



2006-2007 Executive Summary
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VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Virtual Virginia Executive Summary 2006-2007

Virtual Virginia Today

Virtual Virginia is a program of the Virginia Department of Education serving students in Virginia middle and high schools by providing flexible options for the diverse educational needs of students and their families. The program offers access to online courses for students who might not be able to take advanced placement and world language courses due to the lack of a highly qualified instructor, too few students to offer the course, or scheduling conflicts within the school. The website and portal to learning is located at www.virtualvirginia.org.

The 2006-2007 course catalog listed twenty advanced placement courses, three world languages, and several elective courses. The projected course enrollment, based on prior history, was approximately 1,500 students but demand proved to be very strong. The first class start date arrived with a total of 3,198 students enrolled. Of these, 2,208 were successful completers. These students represented over 115 Virginia school divisions and 250 middle and high schools from rural, urban, and suburban areas. Additionally, students in several other states and countries along with a number of Virginia private schools and home schools participated in the program.

Virtual Virginia Yesterday

Virtual Virginia is an outgrowth of two distance learning programs with origins dating back over twenty years. The Virginia General Assembly recognized the need to provide rural school divisions with high quality advanced and world language courses, giving all students in the commonwealth the same educational opportunities.

After a successful pilot utilizing a converted classroom at Varina High School broadcasting classes to ten schools via Richmond public television, the General Assembly, in 1987, enacted legislation authorizing the “Electronic Classroom Program.” The legislation charged the Department of Education with development and management of the program. In conjunction with Virginia university distance learning programs, satellite delivery was selected as the preferred mode for all courses. The Department selected the name *Virginia Satellite Educational Network* (VSEN) as the brand for the program. VSEN provided access to five advanced placement and six world language courses. In this model, students took class at an appointed time, watched the content through satellite dishes at the local school, and communicated with the instructor through a land line telephone.

In 2003, Governor Mark Warner sponsored the Education for a Lifetime Initiative which encouraged students to become Early College Scholars (ECS). As an ECS, a student maintains a “B” average, pursues an Advanced Studies diploma, and agrees to take 15 hours of transferable college credit in high school. The commonwealth launched VAPS

to specifically address the need for access to these courses in the rural and underserved divisions. By taking advantage of web based technology and asynchronous learning software, schools could alleviate potential scheduling conflicts in bricks and mortar schools and increase the number of advanced placement course offerings.

Realizing the need to combine these two entities, take advantage of newer technologies, and provide a more organized structure, the Department of Education named an E-Learning coordinator in spring 2005. The new E-Learning coordinator was tasked with the oversight of the distance learning program that would come to be known as *Virtual Virginia*.

In the fall of 2005, an advisory committee was formed to help develop a clear understanding of the current state of distance learning programs in the commonwealth. The committee had representatives from Virginia universities, public schools, public television, and educational consortia members. By the summer of 2006, the E-Learning coordinator and the advisory team identified five main goals to accomplish prior to the start of the school year: a) establish the delivery of instruction via the internet, b) unify the method of course delivery, c) identify four core support centers representing the areas of content (i.e., math and science, social studies, world language, English and humanities), d) hire and train highly qualified teachers, and e) to provide support to local school divisions and communicate Virtual Virginia policy to division personnel, parents, and students.

By July of 2006 each identified goal was accomplished and the full faculty convened in Harrisonburg, Virginia on the campus of James Madison University. Throughout the week instructors received training on the selected course management software, communication tools, and hardware. Emphasis was placed on the special skills essential for teaching in an online environment.

This multi-step process required many difficult decisions and the cooperation and assistance of public and private entities. The Virginia Department of Education credits the Henrico County, Fairfax County, Prince William County, and Wise County Public Schools, and WHRO public broadcasting service in Hampton Roads along with the Virtual Virginia administrative team, faculty, and staff for making the 2006-2007 school year successful. The educational community has embraced the concept of distance learning and clearly recognizes the flexibility and access this method of delivery provides for students.

Virtual Virginia Tomorrow

The beginning of the next school year is still a few months away; however, Virtual Virginia administration, faculty, and staff are hard at work. While essentially positive, the results of the end-of-year survey highlighted several issues for improvement. The Virtual Virginia administrative team categorizes these improvements into three key areas:

- Instruction – employing, training and evaluating highly qualified and experienced staff who demonstrate a strong desire and ability to teach children and dedication to meeting the needs of individual students,
- Curriculum - improving the content of courses through a rigorous development process which results in curricula that meet the Virginia Standards of Learning and national standards including advanced placement guidelines,
- Technology – improving the communication structure of registration and enrollment and work with the local schools to improve their ability to take advantage of web based courses.

In the coming school year, Virtual Virginia will offer additional courses; AP Calculus BC, AP French Language, and Honors Chemistry, Honors Physics, and Spanish IV. These additions to the curriculum are representative of requests from schools across the commonwealth. Virtual Virginia now offers twenty-two AP courses. In addition to the AP world languages, there are three world languages (Chinese I-II, Latin I-III, Spanish IV). The need for developmental course work became evident this year; consequently, the advanced placement foundation course offerings of Spanish IV, Honors Chemistry, Honors Physics, and Pre-Calculus/Math Analysis will be available to serve student needs. At the request of Virginia schools, elective courses such as Creative Writing, World Mythology and SAT Prep will be offered. The demand for classes in 2007-2008 is projected to be higher than the available funding will support. Enrollment capacity is between 3,000-3,500; however, early registration numbers indicate demand may significantly exceed current capacity.

An outstanding faculty has been hired for the coming year. Hundreds of applications were reviewed in the selection process. All faculty members are highly qualified and most have advanced degrees with specialized training in their content area. Faculty members participate in a seven week online orientation course prior to beginning instruction followed by a week long face to face training session. A comprehensive professional development program supports the instructors throughout the school year.

In conclusion, Virtual Virginia and distance learning opportunities in the commonwealth are growing. There is an increase in the number of public school divisions as well as private and home school students who want to participate in the program. While the initial focus of this program was to serve the needs of rural schools, it has become a program that can meet the needs of all school divisions. Virtual Virginia continues to serve students by providing access to advanced level courses, solving scheduling conflicts, and building a bridge to higher education during high school.



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