MSDE Digital Learning Advisory
Stakeholders Committee Meeting

October 16, 2020
Virtual Meeting

Meeting Minutes

Council Members in Attendance: Dr. Carol A. Williamson (Chairperson), Ms. Donna Baker, Ms. Carol Beck, Mr. Brian Beaubien, Dr. Colleen Eisenbeiser, Mr. Brad Engel, Dr. Julie Evans, Ms. Marquita Friday, Ms. Anna Gannon, Ms. Robin Hopkins, Ms. Yasmine Juhar, Ms. Marsye Kaplan, Mr. Andrew Moore, II, Mr. Scott Nichols, Ms. Rebecca Pensero, Dr. Peggy Pugh, Ms. Nina Riggs, Ms. Kelly Ruby, Ms. Leeann Schubert, Ms. Susan Spinnato, Ms. Tonya Sweat, Mr. John Tompkins, Mr. Jonathan Turner

MSDE Staff in Attendance: Ms. Val Emrich, Mr. Shane J. McCormick, Ms. Erin Senior, and Ms. Christy Shockley

Members Not in Attendance: Mr. Brian Dulay, Dr. Joey Jones, Ms. Amy Shepler, Dr. Gina Solano, and Dr. Christine Welch

The meeting was called to order at 9:02 a.m. when a quorum was established.

Welcome & Approval of Minutes

Dr. Carol Williamson, chairperson, welcomed the members and discussed the previous work and activities of the committee and the challenges faced at the State level that have necessitated a change in the committees' mission. Dr. Williamson shared with the members that for the foreseeable future meetings of the committee would be conducted virtually. The members exchanged introductions and shared their professional affiliations.

The members reviewed the meeting agenda and the topics that would be discussed. Dr. Williamson shared with the members that the majority of the meeting would be informational and to provide an overview of the prior work of the committee.

Committee History and Overview

Dr. Williamson provided the members with an overview of the Digital Learning Board of Education Workgroup, which was established by the State Board of Education. The workgroup developed a series of overarching goals and objectives to address digital learning deficiencies within the State of Maryland. One of the recommendations of the workgroup was to convene a

Digital Learning Advisory Stakeholders Committee to consider recommendations for implementation and gather feedback on potential challenges and roadblocks to implementation. The committee met from January 2020 to June 2020, initially at the Maryland Department of Information Technology (DoIT) in Crownsville, MD, and then virtually in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Dr. Williamson reviewed with the members the four objectives of the initial Digital Learning Committee. Each objective would have actions or activities associated with them, ranging from short-term to long-term, in order to accomplish each objective. The objectives were:

1. Increase awareness of digital opportunities in the State;
2. Enhance equitable access to and utilizations of digital learning;
3. Enhance career and college readiness opportunities;
4. Enhance educational delivery options

Dr. Williamson shared with the members that in response to the COVID-19 pandemic the State Board of Education made the decision to repurpose the mission and scope of the Digital Learning Advisory Stakeholders Committee, which included inviting additional stakeholders representing a wide spectrum of backgrounds and perspectives to serve on the committee. The members were informed that the Digital Learning Board of Education Workgroup would be reconvening on October 19, 2020, and that more information on the direction of the committee will be provided at the November 2020 meeting.

Overview of Digital Learning Regulations & Technical Definitions

Ms. Val Emrich, MSDE staff, reviewed with the members' existing legislation and regulations that regulate digital learning offerings, including State laws, as well as regulations found in the Annotated Code of Maryland (COMAR). The legislation and regulations discussed regulate such areas as the development and approval of online courses and services, the accessibility of online courses and services, digital learning, and the purchasing and usage of accessible teaching and learning materials. Ms. Emrich shared with the members that the previous Digital Learning Committee revised technical definitions of commonly used Digital Learning terms to clarify and simplify definitions. The members were provided with technical definitions of synchronous learning, asynchronous learning, blended learning, and the technical components of each term.

Ms. Erin Senior, MSDE staff, provided the members with a definition of online learning, as established through COMAR. Online learning is defined as when eighty percent or more of instruction is conducted online, the teacher and student are separated by distance, time or both, and two-way communication is required between teacher and student. Ms. Senior reviewed the online course review process with the members. The members were informed that credit-bearing online courses must be evaluated for content and accessibility and must be on the State's approved course list in order for students to receive credit.

Ms. Senior provided an overview of online and blended learning data figures with the members. The data provided included the total content areas represented on the approved course list, the total number of courses offered, and the number of local school systems (LSSs) that used online

and blended learning courses in the 2019-2020 school year. A question was asked in the virtual chat feature about whether a LSSs could offer their own online course that was not on the State offering list. Ms. Senior clarified that courses offered by LSSs would still need to go through the State approval process.

Overview of Vendor Virtual Schools

Ms. Senior reviewed with the member's vendor virtual schools, which are when an online education vendor or provider is contracted by a LSS or LSS consortium to provide digital learning. Learning through a vendor virtual school is based on asynchronous learning model that includes minimal instruction on an as needed basis between students and the vendor. Ms. Senior noted that vendor virtual schools must go through the same content and accessibility review process.

Ms. Emrich discussed pathways for virtual schools in the State of Maryland with the members. The State of Maryland provides a pathway for LSSs to request a virtual school, which encompasses an application process and requires approval by the State Superintendent of Schools. Ms. Emrich shared with the members information collected through the MSDE Office of Research from presentations and research on knowledge and insights collected regarding virtual schools. Information collected on virtual schools suggests that funding must be provided to establish and maintain a virtual school, states should learn from best practices provided by other states, stakeholders should be mindful of successful student profiles, and that the process should move along slowly.

RFI Discussion

Dr. Williamson reviewed the technical definition of a request for information (RFI) with the members and discussed recent interest by the State Board in potentially offering virtual learning options in the State of Maryland through a virtual school. An RFI is used primarily as a planning tool when an agency does not have the necessary information to prepare a solicitation document or request for proposal (RFP). RFI's can be used to generally ascertain the level of interest of prospective respondents, parties, or individuals, or to identify applicable standards and best practices. Dr. Williamson informed the members that interest in virtual schools has increased since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and that some parents throughout the State have expressed an interest in the option in lieu of having their students attend in-person public schooling.

Ms. Emrich discussed the purpose of an RFI as it pertained to the Board workgroup and to the committee, noting that the State Board of Education work group expressed an interest in exploring virtual schools as an alternate option for parents in the State. This interest in virtual options, more specifically in learning more about the viability of virtual schools, led to the creation of the RFI. Ms. Christy Shockley, MSDE Assistant State Superintendent for Business Services, discussed with the members further the RFI process conducted by MSDE. Ms. Shockley summarized that the RFI process allows for MSDE to collect as much information as possible to make the most informed decision.

The members were directed to a draft document of potential RFI questions, which could be found in the committee's shared e-community as a Google document. The draft questions are specifically targeted to vendors and LSSs to collect information on the types of services offered through their platforms and what a typical day of instruction would look like for participating students, among other things. The members were encouraged to review the questions and to add suggestions and comments to the document about important questions that should be asked to potential vendors and providers offering services that could be potentially utilized in a virtual school. The members were asked to not make direct changes to the document.

The members provided several recommendations, both modifications to existing questions as well as new questions. In response to a proposed statement asking for vendors to provide a video using screen shots or narratives of student experiences in a typical day, members recommended defining what a typical day is, ensuring a balance between screen time and work time for students, and asking what the length of time would be for synchronous and asynchronous learning. The members recommended that both learning models are grade level appropriate.

The members had additional suggestions and recommendations regarding questions focused on the content and educational outcomes from services provided. The members recommended defining specific educational outcomes, such as student achievement results, and ensuring curriculum alignment with current standards. The members also expressed concerns with how to document and manage student progress and engagement, and ensuring both academic and technical support is available through a digital platform, such as a helpdesk. Dr. Peggy Pugh recommended strongly considering whether data collected at a virtual school is integrated into LSSs existing system databases. Dr. Pugh also recommended ensuring the validity and reliability of assessments.

The members were asked if there were any questions they would like asked that were not included in the document. Ms. Leeann Schubert recommended that the RFI should focus on student classroom roster integration and where data is stored. Ms. Anna Gannon asked whether a question should be asked about ensuring services are provided to students with documented disabilities and 504 education plans. The members agreed that questions ensuring services to special education and special needs students should be included. The members also agreed to include a question that focuses on ensuring academic integrity, and a question on what tutorials are available to assist students in getting oriented to using the virtual platform.

Adjournment

Dr. Williamson shared with the members that the comments and suggestions of the members would be taken to the upcoming Board of Education Workgroup meeting. Dr. Williamson discussed the potential impact of the committee, and commended the members for their participation and contributions. The members were reminded that the next meeting would be held virtually on November 13, 2020.

The meeting was adjourned at 10:32 a.m.