



Illinois State Board of Education

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

Illinois Review Committee on Virtual Education

Meeting Summary

10:00 a.m.–12:30 p.m.

Monday, March 7, 2016

- Illinois State Board of Education, V-TEL Room (3rd Floor), 100 North First St., Springfield, Illinois
- Illinois State Board of Education, V-TEL Room (14th Floor), 100 West Randolph, Suite 14-300, Chicago, Illinois
- Conference call-in number: 1-888-494-4032; access code: 7236897539

Attendees

Task Force Members

Bryce Cann

Chris Janssen

Nicholas Polyak

Tim Dohrer

Scott Martensen

Chaya Rubenstein

Cindy Hamblin

Joanne Osmond

Kate Shutter

Jessica Handy (Chair)

ISBE Staff

Brian Houser

Dora Welker

Midwest Comprehensive Center (MWCC) Staff

Don Doggett

Jayne Sowers

Corrin Pitluck

Public Attendee

Charissa Armon, eBrigade/Blue Foundation

Derek Cantu, Dunn Fellow for Illinois Secretary of Education

Meeting Objectives

- To reach consensus on the virtual education decision points (policy levers)
- To discuss funding mechanisms for course access
- To propose preliminary recommendations for improving access to virtual education in Illinois.

Welcome, Agenda Overview, and Recap Meeting

Ms. Jessica Handy, chairman, called the meeting to order at 10:00 a.m. Ten members were in attendance and a quorum was present.

Mr. Doggett reviewed the agenda. Ms. Handy reviewed points resulting from the previous meeting.

Approval of February 16, 2016, Meeting Minutes

Mr. Cann noted an error in his statement on page 6, the fifth paragraph. The text should read “IVS,” not “IDS.” Ms. Handy agreed to make the correction.

Motion to approve: Moved by Mr. Dohrer, seconded by Ms. Rubenstein. Approval was unanimous.

Discussion on Funding, Access, and Recommendations

The committee discussion focused on three main topics regarding virtual school recommendations:

- Funding
- Equity
- Quality

Funding

Existing Funding Models

The committee reviewed models used by other states, as presented by Dale Frost from the International Association for K–12 Online Learning (iNACOL) in the previous meeting:

- Eight states have a fixed state appropriation and no fees at the student or school district level: Alabama, Hawaii, Iowa, Mississippi, South Carolina, Utah, Virginia, and West Virginia.
- Ten states, including Illinois, have fixed state appropriations plus a fee charged, usually to the district, which is often passed on to the student.
- Three states have funding based on the number of enrollments and completions (the dollars-follow-students model): Florida, New Hampshire, and Texas.
- Two states have a school district membership fee model: Alaska and Vermont.

- Wisconsin is entirely funded on course fees.

Ms. Hamblin provided details of Illinois Virtual School's (IVS) current costs and funding structure. IVS's costs are between \$325 and \$345 per course. National averages reported by iNACOL are also in the \$300–350 range. IVS charges \$190 to districts and the rest is covered by the appropriation. Districts choose to pay for all, some, or none of the cost, and families pay the remainder. If enrollment grew substantially, IVS would need to increase fees because the appropriation (\$1.2 million) is static. IVS provides accommodations for English learner (EL) students and those with individualized education programs. Costs associated with the accommodations, and with additional costs associated with Advanced Placement courses, are absorbed by IVS.

Who Should Pay for IVS Courses?

The committee discussed the question of how responsibility for IVS course fees should be distributed among the state, districts, and families.

State. Committee members discussed maintaining the current model of a state appropriation to fund a portion of IVS courses. Members noted that the appropriation could be used to increase equity and access through various mechanisms, including a weighted fee structure and fee waivers.

The committee drafted a fee structure for a district's responsibility to fund IVS courses weighted by the district's percentage of students in poverty. If the district has 10 percent of its students in poverty, the state would expect the district (or families) to pay 90 percent of the costs of courses. In a 100-percent-poverty district, all courses would be free to the district and families. The state appropriation would cover remaining costs. The drafted weighting formula is:

$$(1 - x) \times \$325 = \text{district fee}$$

With x representing the percentage of a district's students in poverty, as determined by Department of Human Services (DHS) figures, and \$325 serving as the total cost of providing an online course. For example, a district with a DHS poverty rate of 10 percent, the formula would show:

$$(1 - .10) \times \$325 = \$292.50$$

Thus the formula would suggest charging a district with ten percent of its students in poverty \$292.50 for each IVS course enrollment. Additional local conditions, such as high proportions of ELs or students with disabilities could be incorporated into a weighting formula to meet district needs. Ms. Hamblin noted that reviewing IVS's costs and enrollment using this formula could result in a revised appropriation recommendation.

Committee members suggested that a state appropriation could be used to offset fee waivers for IVS courses, which are granted to low-income students for other school fees, including free and reduced-price lunch and sports fees.

Concerns about state funding. As described earlier, appropriations are static, and growth in IVS enrollments is not addressed by an appropriation. Also, committee members noted that appropriations can be cut, raising concerns about the stability of the funding source.

District. Committee members repeatedly observed the importance of local control in determining how to handle the costs of IVS courses that are not covered by a state appropriation, and Dr. Polyak discounted a “dollars follow students” model within districts. Some committee members said they are not comfortable with mandating that districts pay for any course. Some committee members said that district control over paying IVS fees or passing the costs on to families, without further recommendations, does not protect low-income students from losing equitable access to courses if they cannot afford them.

Family. Committee members repeatedly expressed concern to ensure that low-income students have equitable access to courses. Weighted fee structures and fee waivers, described earlier in connection with state funding through an appropriation, were considered as approaches to ensure that low-income students can access courses. Committee members further noted that families not qualifying for a waiver would be charged if their district passes on the cost. Finally, several committee members said that students should pay for courses they take for their own purposes, beyond typical requirements, regardless of income status.

Funding Mandates

The committee discussed mandates mainly in terms of potentially requiring districts to grant credit for IVS courses, although the discussion occasionally included the question of mandating district responsibility to pay IVS course fees. Points raised about mandates, described in more detail later in the meeting, included discussions about which courses can be considered core courses and which are supplementary. In addition, some committee members said they do not support expecting districts to pay for credit recovery courses. Mr. Hauser noted that parent-paid online credit recovery courses offered by his district were well subscribed.

Additional Funding Considerations

Committee members raised the following additional considerations about the amount that should be paid for courses, and by whom:

- Should funding decisions be influenced by whether the student takes the course as part of school day or after school? IVS data indicate that most online course-taking activity occurs during school hours.
- Should funding decisions be influenced by whether the student takes the course in the school building, with district supervision present?
- Should funding decisions be influenced by whether the course can be considered a core course, such as algebra or precalculus, rather than a supplemental course?
- Should funding decisions be influenced by provider performance? Should student scores on an assessment be used to determine payment to providers, or should bonuses be considered if students excel?

- Relatedly, should funding decisions be influenced by course completion? A member noted that a high level of state responsibility to pay for most or all of a course could result in a low commitment on the part of families and districts, potentially resulting in higher levels of noncompletion. Currently, IVS has a two-week grace period to ensure students start the course and that it is a good fit. After the two weeks, charges are applied. IVS has a 90 percent completion rate. In response to this concern, a minimum fee of \$25 was suggested.

Draft Recommendation Passed Related to Funding

1. No student should be denied access solely because he or she cannot pay for all or a portion of the course.

Moved by Mr. Cann, seconded by Ms. Rubenstein. The motion passed unanimously.

Access and Equity

Committee members stated several times that the purpose of the committee's work is to address issues related to equity of access to coursework through IVS. Two motions, developed partially in the previous meeting, were made in connection with this commitment.

Draft Recommendations Passed Related to Equity of Access

2. Students are not mandated to take at least one virtual class, as some states have done.

Moved by Mr. Dohrer, seconded by Ms. Handy. The motion passed unanimously.

3. The virtual courses are supplemental courses only, not a degree-granting institution.

Moved by Ms. Handy, seconded by Ms. Rubenstein. The motion passed unanimously.

Equity Problem

The committee noted that limits to student access to courses often stem from teacher shortages in areas such as foreign languages, advanced mathematics courses, and Advanced Placement courses in mathematics and science. Ms. Handy noted that IVS courses could offer a cost-effective solution to districts unable to offer such courses. Ms. Hamblin pointed out the unavailability of a course in the district and a conflict in a student's schedule are the two conditions that created the original bill for online course availability.

The equity of access problem was illustrated by a review of points made by Dale Frost during the previous meeting. Ms. Handy reported that he stated that only 53 percent of schools in Illinois offer mathematics up to calculus, and only 78 percent of schools have Algebra II. Committee members said the numbers indicate that access to college-track coursework is inequitably distributed around the state. Ensuring that all students can access any needed college-track coursework, without shifting the financial burden to low-income families, was described by committee members as their main concern.

Course Credit Mandates

As with issues related to funding IVS courses, the committee discussed whether or when it might be appropriate to recommend mandating that districts grant credit to students who complete IVS courses. Points raised regarding mandating credit:

- Some committee members prefer to keep the decision about what is on enrolled students' transcripts as a local decision in all cases.
- Some committee members would consider mandating that districts grant credit for the following limited range of courses when they are not offered by the district and are typically expected by universities for students to be considered for admission:
 - Algebra I
 - Algebra II
 - Geometry
 - Calculus
 - Chemistry
 - Physics
 - Biology
 - Foreign languages when no foreign languages are offered
- Ms. Hamblin noted that IVS has a partner relationship with participating districts so that when they approve a student's enrollment in an IVS course, they also approve granting the credit. Nonmember districts are not approving online coursework and are not granting credit. As described in the earlier discussion on funding, districts can opt in or opt out of offering individual courses, which provides local control over credit decisions. Ms. Hamblin also noted that there are cases of students who take courses that will not receive credit from the district, but they will have a transcript from IVS indicating they completed it. Universities may consider the coursework in admission decisions. In the case of AP courses, students may not need credit from the high school when their test results are sent to colleges.
- Some committee members said that specialized higher mathematics and science courses and a wide variety of foreign languages could be seen as supplemental courses instead of core courses, suggesting that the committee would be less likely to recommend that the state mandate that districts grant credit. Committee members suggested letting districts decide on the availability of such courses.
- Some committee members noted that they would not approve of mandating that credit be granted for credit-recovery programs.
- Ms. Handy noted that the virtual school bill discussed previously may have incorporated a governing board to make determinations on expectations for districts to grant credit for IVS courses.

Concerns about growth in enrollments. The committee agreed that students are usually expected to take courses offered by the school. Use of online courses for reasons such as a

personality conflict between a teacher and student or a student's social conflicts were described by committee members as problematic. Mr. Cann observed that districts are already identifying solutions for issues like these. In addition, committee members raised two concerns about greater access to IVS courses:

- When students take online courses in the building during the day, how is supervision managed? Ms. Hamblin stated that an analysis of student log-in data indicated that most IVS coursework is completed during the school day.
- If districts are required to accept online courses, will there be a negative impact on districts from reductions in section enrollments as a large number of students take online courses? Committee members asked whether the group should consider ways to protect districts from staffing shifts resulting from expanded IVS enrollment.

Quality

Issues related to quality discussed by the committee included district-level trust, quality measures, and tracking growth and completion rates.

Committee members noted that trust among district leadership and families about the quality of courses will increase the likelihood that districts will provide credit for them and that parents will push for credit.

Regarding quality measures, the committee was informed that the College Board has approved IVS's AP courses, implying external vetting has been completed for those online courses. The committee further discussed quality measures present in the field. IVS uses Quality Matters standards in course design to guide alignment to academic standards and accessibility. According to Ms Hamblin, IVS has not engaged the peer review process to receive official recognition for meeting the standards (\$1,000 per course). Also, Advanced Ed is starting to offer accreditation for virtual courses. Committee members noted the need for an entity to oversee IVS course quality, though members wanted to avoid stipulating specifics. Ensuring that student growth and completion rates also are tracked was noted as an outstanding issue. Finally, the committee considered paying course providers bonuses for strong student results, but the suggestion was not discussed.

Draft Recommendations Passed Related to Quality

4. ISBE must oversee the quality of virtual courses and review relevant data in order to ensure rigor and excellence.

Moved by Mr. Dohrer, seconded by Ms. Shutter. The motion passed unanimously.

Public Comment

Ms. Armon, from eBrigade/Blue Foundation, a family foundation dedicated to supporting student access to online courses, asked to confirm that the committee was not requiring online courses. Mr. Dohrer confirmed that requiring online courses was felt by the committee to be outside their guiding principle, in that they are focused on increasing equitable access to courses. Ms. Armon asked whether there is there an assumption that there is adult supervision when

students take a virtual course while at school, and who would be responsible to pay for the supervision. Ms. Handy noted the committee assumed that schools would have an adult supervising the class.

Next Steps

A webinar is scheduled for March 28, 1:00 p.m.–2:00 p.m.

- The committee will review the recommendations and capture additional recommendations.

A meeting of the committee is scheduled for April 7, 1:00 p.m.–3:30 p.m.

- The committee will review draft report.

Ms. Handy moved to adjourn. Ms. Rubenstein seconded. Motion passed at 12:33 p.m.