



Illinois State Board of Education

James T. Meeks, Chairman

Tony Smith, Ph.D., State Superintendent

Illinois Review Committee on Virtual Education

Meeting Summary

Tuesday, February 16, 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

Cindy Hamblin

Jessica Handy (Chair)

Chris Janssen

Joanne Osmond

Nicholas Polyak

Mathew Rodriguez

Chaya Rubenstein

Kate Shutter

Sarah Slaughter

Scott Martensen

Matthew John Rodriguez

ISBE Staff

Brian Houser

Midwest Comprehensive Center (MWCC) Staff

Rachel Trimble

Jeremy Rasmussen

Nicol Christi

Guests

Josh Dwyer, Once Chance Illinois

Dale Frost, International Association for K-12 Online Learning (iNACOL)

Matthew Wicks, International Association for K-12 Online Learning (iNACOL)

Derek Cantu, Dunn Fellow for Illinois Secretary of Education

Meeting Objectives

- To reach a common understanding about the problem we are trying to solve
- To develop consensus on the virtual education policy levers
- To develop a framework for capturing proposed recommendations for the final report
- To propose preliminary recommendations for improving access to virtual education in Illinois

Opening

Ms. Jessica Handy, chairman, called the meeting to order at 1:00 p.m. Thirteen members were in attendance and a quorum was present.

Mr. Dohrer motioned to approve January 12, 2016 meeting minutes. Ms. Shutter seconded the motion.

Our Charge

Ms. Handy stated that the taskforce's charge today was to enter the discussion of what virtual education should look like in Illinois. She suggested that the task force first figure out the scope of the problem.

Discussion Topic 1

Supplemental Online Learning Versus Fulltime Online Learning

Mr. Frost said there are many problems in education that can be addressed with high-quality online learning. However, the taskforce will first need to determine exactly what the taskforce's charge is. Nationwide students are more likely to use online learning as a supplement to their brick and mortar school rather than enrolling in a full-study online school. Full-time online learning is important for many students, but a lot of the growth and demand is centered on supplemental online learning, about 10 times as many students. If Illinois wants to go down the full-time route, schools have to provide all the wraparound services. iNACOL recommends six metric categories for full-time online learning and two metric categories for supplemental online learning. It may be simpler to focus on the problems supplemental online learning solves, which is eliminating opportunity gaps for students who cannot take certain courses for scheduling reasons or availability.

Ms. Handy said it seems like supplemental is where the demand is. Supplemental is also what we have currently with the virtual school. Does the taskforce see the need for a virtual option that grants degrees and is that within the taskforce's scope?

Ms. Hamblin said she wonders whether the full-time, degree-granting option is outside the scope. The purpose seems to be focusing on supplemental and whether we are expanding that.

Mr. Cann said that the most important thing to him is ensuring that students can access the courses they need; it should be more about access than anything else.

Ms. Handy gave an example in which a student was going to a school with the bare minimum five clock hours. He was four credits short of the University of Illinois's admission credit requirements.

Mr. Polyak said that was a problem in a district real close to his, it is a reality some students face.

Ms. Slaughter asked whether there were any data showing how many students face that problem.

Mr. Dwyer said they are working on gathering from districts that lists of their course offerings at the high school level, in order to examine, for example, AP classes, CT courses, foreign language courses, but such lists will not show what schools have reduced their clock hours. ISBE put together a heat map that shows AP participation by district and something similar will be done with this data on course offerings. This will be the first look at course availability statewide.

Ms. Handy asked Ms. Hamblin whether a heat map is available of Illinois and where districts are using the virtual school.

Ms. Hamblin replied yes and that she would be happy to forward that to the group.

Ms. Handy said that it might be interesting to take the virtual school heat map and overlay it with the information Mr. Josh is collecting. She then asked Mr. Josh how many courses will be covered.

Mr. Dwyer replied that a list of 15 courses will be released publicly.

Ms. Slaughter asked when that data will be available.

Mr. Dwyer replied that it would be available in first week of April. But they could have it available for the committee by late March.

Ms. Handy asked Mr. Frost what other things they should be thinking about in terms of scope of the problem.

Mr. Frost said that staying focused on addressing opportunity gaps might be the way to go. It is a very clearly defined problem that be addressed effectively at the state level. He then asked Mr. Josh whether his data would be able to clarify how many districts do not offer enough high school courses so their graduates can get accepted into the public university system?

Mr. Dwyer said that the data will not show that.

Ms. Handy then asked the taskforce about the digital divide and broadband access, which led to the second discussion topic.

Discussion Topic 2

The Digital Divide and Broadband Access

Mr. Dohrer stated that although ensuring districts have broadband access to successfully utilize online courses is critically important, it may be beyond the scope of the taskforce.

Ms. Osmond said that she agrees, but that it is a topic that needs to be addressed. The schools and districts that could benefit from online learning the most are likely the same ones that do not have broadband access built into their infrastructure. It should be addressed somewhere in the taskforce's conclusion.

Ms. Slaughter felt that the taskforce needs to comment on the digital divide to the extent that it is an obstacle to achieving the goals of virtual education. In other words, districts that wish to provide students with access to online learning will need the requisite infrastructure to do so.

Mr. Cann agreed.

Ms. Handy asked Mr. Frost whether he has thoughts on how other states address the digital divide.

Mr. Frost replied that most people on the committee are aware of some examples in which the cart gets put before the horse. There are some one-to-one initiatives in which the instructional environment is not changing and students are not using time differently and that can cause laptops being unused; it is about reinventing how we learn with new technology. And when you look at the broadband issue, there are two things to consider: (1) equity and access at the school level and (2) at the home level. Both are important for the success of online learning. States have done many things, but starting with that sometimes results in building an infrastructure that does not really get used. Highlighting the digital divide is important because it is a problem that does exist. Infrastructure issues need to be addressed as they come up. When expanding virtual education, it will become apparent when those kinds of discussions need to occur.

Ms. Handy asked whether it was possible to quantify the digital divide.

Mr. Houser replied that ISBE did have districts complete a technology readiness survey. But the districts were told those results would be used only to determine the schools' readiness for the testing. That information cannot be shared. A better predictor might be the education superhighway, whose primary purpose is to get fiber to schools that need it and make broadband more affordable to schools. The education superhighway contacted the governors of all other states, and Illinois accepted their offer. The Illinois governor's office is now putting together a small working group to develop a long-term plan by the beginning of April. Eighty-eight percent of districts have some kind of broadband access (this not a concrete number).

Mr. Dohrer said that technology access is important for the taskforce to think about because they do want schools to have broadband access. Another thing to think about is other ways students are getting online: homes, libraries, personal devices, and so on. Individual access is very important as well and how is that data ascertained?

Mr. Frost concurred and said the digital divide at home is a real issue. Some districts and states have taken it upon themselves to address this. Senator King from Maine introduced a bill that provides funding streams for addressing the digital divide at home. Libraries in Maine are allowing students to check out portable hotspots. But many of these initiatives are happening at the district level and do not adequately address the digital divide at home.

Mr. Polyak said that his district received a grant that allowed them to purchase Wi-Fi hotspots to give students access who would not otherwise have it at home. This grant provides students up to four years of Internet access.

Ms. Osmond asked what percentage of students use those.

Mr. Polyak replied about a hundred students use it out of a district of about 3,500.

Ms. Handy said she thinks they should mention the digital divide in the taskforce's introduction and asked whether anyone wanted to provide a recommendation for the state of technology in Illinois.

Ms. Slaughter responded that she was envisioning that there could be a statement embedded in the introduction, but it could say that the taskforce is aware that some districts do not have this access and therefore, despite the availability, it is an issue beyond the taskforce's scope to solve and that this might be better served by gathering more data and becoming more aware of grants and identifying other potential levers for the future.

Mr. Dohrer said the access issue is the main reason why the taskforce is here, it is about access to curriculum, access to content, and the access to get the curriculum and content is very important. It is linked to what the taskforce is trying to accomplish.

Ms. Handy said the next thing she would like the taskforce to focus on is the decision point document. First thing: Does the taskforce want to make recommendations about having one virtual school or multiple providers?

Discussion Topic 3

One Virtual School Versus Multiple Providers

There seemed to be universal agreement that the taskforce does not favor creating an online virtual school that grants diplomas to students for virtual education in Illinois.

Ms. Handy said if the taskforce decided on a supplemental program and there was a student who was medically fragile and could not attend school in a classroom setting, could that student theoretically get a degree through online courses?

Mr. Frost said that some states are grappling with that issue, but he thought it is certainly possible.

Ms. Hamblin said she believed there is a remote education act that allows students to set up a remote program in these circumstances.

Mr. Dohrer said he thought the supplemental model makes a lot more sense, schools making decisions on the basis of what they know about that student .

Mr. Frost said he totally agrees with that, the school is going to have to take the responsibility for special circumstances.

Ms. Handy then asked the taskforce who should decide whether a student takes a course. Should it be up to the student or the district? Also, the taskforce needs to address funding questions, technology and rural access, what organizations approve programs, the process for authorization and renewal, and mandates.

Mr. Dohrer said he believes the subject of who is teaching the course raises other issues, such as oversight and approval. Those questions will get answered by other points.

Ms. Shutter said a large question to consider is the attendance issue and how that will affect school districts and their funding from states.

Mr. Cann said the question of whether there is going to be one or multiple providers will change the nature of the mandate. Need to answer that first.

Ms. Shutter said multiple providers would lead to multiple options for schools and students alike. She then asked what the taskforce what obstacles would come from multiple providers.

Mr. Cann, a taskforce member, responded that there could still be the issue of access. An example he gave is if a district had access to only one provider but a student in that district needed to take a class offered only by different provider, then that student would not have access to that course—an issue of equity. He then asked what the difference is between what the taskforce is talking about and what IVS already does.

Mr. Frost said some states have done each of these options. A virtual school is a single provider that works with districts that either opt in or all districts have to provide. It could be run by a state education agency or education service provider. Wisconsin has multiple providers. New Hampshire uses a charter school but has a statewide provider for their virtual school. But the question still remains with any virtual school, can any student access it, does the student have to pay for it? A multiple-provider program could be both face-to-face and virtual or just completely virtual. They usually have a statewide entity or another entity on behalf of the state to provide both quality assurance on the front end and an approval process to hold providers accountable. They usually have a set price across the state for a particular course. They usually have a clearinghouse so students know where to go to find classes.

Ms. Handy asked, when Louisiana made their switch from the virtual school to multiple providers, did students receive more access or less?

Mr. Frost said Louisiana was able to grow it, but most course access programs have not grown their programs to the extent that Louisiana has.

Ms. Slaughter said this seems to be about what safeguards are in place when considering one versus multiple providers. If you have those safeguards in place, does it matter whether it is one or multiple providers?

Ms. Handy replied that there is a lot more overhead with multiple providers.

Mr. Dohrer added that oversight would be much easier with one entity.

Mr. Frost said one reason that iNACOL advocates open course access is that, by having multiple providers, you create a competitive atmosphere among providers, who strive to make their classes better than their competitors. But there are more duties at the state level when you have a course access program.

Ms. Handy said it seems as though not all the content of the course is accessed in a virtual manner and asked what the split is.

Mr. Frost responded that the majority of course access programs are purely virtual.

Ms. Handy then asked Ms. Hamblin how many kids are served by Illinois's current virtual school and what the growth trajectory is.

Ms. Hamblin replied that they are well below their capacity, there is lots of room for growth.

Mr. Dohrer said he would like virtual education in Illinois to progress to a point at which a student can take a state-approved virtual course and receive credit from the student's school district for it. And to do that, there is going to have to be trust between the state and the districts. He said he does not see at the moment being able to create the safeguards for multiple providers, but that perhaps it could be done with one entity with really high standards.

Ms. Slaughter said that the taskforce needs to be mindful of the fact that the target population of virtual education in Illinois is to provide students with courses they would otherwise not have access to. The taskforce right now is really focused on the one versus multiple providers and the focus perhaps should be what the standards or bars should be set, regardless of whether it is one or multiple providers, to make sure it is excellent.

Ms. Handy said completion data is not a good metric, although students who take AP courses online might provide better data. But how is quality measured?

Ms. Hamblin replied that there are several standards that measure quality for online teachers. The current virtual school also uses Quality Matters, quality plus, and the like. There are standards to apply.

Mr. Frost said when looking at what outcomes should be measured, iNACOL recommends looking at student proficiency and individualized student growth. Individualized outcomes related to metrics per course. He said that that is really important, especially with multiple providers. Mr. Frost added that he believes one of the key levers should be guaranteed credit, especially in the case of universal access.

Someone asked whether these courses are offered as pass-fail or whether students receive a grade.

Ms. Hamblin said they provide a percentage, and then the local school looks at that percentage and decides whether to issue a grade or issue a pass-fail. She said that showing student outcomes is important, but it can be difficult to because since many students take one course and leave.

Mr. Cann said that looking at quality in pre-post testing is pretty narrow. Looking at how a course is put together might be helpful as well.

Mr. Frost agreed. He said both are important.

Ms. Handy asked whether it is good practice to have pre- and posttests on every course.

Ms. Hamblin said that is her way of determining individual student outcomes. That is the way they have been trying to document it.

Mr. Cann said that in terms of quality, completion rate needs to be considered. If you do not complete the course, there is no valid data to look at. A student might not complete a course for a variety of reasons. Noting those reasons, too, might be valuable.

Mr. Dohrer asked whether the taskforce can take quality assurance measures that already exist and apply those measures to whatever the taskforce decides.

Ms. Handy said that the inputs are meeting learning standards for virtual education, outcomes of pre- and posttests and completion data, and teachers complying with the licensure program. Ms. Handy then asked the taskforce for their thoughts on teacher licensure requirements for virtual courses.

Discussion Topic 4

Teacher Licensure Requirements for Virtual Courses and Other Inputs to Consider

Ms. Handy asked Mr. Frost whether other states require licenses for their virtual teachers.

Mr. Frost said he would have to look at the data. Although he knows many states do require them.

Mr. Dohrer then brought up a situation an instructor for a welding course did not have an Illinois teaching license, and asked whether the state would require him or her to have one.

Ms. Slaughter added there might need to be a narrow list of exceptions.

Mr. Cann said if you are going to create buy-in with schools and districts, there would be a lot more credibility if the taskforce ensures it is an Illinois provider.

Ms. Handy asked the taskforce what they wanted to discuss on the matter of inputs.

Ms. Hamblin said they should add course design standards to the inputs too. The Illinois virtual school uses Quality Matters for course design, it looks at different aspects of the course from testability to course objectives and the like.

Mr. Frost added making sure courses are acceptable and are 508 compliant. He will send out the iNACOL quality standards.

Ms. Handy asked whether, in a course access program, each provider would receive certification on complying with the standards or some kind of accreditation.

Mr. Frost said the application process ensures alignment.

Discussion Topic 5

Should Students Have the Choice to Opt In

Ms. Handy then asked about student access and whether students should be allowed to opt in or whether they are required to enroll through the school district.

Mr. Dohrer first wanted to know whether the taskforce agreed that an online course should not be a requirement for graduation.

There was unanimous agreement on this point.

Someone said determining how the taskforce decides what kind of courses will be available to students plays a major factor.

Ms. Hamblin said there are some conditions for a student receiving credit for an online course. If the course was not available at the student's school, if the course was a good fit according to the guidance counselor, and so on.

Mr. Frost said the language in the bill stated that a district can deny enrollment if the course is not appropriate, does not keep the student on track, or creates too heavy of a course load. The funding stream that was created and the requirements for allowing access was for courses that were not offered at the home school.

Mr. Martensen said it is important that this remains an opportunity and not an alternative. The taskforce should focus on courses that are not offered.

Mr. Rodriguez asked whether the taskforce is making recommendations on who is going to make decisions about accepting children into these virtual courses.

Ms. Handy said right now the district decides, but the question is whether the student should be able to do that.

Mr. Cann asked Ms. Hamblin whether there is currently a common reason for districts denying courses.

Ms. Hamblin replied that she did not have the specifics.

Mr. Frost said these are districts who have decided to work with IDS and asked whether is it a rare thing or fairly common for a district to deny a course.

Ms. Hamblin said the schools that utilize IDS approve the courses before the student even starts the course. If it is something the district does not want the student taking, they deny it upfront. The reasons for a school denying might because they offer it locally, it could be a funding issue, for example.

Ms. Handy asked the taskforce whether they think students should be able to take an online course without their school's consent.

Ms. Shutter said if a student can choose without district input and that student does poorly, then that could reflect poorly on the school. If the school is putting a stamp on it and awarding the diploma, then the school should have a say whether to accept that course.

Superintendent Polyak said his preferred model would be that virtual courses be developed by teachers in the districts, which would help vertical alignment, though that is not possible everywhere.

Ms. Slaughter said there would have to be those quality elements built in and the state board of education will have to have very strong communication, the superintendents would need to hear about those quality guidelines from the state board of education.

Ms. Handy said she is leaning toward having some type of option for students to access online courses even if it is not through their districts. She wondered how much of a problem that would be.

Ms. Slaughter said she could imagine situations in which schools did not offer a particular class, but wondered whether there were other situations.

Ms. Handy said another situation might involve a scheduling conflict, or perhaps a student needs a few more credits to get into a university. There are various reasons for it.

Mr. Martensen said if schools are judged by how they perform, then districts will be judged by criteria they have no control over.

Ms. Shutter added that it would also be putting the educational decision making on people who are not the experts rather than the schools who have the expertise.

Ms. Hamlin said this does not really get to the problem of the opportunity gap and access if it is limited to just other kinds of courses a student has. She then brought up the calculus.

Mr. Dohrer said one difference between what Illinois has right now (in terms of virtual education) and what they could have in the future is there is no ISBE stamp of approval. The reason his districts use to reject these courses is the lack of quality assurance. An ISBE stamp of approval might change things.

Mr. Cann said there is also a problem of students overloading to accelerate. Would have to pay attention to that.

Ms. Handy asked the taskforce whether they wanted to put together a list of reasons for why it would be appropriate for students to opt into a class. Afterward, the taskforce can decide whether they are open to any of those options.

Ms. Slaughter said if a student has the ability to opt in, then the quality assurance better be in place and funding decisions made.

Ms. Hamblin said it would be valuable to hear from school administrators who are accepting credit and using other programs to grant credit and to hear about their experience.

Ms. Handy said it also might be valuable to hear from any superintendents who have denied students.

Mr. Dohrer asked whether they have the statistics on the number of districts that IDS is currently working with as an approved provider.

Ms. Hamblin said she would be happy to share that.

Ms. Handy clarified: by school or school districts?

Ms. Hamblin responded by districts.

Ms. Handy asked the taskforce whether they wanted to throw out other topics.

Mr. Cann said it might be useful to have a synopsis on what the taskforce agreed upon before starting.

Ms. Shutter said funding is a big issue coming up, one we need to get on the table.

A meeting has been added in April. Mr. Houser will conduct a poll and find out what week works best.

Ms. Handy asked whether members of the public wanted to give comment. Mr. Wick said thanks for the opportunity to listen.

Mr. Hansen motioned to adjourn; Mr. Cann seconded. The meeting adjourned at 3:30 p.m.