development to occur on a more comprehensive statewide basis. Essentially, this bill would call for another organization that would have a board of trustees responsible for oversight, curriculum, finances, and so on. In essence, the virtual school would be funded through ISBE, with most of it covered by charging fees to homeschool families and the resident school district. All coursework would be produced by teachers and the process by which virtual schools offer support to local districts would be outlined. The most important objective of the virtual school is to create an organization that could thrive independently and supplement districts with a lack of financial resources. Also, it would be a degree-granting institution; students could graduate from the virtual school with a high school degree.

Mr. Dabrowski then discussed the purpose and reasoning behind House Bill 3307.

Mr. Dabrowski has done a lot of research on achievement gaps and has discovered that students are two to four years behind academically in Illinois. He sees virtual schooling as a critical component to help close the achievement gap. It would be impossible under conventional teaching practices to get all students caught up. Virtual education could be the tool that helps close that gap. Virtual education also might prove useful in terms of college and career readiness. The challenge is that quite a few districts heavily rely on state government money, which will make funding tough. Half of the school districts would have to get 40 percent or more in support from state and federal sources, not only to enhance access but also to bring down the cost. Georgia Tech was one of the first institutions of higher education to offer a virtual, online master's degree in computer programming, completely online and at a quarter of the cost of attending a brick-and-mortar institution. At some point we are going to have to figure out how to make Illinois one of the innovators in virtual education.

Questions

Q: What are the differences between your proposal and the existing virtual school that Cindy Hamblin is a part of? It seems that your proposal would have an independent board of trustees whereas where the virtual school that Cindy is a part of is run by ISBE, correct?

Ms. Hamblin: We have a contract with the state.

Q: It also seems that this would be a degree-granting institution whereas the one that Cindy is a part of is purely supplemental, correct?

Rep. Sosnowski: Yes.

Q: Are those the only key differences?

Ms. Hamblin: Currently, schools have the ability to deny being a part of our virtual school; this bill would safeguard access and the school would not be able to vote yes or no.

Rep. Sosnowski: As long as the courses fulfill state requirements, a school could not object.

Ms. Hamblin: The funding mechanism is different too. With our program currently, the school can pay for it or pass it off to parents. In the virtual school that Representative Sosnowski is proposing, there would be a more structured funding mechanism coming from the school.

Senate Bill 1679

(Presentation by Senator Lightford and Mr. Dwyer)

Senator Lightford provided a background of Bill 1679. The purpose of the bill is to allow students and districts that have limited course options greater access to a broader variety of courses. It's modeled after a bill in Louisiana. There is a funding piece that is being requested at this point. The bill would allow students and charter schools to enroll in online course by a provider authorized through ISBE. The state board would authorize the course provider, create criteria, and maintain public catalogs of courses that would be available for students to access. The cost of these courses would be negotiated by the provider and state board, which transfers

payment to the provider on behalf of the responsible school district. Providers would receive half of the cost of tuition upon a student enrolling in the program and the second half of tuition upon the student's successful completion of the course. That idea was put forth to a committee, and a significant amount of discussion followed. For instance, at one of the committee meetings, it was suggested that the providers should be required to have certified teachers teach the online courses. At another meeting, the committee wanted clarity on a number of items. These items include the following: only want high school students to participate, required transportation should be provided by the course provider for students who are eligible for free and reduced-price lunch, and an appeal must be made to local school board when a student is denied enrollment in a course.

Mr. Dwyer then added to Senator Lightford's talking points. He said the idea is to give students access to courses via the marketplace. It isn't only geared toward online education. One of the big components is career and technical education (CTE). In terms of going through the committee, the amendment about teacher certification was offered. There was some pushback on that element, especially considering CTE teachers. It seems like a burden to make them get a license. The program could start with juniors and seniors. In the first year, districts could choose whether to participate; then, after a year, it would go statewide and districts could not opt out at that point. Students could take up to two classes. They could take a third class if they felt it made sense for them or if they paid out of pocket. Private school and homeschooled students also could have access to this marketplace, but they would have to pay out of pocket. One of the things that is unsettling about the bill is its performance funding component. Fifty percent of the money is received upfront; the other half is received for meeting certain benchmarks. Another important piece is that providers can be put on probationary status if they fail to deliver instruction effectively and would have to prove to the state board that they have changed their ways. This wasn't included in the bill, but Stanford University produced a study on different funding mechanisms. One was where a provider would have a base price (no matter how well a student does, you pay that price), which would then be followed by a performance-based price. ISBE would look at these bids from potential providers and take into account the highest performance-based price. This concept wasn't included in the bill, but it was something we considered.

Questions

Ms. Handy: It is interesting that you have more than just virtual school in your bill. That's something we might want to explore. The funding mechanism keeps coming up as well; performance based is interesting.

Q: You are high school only, correct?

Mr. Dwyer: Yes.

Dr. Helfer: Basically, the state approves providers and districts would then tell the family if they were going to accept credit from providers, which are from other states. The purpose of approaching it in that way would not be for a student to receive an education through virtual education alone, but rather the virtual school would offer course options that that school district couldn't offer or it could help bypass a scheduling conflict. So, the requirement of having an

Illinois-certified teacher becomes problematic, it's problematic in terms of if you want to increase the scope of access.

Ms. Handy: So, another policy lever to consider are the certification requirements.

Virtual Education in Other States

(Presentation by Mr. Frost)

Mr. Frost, from iNACOL, started by saying that in Florida Virtual School, if it's an approved course, there are assurance mechanisms that districts will have to accept the virtual course for high school credit. Other states do allow districts to decide whether they want to accept credit from virtual courses or not. The mission of iNACOL is to catalyze the transformation of K–12 policy and practice to advance personalized learning and experiences through competency-based blended and online learning. From a school district standpoint, three quarters of school districts use online learning to offer some Advanced Placement (AP) or college-level courses, which means it already is being widely used. Forty percent of school districts say they need online learning due to a lack of certified teachers; this need is often found in rural areas. Sixty percent of districts use online learning for credit recovery and 50 percent of districts use online learning for scheduling conflicts. There are lots of benefits and flexibility for school districts and also for students. Online learning can provide personalized learning experiences for all types of students—English language learners, special educators, and those who need credit recovery—or accelerate students. There is high-quality online learning and there is poor-quality online learning; there need to be high standards upfront that are upheld to a high level of accountability. About half of the states have some form of virtual schools, but enrollment varies dramatically. In Illinois, there is very little use of virtual schooling when taking into account the total population of students in the state. Funding mechanisms for virtual courses in Illinois might explain why the state doesn't have high enrollment in these types of courses. New Hampshire is a state with fairly high utilization of virtual schooling. It has a funding model that is enrollment based and is taken out of district budgets. There are about 800,000 virtual enrollments throughout the nation and about 3.8 million courses throughout the districts, a lot of which is happening locally and organically throughout districts. A vast majority of these 3.8 million courses are in core subjects, about 20 percent are electives, and 2.5 percent are in foreign languages. All students at all grade levels can benefit from virtual schools. But for supplemental courses, the vast majority of students are in high school.

The first funding model is fixed appropriation where there are no fees charged either to the district or the families of the students. There are about 10 states that use this funding model, Alabama included. The fixed appropriation can result in waiting lists. Another model is appropriation with a fee; Illinois is one of those states. Fees could go to the district or to families. A concern from an equity perspective is that this method might exclude low-income families. Florida and Texas have a funding model akin to Senator Lightford's bill where the funding follows the student. New Hampshire has a model based in the state; it doesn't come from district budgets and is a formula-based model that can grow with demand. Arkansas and Vermont have a member-fee arrangement, and Wisconsin is purely based on course fees. With Illinois' fiscal challenges, there is no easy answer here.

The Illinois Virtual School has grown significantly. It had about a 40 percent increase in the last year in enrollments. The state is still at a budget impasse, which makes any funding discussion really challenging. In regard to opportunity gaps, 53 percent of high schools offer calculus in Illinois. So, making courses such as calculus available is a large value added for the state. In terms of quality assurance, iNACOL recommends that there be rigorous academic quality standards. Online programs should follow state certification requirements and there should be performance metrics on the back end. Also, assessments across core subjects and data from surveys should be included. It's also important to allow for equitable access.

Questions

Q: Online courses always mean fewer full-time-equivalents (FTEs). And when I look at the list of the high-user states, a lot of them are “right to work” states. Can you speak to that and how that plays out in terms of playing nice with unions?

Mr. Frost: You need to figure out what works in your political context. That relationship between teacher and student is so fundamental. Virtual education can actually be very collaborative; it can help teachers take some of the brunt work away and allow them to further establish connections with their students. There is some fear from teachers that virtual education will replace their jobs. There is no easy answer here though. Alabama might be a good model to look at for this question.

Q: Do the higher enrollment states have assurances in place where districts have to accept credit from state-approved vendors?

Mr. Frost: Most of the states with much higher enrollment rates prohibit districts from denying students for various reasons. Some of the higher enrollment states take away any disincentives for districts to use.

Louisiana’s Course Access Program

(Presentation by Mr. Lefkowitz)

Mr. Lefkowitz described course access as a state-level program that was pioneered in Louisiana. Students have access to both in- and out-of-state providers and both for-profit and nonprofit providers. It offers both academic and CTE courses. One of the big areas of enrollment in course access has been ACT prep courses. In terms of quality control, if providers are not doing what they are supposed to, it is immediately transparent. Louisiana has been very aggressive in weeding out inadequate course providers. Courses are free to students and are publicly funded. Returning to a question earlier: Why is it that the teachers union shouldn't necessarily be concerned about course access? Students taking online courses they could otherwise take at school is a legitimate concern. However, course access is a supplemental program and offers students opportunities that are not currently available. Course access alleviates access disparities, personalizes learning, allows states to only pay for courses that work, and expands learning opportunities for students. For example, STEM [science, technology, engineering, and mathematics] classes are in short supply, especially in rural areas; course access is a way to address that. Louisiana also has made groundbreaking gains with course access in regard to AP

and dual-enrollment courses. CTE also has been a big part of course access. Course access is not a state virtual school; some differences are: (1) course access providers are academic and CTE, and many of them are out of state; and (2) course access offers all modalities, and virtual schools are typically online only.

Questions

Mr. Frost: Louisiana has grown to 20,000 enrollments very quickly with its course access model. It also really incentivizes this through its accountability system, so districts want to use these courses. If you have really rigorous quality, then sometimes educators feel a little more at ease.

Q: So, Louisiana does not have a virtual school, correct?

Mr. Lefkowitz: We had one that we terminated when we created course access. We couldn't have one of our own course providers be one of the competitors.

Q: Does any state have both?

Mr. Frost: I think Florida might.

Mr. Lefkowitz: I don't know; none that work have in-house competition.

Q: You talked about effective enrollment, but there seem to be very little to no data on successful completion. Do you have those data?

Mr. Frost: Michigan has been doing studies on completion rates. I can send you that report.

Mr. Lefkowitz: Our completion rate is high. The completion rate is well over 80 percent.

Georgia's Virtual Learning Program

(Presentation by Mr. Heap)

Mr. Heap began by stating that there are three core pieces to Georgia's virtual learning program: the virtual school, the credit recovery program, and the professional development program. The program started in 2005. It seemed like a good way to provide course access, such as AP courses, to students. It is available to all students across the state and also services homeschooled students and private schools. The program works with an FTE plus tuition model. For the first year, the program was funded for 1,500 segments. The program then received a midyear adjustment to about 2,000 segments. The program had a successful start. Since then, the program has moved to two different funding models. The original funding model was that the line item of the appropriations came directly to the department and it was on an FTE basis—the dollar figure was based on the number of enrollments. This model was used until 2011. In 2012, there was legislation that removed the FTE component from the public schools and changed it into a tuition model. The appropriation from the budget did not change, but school districts now receive full FTE and just return to the state a portion of the FTE. In 2012, Georgia passed Bill 289 that required school systems to notify parents of their online learning options; it allowed students to select virtual school courses regardless of what was available at the local school (in other words,

schools could not deny students access to virtual courses). The bill also created a clearinghouse, but it was unfunded, so it's a very basic model. The program has been able to bring on the teachers it needs along with good support staff. There are no limits; it is a supplemental program, so it does not grant diplomas, but there are students who take the majority of their classes online for various reasons. In the upcoming legislative session, the department will try to make some changes to the bill. For example, it will make an online course a requirement for students. The reason being college and career readiness, which more and more is requiring the ability to learn online. Right now, regarding the tuition rate mandated by the legislation, the Georgia State Board of Education would like to see that rate established by them instead so that it can be adjusted if needed. The original legislation also states that the virtual school would be a Grade 3–12 online provider. The board would like to change it so they could provide K–5 learning objects. The Georgia State Board of Education also would like to change the law in a way that would allow them to carry over tuition funding in order to grow the next year. The program works with schools to provide options and opportunities. Full-year enrollment is available; the program offers a large course selection and its supports facilitators at each school with a dedicated support staff. Some of the challenges experienced include the following: Some schools lack bandwidth and the department of education is the only group that teaches and provides the learning experience for students, which can create issues working with existing human resources policies. Teacher recruitment and evaluation are ongoing challenges. There is an 82 percent completion rate and an 80 percent pass rate.

Questions

Q: Are school districts allowed to pass tuition costs onto families?

Mr. Heap: If they are taking courses outside of school day, then they can.

Q: Are there any data on virtual online learning and narrowing/closing achievement gaps?

Mr. Heap: I don't have any data directly addressing achievement gaps.

Q: Can we get this information?

Mr. Frost: Iowa just this last year became the first state to adopt quality metrics for online schools to increase transparency so we can see things like online learning and achievement gaps.

Q: What's an object versus a course?

Mr. Heap: Learning objects are videos, teacher presentations, and small chunks of material (i.e., cell division)—all objects put together create a course.

Q: Do we have a source of those objects?

Mr. Frost: Some states provide some of the modules.

Ms. Hamblin: We develop at the course level rather than the object level.

Ms. Hamblin: The problem with achievement gap data is that students can take one course and then they are out. We don't have data over the long term.

Ms. Handy: There are a couple of different buckets of online learning: The kid who wants to take AP courses who doesn't have access; the kid who wants to take Mandarin Chinese. There also is the credit recovery option. To me, those are fundamentally different populations of people that we should be serving.

Ms. Handy then reminded the task force that there are two more meetings, one in February and one in March.

Mr. Doggett then asked the task force to reflect on today's presentations and to add thoughts to the reflection sheet. He said it also is time for the task force to start thinking about how to reach consensus going forward when it's time to start making recommendations.

Open for Public Comment

The meeting was opened for public comment. There were no public comments.

Closing

Senator Lightford motioned to adjourn; Cindy Hamlin seconded. The meeting adjourned at 3:30 p.m.