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Time to Move Online Education Forward

By Chris Braunlich

Governor Terry McAuliffe earned high praise last year for allowing 21st century enterprises like Lyft and Uber to operate legally in Virginia.

He now has a similar opportunity in education.

The General Assembly has approved legislation sponsored by Delegate “Dickie” Bell creating a statewide Virtual School to provide full-time online opportunities. The same bill passed last year, but because of a “re-enactment clause,” it needed to be passed again. Governor McAuliffe signed it last year and forward-thinkers should encourage him to sign it again, making Virginia a leader in full-time digital learning.

Virginia currently has a robust set of *supplemental* online opportunities, with more than 40,000 course enrollments in a combination of programs run by the Department of Education, multi-division online providers (MOPS), and individual school systems offering courses to their own students. These are individual courses, allowing students to take subjects they otherwise could not take.

But Virginia lags seriously behind in full-time opportunities, despite the state’s reputation as an epicenter of technology. Nationally, more than 300,000 K-12 students in 31 states are full-time online students, but here in Virginia less than 1,000 children are enrolled. Two reasons for this stand out: A lack of diverse offerings, and an unsustainable funding stream.

The bill creating a statewide virtual school addresses both issues.

Offering multiple opportunities is critical. After the General Assembly created multi-division online providers, enrollment in online education jumped dramatically. Faced with competition, the state increased its level of individual courses and school divisions jumped into the business, too. The same is needed for full-time programs.

Full-time online learning is also hobbled by the current system offering variable funding that can be as little as \$1,400 in state funding for a full-time student. The new virtual school bill recognizes these are “students without borders,” and funds them at the average state-wide level.

Instead of embracing new opportunities driving further improvements, too many are organizing the kind of roadblocks that faced Uber and Lyft. After initial passage of statewide virtual school bill last year, the state put into production a “full-time high school pilot” through its Virtual Virginia program.

But a solely state-run technology enterprise should not be acceptable to educators, taxpayers, or parents. Here’s why –

It's not sustainable. The new state-wide virtual school bill funds students at about \$4,800 each, and local school divisions would no longer receive state funding for that student because they would not be responsible for educating that student. But under the state-run Virtual Virginia program, taxpayers pay twice: Once through state per-pupil funding that continues to flow to local school divisions (even though they no longer educate that student) and again in a state budget line item – a combined average state cost of more than \$10,000 per student.

This “double funding” mechanism was used by the first state virtual school in Florida 18 years ago. As a result, Florida’s budget exploded because demand always exceeded funding. Shouldn’t Virginia learn from this example?

Students are dropping out. Although the original pilot called for 100 students, only 90 enrolled. By the second semester, only 68 remained – a drop-out rate three times that of Florida’s Virtual School. One reason may be a bifurcated system of accountability: Courses are taught by the state, but other functions (i.e., student guidance) are provided by the local school system. Creating multiple layers responsible to multiple systems is a less than optimal system of accountability.

Not everyone gets an opportunity. The state-operated program only offers courses in grades 9-12. The new state-wide virtual school would offer courses starting in elementary school. The state-operated program doesn’t provide equipment and access to economically disadvantaged students. Providers in the new state-wide virtual school would. Parents in the new state-wide virtual school would choose from a variety of approved providers; the state-operated Virtual Virginia program offers only one.

And under the state-operated pilot, attendance is controlled. Students only attend full-time courses if their school division approves; 97 of Virginia’s 133 school divisions just said “no.”

Worse, it incentivizes schools to cherry-pick which students participate. The state-wide virtual school is open-enrollment: parents decide. This is vital for many families (military, some special needs students, bullied children). In fact, a majority of families enrolled in similar schools around the country are economically disadvantaged.

Some argue that Virginia should analyze the state-operated pilot to determine online education’s effectiveness before moving forward. But the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission recommended doing so using the state pilot *and* the new state-wide school. Certainly, an objective analysis demands more than 68 students and more than one system.

The McAuliffe Administration is vested heavily in “redesigning high school.” But redesigning education includes redesigning its delivery system, and a 21st century educational enterprise must offer diverse selections to a generation accustomed to quality choices.

Signing the state-wide virtual school bill would help get Virginia back into the lead.