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Will the Virginia General Assembly Kill Online Learning?

By Chris Braunlich

One of the hottest topics in education today is the growth of online learning or virtual schools. Today there are more than a million enrollments in K-12 online courses nationwide ... and more than 200,000 of these are full-time students in full-time online schools.

The ability to learn is no longer limited to classes held in a bricks and mortar building. And Virginia, home to some of the world's premiere technology companies, ought to be a hotbed of this 21st Century learning, right?

Not if Virginia's General Assembly gets its way.

While the Old Dominion overwhelmingly approved a Virtual School law last year, a Senate budget amendment will likely result in shutting down the state's only full-time virtual school ... and prevent opening any future ones.

To understand why, let's dig a bit into online learning.

For some years, the state Department of Education has operated Virtual Virginia (VVA), offering students the opportunity to take online courses typically not offered in their own local high school -- ranging from Advanced Placement Art History to World Mythology.

But enrollment in Virtual Virginia is strictly limited. Fees are imposed, registration is limited to 15 students per course per school, and demand exceeds funding, with a waiting list.

That's one reason Governor Bob McDonnell pushed for legislation authorizing full-time multi-division online learning programs.

These schools serve students across multiple school districts or throughout an entire state. They not only instruct middle and high school students, but also elementary-age students. Enrollments range from a few hundred to several thousand full-time students . Because these are recognized full-time schools, they are accountable for student achievement in state assessments in the same way as other public schools.

Approval of McDonnell's legislation last year meant Virginia joined 27 other states and the District of Columbia in providing for online schools.

One Virginia county wasted no time. Carroll County, which was already operating an online program, quadrupled its enrollment, taking 400 students (from 70 school divisions) into its Virginia Virtual Academy.

But funding proved problematic. While online learning is a lot less expensive, costing on average about 65 percent of traditional bricks and mortar education, it isn't "learning on the cheap." States that successfully fund their virtual programs typically spend about \$6,000 to \$7,500 per child. Where was the money to come from?

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When the bill passed last year, the General Assembly settled on simply counting each enrollee as a student in the school division he or she was enrolled in rather than where he or she lived. That meant the local school division with virtual classes would receive additional state funding for students enrolled in virtual school but living in a different part of the state. Because of the way Virginia funds our schools, Carroll County receives more than \$5,000 per student enrolled in their schools, but Arlington, would receive less than \$2,000 per student enrolled in a Virtual classroom in that county

And that meant an Arlington child attending the Carroll County online school was now costing the state around \$3,000 more to educate. Which is why the General Assembly slammed on the brakes.

The Senate provision caps the one Virginia online school at 350 students. And next year, it changes the formula so that virtual schools receive the state share of funding in a student's residential school division. The effect is to force virtual schools to turn away students from areas receiving low state funding inadequate for entirely funding education.

The amendment sets up horrible inequities. Students from places like Bath or Goochland or Lancaster Counties will be effectively blocked from online education in Virginia. Rural students will have fewer options. Wealthy areas like Fairfax might organize full-time online programs for their own students, but counties with fewer resources will be out in the cold.

An entire generation now takes for granted the idea that information and learning should be at their fingertips wherever they are and whenever they want. Now, for some of them, a 21st Century education will look a lot like a 19th Century education.

How do 27 other states do it? In some, the state funding share is simply high enough to fund virtual schools by itself. In others, the schools are funded not only with the "state share" of education funding but also by tapping into the "local share."

For example, in Pennsylvania and Wisconsin, online students enrolled in a different district are financed through payments required from their home district. In Georgia, the state withholds an additional percentage of the residential district's state aid to balance out the payments per student.

That concept goes in a direction Virginia has never gone. But the time is now to study how virtual schools can best be funded in Virginia, so that our students aren't left in an educational horse and buggy age.

The Joint Subcommittee on Elementary and Secondary Education Funding is expected to do just that. But, in the meantime, it would be a pity if one of the Governor's top education initiatives were starved in the cradle. The budget amendment should be vetoed.

If other states can make them succeed, Virginia shouldn't be left behind.

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