



Illinois State Board of Education

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

Illinois Review Committee on Virtual Education

Meeting Summary

March 28, 2016, 1:00–2:30 p.m.

- Webinar: <https://attendee.gotowebinar.com/register/33996173110559492>
- Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE), Webinar Room (4th Floor), 100 North First St., Springfield, IL

Meeting Objectives

- To finalize recommendations for improving access and funding mechanisms to change and improve virtual education in Illinois.
- To provide feedback on the introduction section of the committee report.

Task Force Members

Tim Dohrer	Mathew Rodriguez
Cindy Hamblin	Kate Shutter
Chris Janssen	Sara Slaughter
Scott Martensen	Jessica Handy (Chair)
Joanne Osmond	

ISBE Staff

Jamey Baiter	Sarah Hartwick
Brian Houser	Dora Welker

Midwest Comprehensive Center (MWCC) Staff

Nicol Christie	Jeremy Rasmussen
Don Doggett	Rachel Trimble

Public Attendees

Charissa Armon, Blue Foundation
Joshua Dwyer, One Chance Illinois
Pam Witter, Network of Charter Schools

Welcome & Agenda Overview

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

Ms. Handy reviewed the agenda.

Approval of March 7, 2016, Meeting Minutes

Ms. Handy first asked the task force to look through the minutes from the March 7 meeting before approving.

A motion to approve the meeting minutes was made by Ms. Osmond and seconded by Mr. Dohrer.

Ms. Handy then asked the task force to look at the draft recommendations report to review the recommendations.

Recommendation 1

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

Ms. Handy asked if any of the task force members wanted to make a comment regarding Recommendation 1.

(There were no comments.)

Recommendation 2

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

Ms. Handy said at the last task force meeting there was a lot of discussion on how to improve access and make sure courses were available, and that funding was not a barrier for any student. There was a suggested formula that would take the poverty rate into account, where districts would pay the entire fee for students if there was no poverty and would pay 50% of the fee if they had 50% poverty, and so on. Right now, this is not a recommendation itself but an example of a way to make these courses affordable. Another idea discussed by the task force was if students are eligible for free and reduced-price lunch, they also should be eligible for a waiver regarding online courses. There also had been discussion about whether there should be additional fees when comes to English language learners (ELLs), students with individualized education programs, and other students with particular needs.

Ms. Hamblin said that perhaps there should be some minimal fee. Sometimes, students don't always follow through with their online course. A minimal contribution may help with student engagement.

Mr. Martensen said he agrees that there should be some sort of minimal contribution to hold students accountable.

Ms. Osmond said she also agrees with that.

Mr. Janssen agreed as well.

Ms. Handy then asked Ms. Hamblin what her idea of a nominal fee would be.

Ms. Hamblin said she hadn't really thought of what that might be and suggested perhaps \$20–\$25 per course.

Ms. Handy then asked Ms. Armon to talk about the pass rates of Chicago Public Schools students she works with who have taken free online courses.

Ms. Armon said she has been working in schools with very high poverty and that she does not necessarily disagree with the idea of a nominal fee to schools, but that students should not be required pay any fees personally.

Ms. Handy then stated that a nominal fee appears to be something they should add to the recommendations. She then asked if the pay structure should be any different for credit-recovery courses. Another item discussed was completion fees in terms of receiving half upon enrollment and half upon completion. There was agreement that the half-and-half- pay structure was something the task force would like to include in the recommendations.

Ms. Handy then asked the task force to address the question of whether there should be higher fees for ELLs and special-needs students.

Ms. Osmond said her recommendation would be not to have higher fees for these groups. She said there is a lot of support for these groups at the local level. She said she does not feel that is their (the task force's) role to provide additional assistance at a higher fee.

Mr. Janssen said you could get into a legally tough situation if you make fees higher for these populations.

Ms. Handy concluded that the task force seems to agree that fees should not be higher for ELL and special-needs students.

Mr. Martensen said the task force should discuss if there should be differentiation between a student taking a course and credit recovery in terms of the fee being paid.

Ms. Osmond asked if there also should be differentiation between prerequisite courses versus nonelective courses (need versus want).

Ms. Handy said the question on who gets to approve the class is an important one and that there was a balance struck on this topic the last time it was brought up. If a school district does not offer a certain core class, then students would be allowed to take a virtual course with or without the district's permission. Other than that instance, the district would have the final say on whether it would pay for the student to take the class.

Ms. Handy then asked the task force if it should be specified that credit-recovery courses would have a lower cost passed on to families.

Ms. Osmond said she thinks they should leave that up to the districts.

Mr. Janssen suggested that the task force specify when it talks about eligibility for fee waivers; that if a student receives a waiver that cost is then absorbed by the district or some other entity.

Mr. Martensen said the school he works at has over 50% poverty, and students pay 100% of their credit recovery.

Ms. Hamblin asked if the core math and science courses would be covered by the state or determined by districts' ability to pay. She said she thought the math and science core courses would be funded by the state if the district is unable to offer them, which would be a different funding stream than the elective courses.

Ms. Handy replied that it would be a disincentive for a district to bring on a calculus teacher if it could just write off the whole cost to the state and enroll students in virtual classes.

Mr. Dohrer said the last time task force members talked about the math and science core courses, they were not talking about the funding issue as much as they were about schools being required to accept credit for core courses. He said he liked the idea of core courses being thought of differently than other online courses, but that the task force should revisit the fee structure that would reduce the burden for students in poverty. He said he would like this to be as simple as possible. When it comes to the funding issues, he said he could use some guidance on what is going to be a simple way of doing this, a way that will allow students to afford the course.

Ms. Handy asked that if the proposed funding structure that Mr. Polyak (not present) proposed is sufficient to achieve this.

Mr. Dohrer replied that he does like Mr. Polyak's suggestion. He said it's a nice way of at least offering some kind of discounting of rates to students or districts that have a legitimate poverty situation.

Ms. Handy asked how the task force felt about districts not being the ultimate gatekeeper in terms of core classes. If the school district doesn't offer a core class in a certain subject, then students should be able to take that class virtually, with or without the school's permission, and receive credit for it.

Ms. Osmond said she has a difficult time imagining why a district would prohibit a student from taking a core course virtually if it didn't offer that course. She added that the education of the student is the responsibility of the district.

Mr. Dohrer said that there are some districts that do not offer basic courses for college and career readiness and that there are particular courses that Illinois has identified as being important to that goal. If a school district does not offer one of these courses and students were to take that class through the Illinois Virtual School (IVS), they should be guaranteed that that course will be placed on their transcript.

Ms. Handy shared part of the recommendations report (draft) with the task force stating that only 78% of schools offer Algebra II and only 53% of high schools offer calculus. If a student is in the 22% of schools that do not offer Algebra II, how is it fair for that student not to have access to that course at all?

Ms. Osmond reiterated that she does not conceive of a situation where a school would deny a core course if it does not offer it.

Ms. Handy looked at the language in the recommendation stating that students taking a virtual course must have approval from their home district, except for home districts that do not offer specific core math, science, or foreign language courses (and possibly coding). She then asked to get a sense of where the task force stands on this.

Ms. Osmond said she believes schools need to be 100% involved virtual online courses for students.

Mr. Martensen stated that if the district doesn't offer the core course, then the student should be able to take the course regardless.

Mr. Janssen said speaking of foreign language in general, if a school offers Spanish for example, could a student still opt into a Latin online course if he or she wanted to.

Ms. Handy said she was thinking "no"; if the school doesn't offer any foreign language, then the student would be able to opt into a foreign language.

Mr. Dohrer said he is a little worried about the oversight and how it will be handled, especially in terms of options that students and schools will have available to appeal.

Ms. Shutter asked: What would be the reason for a district to say "no" to a class it does not offer?

Ms. Osmond added that she does not want schools to be surprised that students are all of a sudden taking these classes.

Ms. Handy said that is a good point and that some kind of notification system would have to be worked out.

Ms. Hamblin asked: If the school does not offer that course, will the state or district be paying for the class?

Ms. Handy said it would follow same funding structure as everything else, If it's a poor district, then there is some nominal fee that the district would pay or pass on to the student. If there is a fee waiver for a student, then the district would have to absorb it.

Ms. Handy then stated that she believes the task force has established a good sense of the things they need to tweak for this recommendation for the April 7 meeting, There is still some concern regarding the language of the foreign language piece, the appeals and oversight process, how students taking a virtual class will communicate with districts, and clarifying how the funding works.

Ms. Handy then asked for thoughts regarding whether it makes sense for the funding structure to apply to these courses, or whether someone wants to advocate for an additional line item in the state budget to cover them.

Mr. Rodriguez asked: What happens if a student takes a virtual class (core class) and the school does not approve it?

Ms. Handy replied that the school would have to recognize and pass the fees on to the student if the student is not eligible for a waiver. If the school district wants to refuse a student from taking a core subject that it did not offer, then it would have to find another way to offer that class.

Ms. Handy then turned to the next recommendations.

Recommendations 3 and 4

The Illinois Virtual School should provide supplemental courses only and should not be a degree-granting institution.

Students should not be mandated to take an online course for graduation.

Ms. Handy asked the task force if there were any questions or concerns on either Recommendation 3 or 4.

Ms. Osmond stated that she likes both of them.

Ms. Handy then moved on to other potential recommendations. One potential recommendation for discussion was if the task force wanted to allow ISBE to authorize multiple providers in addition to IVS.

Other Potential Recommendations

Mr. Polyak responded in an e-mail that he likes the idea of multiple providers and vendors.

Ms. Osmond also liked the idea of multiple providers.

Mr. Rodriguez agreed as well.

Ms. Slaughter agreed, but said they need to phrase it (in the report) in a way that states ISBE is *allowed* to authorize, but not that it *must*. This way ISBE won't feel compelled to authorize providers that do not meet quality standards.

Ms. Osmond wholeheartedly agreed with Ms. Slaughter's statement.

Ms. Hamblin also agreed, but with a caveat that the data points collected around quality be required for all vendors if there is going to be an approved list of providers.

Ms. Handy then moved on to teacher licensure requirements. If a provider is out of state and its teachers are not licensed in Illinois, can it still be a provider?

Ms. Osmond said that's a tough one. She said she would think that anyone teaching in Illinois would have the proper credentials, She wasn't sure if a teaching license from another state would be equivalent to proper credentials.

Ms. Hamblin said this is an issue that needs to be brought up with other departments at ISBE.

Ms. Osmond wondered if the language (of the report) could reflect that all instructors have had some kind of vetting by some department in ISBE.

Mr. Dohrer said that if you want districts to accept the idea of a virtual course, then one of the first things they are going to ask is who will be teaching it and what are their qualifications? He said IVS is easy because they are all Illinois-certified teachers. It's going to be difficult for schools to be interested if their students are going to be taught by nonlicensed teachers.

Mr. Martensen said there must be some kind of licensure, not open door to corporate schools.

Ms. Handy said it seems like there is near-universal agreement that teachers teaching virtual courses should have an Illinois license. She then asked if the task force wanted to shut the door on giving ISBE some flexibility.

Mr. Martensen said he would like to leave the door open a little; if a teacher is from a university, that should be acceptable.

Ms. Osmond said she teaches at a community college and does not have a license. She agrees there should be some flexibility for university and nonprofit providers.

Ms. Handy said she thinks she can draft this into a recommendation that essentially requires teachers to have an Illinois teaching license but also allows some flexibility for university providers.

A task force member asked: Would that allow university instructors from out of state, or only university instructors from Illinois?

Mr. Dohrer said there is a teacher shortage in Illinois. So far, Illinois has not gone down the path to reduce the minimum requirements needed to teach. He said it seems that Illinois feels strongly that there need to be minimal requirements reached before someone can teach in the state, And that should be the same standard the task force holds any other program to.

Ms. Osmond agreed.

Ms. Hamblin returned to the multiple-provider question and asked: How does that work with the funding mechanism?

Ms. Handy said it would follow the same funding mechanism, but that it also might make sense to put a cap on how much providers can charge.

Ms. Handy then brought up the question of explicitly stating in the recommendations that virtual courses should be grades 5–12, or if they should be silent on a grade range.

Ms. Osmond said she likes the 5–12 range and is not sure if elementary levels would need it.

Mr. Dohrer said he thinks they should not mention a grade range at all and that there is no reason to box anything in.

Ms. Handy said the task force talked some about technology access and the digital divide as secondary to the charge of the task force. However, the task force said it would mention the digital divide in the report where it makes sense to. Ms. Handy then asked the task force for their thoughts on this.

Mr. Dohrer said he thinks the section on the digital divide looks good where it is and the issue does not need to be mentioned anywhere else. He said since many of these online courses are taught during the school day at the school, he is a little concerned about the school not being equipped with the proper technology to teach the class. He suggested changing the wording (in the report) recommending that all districts need to meet the minimum requirements for online testing. If they meet those requirements (which involves a certain degree of online access), then they should be able to teach an online course.

Ms. Osmond said that although she agrees with Mr. Dohrer, the task force should still mention in the report that the digital divide is something students experience at home as well.

Ms. Handy replied that she believes that the language in the report can be amended to cover both those avenues (online access at school and at home) of the digital divide. She said they could even pull some stats on the percentage of students who take online courses at school and at home. That might be helpful background information.

Mr. Dohrer said that sounds like a great idea.

Ms. Hamblin also agreed.

Mr. Dohrer asked: What's the plan going forward with IVS, how is there going to be oversight, and how is the contract going to continue? It is a cornerstone of what we have been discussing.

Ms. Handy replied she believes ISBE extended the contract so they could get the recommendations from the task force's report.

Mr. Dohrer asked if they wanted to make a statement about IVS going forward when talking about best practices and virtual education, course choice, and funding mechanisms. Perhaps this is something to think about for April 7.

Ms. Hamblin said ISBE approved an intergovernmental agreement that takes the contract through June 2017.

Ms. Handy then opened up the floor for public comment.

A motion to adjourn was moved by Mr. Dohrer and seconded by Ms. Osmond.