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A Support Framework for Virtual Learners: A Policy Advocacy Document

Donna Davis Nicolodi
National-Louis University

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A Support Framework for Virtual Learners

A Policy Advocacy Document

Donna Davis Nicolodi

Educational Leadership Doctoral Program

Submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements of

Doctor of Education

in the Foster G. McGaw Graduate School

National College of Education

National Louis University

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This document was created as *one* part of the three-part dissertation requirement of the National Louis University (NLU) Educational Leadership (EDL) Doctoral Program. The National Louis Educational Leadership EdD is a professional practice degree program (Shulman et al., 2006).

For the dissertation requirement, doctoral candidates are required to plan, research, and implement three major projects, one each year, within their school or district with a focus on professional practice. The three projects are:

- Program Evaluation
- Change Leadership Plan
- Policy Advocacy Document

For the **Program Evaluation** candidates are required to identify and evaluate a program or practice within their school or district. The “program” can be a current initiative; a grant project; a common practice; or a movement. Focused on utilization, the evaluation can be formative, summative, or developmental (Patton, 2008). The candidate must demonstrate how the evaluation directly relates to student learning.

In the **Change Leadership Plan** candidates develop a plan that considers organizational possibilities for renewal. The plan for organizational change may be at the building or district level. It must be related to an area in need of improvement, and have a clear target in mind. The candidate must be able to identify noticeable and feasible differences that should exist as a result of the change plan (Wagner et al., 2006).

In the **Policy Advocacy Document** candidates develop and advocate for a policy at the local, state or national level using reflective practice and research as a means for supporting and promoting reforms in education. Policy advocacy dissertations use critical theory to address moral and ethical issues of policy formation and administrative decision making (i.e., what ought to be). The purpose is to develop reflective, humane and social critics, moral leaders, and competent professionals, guided by a critical practical rational model (Browder, 1995).

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Abstract

The goals of my three-year doctoral program are imbedded in my professional and personal desire to offer students the best possible options for learning.

Professionally, I endeavored to improve and advance the quality of online education in my school district. Personally, my goal was to learn about recent advancements in the educational modality I have so passionately embraced for the past nine years. My vision was that my research would directly impact the expansion and improvement process of the virtual education program locally and add to the body of research referencing online and blended learning. Professionally, I have witnessed the impact of my research with the addition of a local kindergarten through fifth grade option for district online learners, instructors providing regular live lessons for their students, increased face-to-face tutorials, and the allocation of lab facilitators to each traditional high school. These transformations were initiated based on the research and analysis I conducted and shared with district leadership.

Preface

I have chosen to live, personally and professionally, in Quadrant D of the Rigor/Relevance Framework (Daggett, 2012). The Rigor/Relevance Framework is comprised of four quadrants: A, B, C and D. These quadrants increase vertically along the knowledge taxonomy (more recently referenced as the thinking continuum) and horizontally, increasing the level of application (action continuum). The quadrants key descriptions are acquisitions (A), application (B), assimilation (C), and adaption (D). Key verbs found in Quadrant D include predict, explore, argue, design, prepare, adapt, revise, and teach.

I am a proponent of authentic learning experiences grounded in the realities of the job responsibilities. As a classroom teacher, my instructional style emphasized student's learning. As a school-based administrator, I emphasized teamwork for addressing issues and concerns.

Over the course of my three years of research, data analysis, implementation, review, and revision, I continuously contemplated whether or not Senator Daniel Webb had any idea or thought of the wheels of change he was setting into motion during the 1997 Florida legislative session. His proposal to statutorily create the Florida Virtual School has impacted state, national, international education systems.

The policy advocacy doctoral format is grounded in quadrant D teaching and learning strategies of evaluation, analyzing, and application. Therefore, I am pleased to have the opportunity to complete my educational doctorate degree through the policy advocacy document. Through this experience, I continued to grow professionally and personally. I have seen that to move a district forward, it will take a team of stakeholders on the bus (Collins, 2005) following with fidelity the steps of change (Wagner et al 2006;

Kotter and Cohen, 2004) with a moral and ethical leader (Fullan, 2002) who motivates others (Block, 2009; Reeves, 2009).

Acknowledgements

The pursuit of my doctorate has been a wonderfully enlightening and stressful journey of personal and professional development. Earning my terminal degree, I have reached a lifelong goal. This adventure and my success would not have been possible without some amazing people.

First and foremost, I want to thank my husband, Larry, and children, Victoria and Randall – without the three of you I would not have been triumphant. I appreciate your love, support, and sacrifices – I love you.

Special thanks to my special friends and professors who served as sounding boards, motivators, and editors.

And last but not least, to my WILD Team, thank you for trying anything once and your ever present dedication to “rigid flexibility.”

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SECTION ONE: VISION STATEMENT

At the onset of my doctoral quest, I realized that I wanted to review, evaluate, and study a district with a strong and developing virtual education program. I selected a local school district as the focal point of my dissertation. Through my work with the Assessment, Accountability, and Evaluation (AAE) department, I was given permission to study the local school district. In accordance with the approval granted by the AAE department, the local district will only be identified as the Sunshine County Public School District or SCPSD.

Educational policy addresses critical issues with rules and procedures established at four levels (federal, state, district and local) (Burg, 2014; Schott, 2014). It behooves educational leaders to cultivate a clear understanding of the power and procedures related to the influence of educational policy development (Burg, 2014). In addition, an understanding should be cultivated in the social, democratic, and economic, values embedded in policy endeavors. These influential values reflect perspectives of the community, stakeholders, and policy developers (Burg, 2014).

My policy advocacy proposal was a district level, proactive response to the needs and values of online learners. My policy advocacy moves my idea of allocating a virtual education lab facilitator to every secondary school through the mandate process. I classified my policy advocacy proposal as a distributive policy since it allocated or bestowed an educational support position to the schools (Schott, 2014).

In my Program Evaluation, I studied the emerging concept of virtual education in SCPSD. I then worked on a change plan designed to improve and enhance services of the virtual education program through communication tools

and processes. In this policy advocacy document, I proposed that a full-time virtual education lab facilitator position be developed, bargained (paraprofessionals positions are part of the local bargaining unit under the union's auspice), and allocated to all secondary schools to serve in a dedicated computer lab. My goal was that a full-time virtual education lab facilitator position be allocated to all secondary schools who serves in a dedicated computer lab for the purpose of providing daily navigation and systems operation support to online learners. Looking to the future, my vision was that the virtual education program and school district would have a seamless partnership effectively serving the students.

Virtual education has experienced unprecedented growth and change as a system for teaching and learning. While the birth of virtual education was a state supported and funded kindergarten through twelfth grade educational system initially occurred in Florida, online education is growing across the nation. iNACOL, the International Association for K-12 Online Learning, publishes an annual report delineating the state of online and blended learning in each of the fifty states. iNACOL holds a yearly conference attended by educators from around the world. During my attendance at this year's conference, I was able to exchange ideas with people from Arizona, New York, and Georgia, as well as with an educator from England. Many of the sidebar conversations with fellow participants migrated to discussions about our concerns for the assurance of successful learning experience for students. Attending the iNACOL conference further underpinned and reinforced my understanding of the importance of my proposed policy.

Virtual education has two types of online learning models specified as *pure* and *blended*. In the pure online model, the students and teachers are entirely separated by

time and space in which students learn within a pure virtual learning environment. The students view lessons and complete the assignments online; then the teacher grades the student's work online. Communication occurs via email, telephone, and web conferencing. Blended learning courses are a combination of online and face-to-face work environments. The blended learning's face-to-face elements are provided once or multiple times within a week.

A search of the World Wide Web for "mandated labs for virtual education" did not return any policy or article links with information pertaining to schools or school systems being required to provide labs for students taking virtual courses. Instead, the links and URLs resulting from the search related to information about mandated virtual classes. Links to articles and information about Florida, Virginia, Georgia, Missouri, and Tennessee located sources regarding virtual courses as a graduation requirement imposed by either the state authority or local school district authority as an additional requirement for earning a diploma.

Introduction to the Problem

During the past two years, my doctoral work focused on the world of virtual education in the state of Florida. User demand and legislative mandates had transformed the landscape of virtual education. Parents and students in Florida realized the value of virtual education as a choice providing additional or extra courses and, in some cases, as a replacement for the brick and mortar school. Since the fall of 2009, SCPSD had offered families the option of allowing their students to complete their entire school year through online learning.

The success rate and funding of the virtual education department is dependent upon students successfully completing all virtual courses attempted. The program and instructor success rates calculation is based on the number of successful completions in comparison to the total number of completers. The funding for virtual education in Florida is allocated and disbursed only for successful course completions. The *FTE General Instructions 2013-14* clarifies that virtual course grades recorded as incomplete or in which a grade of F is earned do not earn funding on behalf of the school district (Florida Department of Education, Office of Funding and Financial Reporting and Bureau of Education Information and Accountability Services, 2013).

During the Program Evaluation Project phase of my three-year study, the data revealed that the virtual education program experienced the greatest loss of funding through lack of successful course completions by the students identified in the public school category. The virtual education program provided instructional services of 490 half credits to charter school students; 3850 half credits to home schooled students; 838 half credits for private school students; and 4,046 half credits for public school students between the 2008-2009 school year and the 2011-2012 school year. Only 74.8% of the public school students who completed a virtual course earned a passing grade and were eligible for inclusion in the funding formula. The remaining 25.2% represented the ineligible course completions. The combination of the survey results from my Program Evaluation Project and the Change Leadership Plan demonstrated the need for structured support for public school students taking virtual learning courses. Extrapolating from the free response portions of the surveys in my program evaluation project, I determined the support needed to be in the areas of program facilitation and technology resources.

The technology resources included regular and routine access to computers and internet for the students. The structured facilitation required support and guidance in systems operations, simple program navigation, and use of basic word and data processing products. Personal accountability strategies and motivation were provided by the computer lab facilitators. With professional development, the facilitators would become proficient in the use of the learning management platform for monitoring student progress.

Critical Issues

Public education students from across Florida are required complete online courses to earn a standard high school diploma. While every student should have the opportunity to be a virtual learner, not every student is prepared for the virtual learning format. Since many students are not prepared to be virtual learners, they need a great deal of assistance to be successful. (Nicolodi, 2014)

The critical issue facing the district was the student completion of virtual courses. The purpose of my proposed policy advocacy that a full-time virtual education lab facilitator position be allocated to all secondary schools who serves in a dedicated computer lab was four-fold: enhance learning, maintain or improve graduation rates, meet state mandates, and increase and retain funding. Successful completion of a virtual education course enhances students' learning, helps maintain a positive grade point averages, and provides a means to meet the state graduation requirement. As mentioned previously, virtual education courses earned state funding only if the student successfully completed the course; and for a course to be considered a successful completion, the student must earn a final grade of D or higher. It was essential that the district's virtual

education program produce as many successful completions as possible. Based on the first two years of research, it was evident that successful completions and the funding that follows would occur only through enhanced support of the student's learning online.

Recommended Policy and Envisioned Effect

My policy recommendation was the allocation of a full-time virtual education lab facilitator to all secondary schools to serve in a dedicated computer lab for online learners. The purpose of the policy advocacy project was to support virtual learners enrolled in the district's public secondary schools ensuring student success and retaining full-time equivalency funding. My vision was that the virtual education program and school district would have a seamless partnership effectively serving the students. The purpose of the position of a full-time virtual education lab facilitator was to provide online learners with daily support for successful virtual learning navigation and systems operations.

The expected effect was an increased number of students successfully completing the required online course and the district maintaining its full-time equivalency earnings. Full-time equivalency was the funding allocated to school districts. Maintaining the funding would enable the school district to reinvest money to support virtual student learners.

For my policy advocacy proposal, secondary schools were defined as schools with a 6-8, 6-12, or 9-12 grade configuration. The facilitators were to be educated adults trained in the use and operation of pure online learning structures. The dedicated computer lab and trained facilitator were to serve as the cornerstone of support for virtual learners. The partnership between the district, virtual education team, and brick and

mortar schools was to constitute the foundation for providing quality educational services to students.

SECTION TWO: NEEDS ANALYSIS

My policy advocacy that a full-time virtual education lab facilitator position be allocated to all secondary schools who serves in a dedicated computer lab to effectively meet the needs of our stakeholders. In this section, I examined the five key areas for analysis and reveal how my policy advocacy's proposed change addresses each. It is critical for the district's virtual education program and brick and mortar schools to work together to advance the success of virtual education for the students. Failure to partner resulted in student learning loss, students electing to seek other available virtual options, and the loss of per-student funding.

Moral/Ethical Analysis

George Woods stated that we must consider the welfare of the students first (Wood, 2005, p. 31) and that school practice should be tailor-made to meet the needs of our students (Wood, 2005, p. 192). There was a demonstrated need for my district's students, based on the survey results of my program evaluation project and my change leadership plan. From the program evaluation project free-response section, many of the respondents noted the desire for additional support and instruction in the "how-to" of virtual education. The "how-to" of virtual education referred to and was indicative of the need for navigational training. The major navigational training included login procedures, lesson progression, assignment location, submission processes, and communication tools.

From the change leadership plan, 23% of the students felt that live lesson support helped them earn a better grade in the course. One-hundred percent of the students said teacher feedback helped them improve and resubmit assignments. Parent survey results revealed that 31% agreed or strongly agreed that real time lessons helped students

understand while 55% replied they did not know. Twenty-eight percent of the parents agreed or strongly agreed that students earned a better grade in their classes with real time lesson support while 60% did not know.

As educators it is our duty and responsibility to meet the needs of our students. Once made aware of the need, failure to address the students need is a failure to serve our stakeholders. It would be unethical to neglect the fact that in every community there are students who do not have after school or at home access to the resources required to complete an online course as mandated for graduation in the state of Florida. Florida demands through legislation that school districts provide students with all necessary resources to access and complete virtual learning courses.

My proposed policy of a full-time virtual education lab facilitator position allocated to all secondary schools serving in a dedicated computer lab meets the state expectation and addresses the need for supported access by students, parents, teachers, and school-based personnel. A dedicated computer lab ensured all students have regular access to computers, software and stable Internet service. My policy also required the trained facilitator to provide the students with instruction on navigational processes of the virtual learning systems as well as assistance in operation of word documents and database files.

Education Analysis

For students to participate in online learning, they need to be able to use Word documents, spreadsheets, and processes for attaching these types of files. My proposal required the district to train the computer lab facilitator to teach students how to create and save Word documents and spreadsheets. The facilitator training in navigational

steps for all virtual education programs utilized by the school district was to be conducted by the virtual education department. The navigation included where to locate the lessons, assignments, tutorial links, submission processes, attachment processes, and communication processes. The facilitators provided instruction to students on the practices and procedures for working in the virtual learning system.

The skills used to function in an online course are transferable to college and career training courses. Online learning was utilized by both educational and business organizations as a means of training and educating students and the workforce. Colleges even offered free courses using the online format for shared learning opportunities. These shared learning opportunities are often found in a MOOC (massive open online courses). For example, a visit to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology website revealed courses that were provided in open access to anyone. UC Berkley, Stanford, Yale, and Duke were only a few of the elite universities that offer free access to online courses.

National and international businesses are neither able to meet the expense of sending trainers to all parts of the globe, nor send trainees to faraway training sites. As an affordable alternative, the corporate world takes advantage of web conferencing tools and online training platforms to address corporate needs. Even the school district employed online learning as a delivery method for professional development. The leadership of the school district I was studying had purchased a software based program and married it with the teacher evaluation and assessment system for delivery of 'just in time' teacher professional development and education.

Social Analysis

In his book, *The Global Achievement Gap*, Tony Wagner (2008) wrote about the need to teach the students the seven survival skills necessary for closing the global

achievement gap in order for our students to have the necessary skills to participate effectively in the global marketplace. The survival skills supported by virtual learning were critical thinking and problem solving, effective oral and written communication, and assessing and analyzing information. It is essential that educators and the educational system prepare students for 21st century learning with the seven survival skills. By providing a trained facilitator assigned to a dedicated computer lab, the school district addresses the needs of all groups of students regardless of the students' socioeconomic status, ethnicity, gender, or any other group classification in which they may belong. Through implementation of my policy advocacy proposal, all students have ample opportunity to develop and apply three of the seven survival skills that virtual education addresses.

The trained facilitator assists students to become comfortable with the online learning format. Even though students were independently enrolled in virtual courses, they worked with a certified teacher and interacted with other students through discussion board activities and web conferencing tools. The facilitators, under my policy, partnered with the virtual education teacher to provide students, parents, and school-based personnel an understanding of the expectations of the "how-to" of completing virtual courses as well as the terminology used in reference to online learning processes. Virtual education instructors and trained facilitator were to work together providing students with examples of positive use of texting, multimedia, and interactive social media. The teachers and facilitators were to work together to guide students in appropriate practices and uses of these 21st century communication tools.

Unfortunately in today's society, many of our students were left to learn the appropriate use of multimedia and social networking tools on their own. Students needed to be taught how to use these tools for positive interactions. My proposed policy advocacy included the basic framework for providing students with the necessary guidance in social use of virtual tools to practice and learn those skills required by a changing world of work and the capacity to develop meaningful relationships with others required for both career and personal success.

Political Analysis

The Florida Legislature had addressed system change through enacting parent choice legislation. Parental choice for families and students was supported through the Florida State Statutes (2013) on education in parts three and four, FS 1002.31 – 1002.455. The choice options open to families included home education programs as well as private, charter, virtual, and public. These choices were open to all students in kindergarten through twelfth grade. Parental choice for digital learning education format was addressed in Florida Statutes 1002.37, 1002.321, 1002.415, 1002.45, 1002.451, and 1002.455.

I believed that the district's virtual instructional program could be so effective that it became the program of choice selected by the parents of the school district. Enhancing the district services offered to virtual learners improves students' successes and in turn boosts parental approval. Parental satisfaction would have led to word-of-mouth references and increased selection of district online programs for enrollment. The services provided by the local virtual education team in partnership with the brick and

mortar schools could outshine those offered by other virtual service learning programs from across the state and nation.

The SCPSD's district policies were adopted and enacted November 12, 2013. These policies set forth the rules, regulations, and codes that the district will operate within. Policy 2370.01 states that:

“The District shall provide access to enroll in courses available through one of the District options for virtual instruction, and shall award credit for successful completion. Access to online courses is available to students during and after the normal school day and through summer school enrollment. A public school student will not be required to take an online course outside the regular school day, in addition to the student's courses for a given semester or on school grounds. The purposes of the options above is to make instruction available to District students using online and distance education technology in either a traditional classroom or a nontraditional classroom (i.e., primarily outside of public school buildings). If the student and his/her parents select part-time or full-time instruction delivered by providers approved by the FLDOE, they will have the right to select from the list of approved procedures offered by the District.”

District Policy 2370 states the following:

“The District will provide students with access to courses available through a virtual instruction program provided by the District, the Florida Virtual School and/or other approved providers and award credit for successful completion of such courses. The virtual instruction option shall consist of full-time and part-time virtual instruction for students enrolled in kindergarten through grade 12.”

(SCPSD, 2013)

The district's policies advocated and promised the availability of virtual education and required unimpeded access; however, the policy did not address the "how" of district support for online learners. My proposed virtual education facilitators and dedicated computer lab facilities were mechanisms of support. The policy implementation I was advocating focused on the 'how' of satisfying the need of district virtual and online learners for support resulting in course completions.

Economic Analysis

Based on the data and information collected during the research phase of my program evaluation and change leadership projects, I learned that the brick-and-mortar category of students was the group with the highest number of students in both the withdrawn failing and complete failing categories. The withdrawn failing category was the group of students that remain active in the course after the grace period closed but were dropped (by self-request or teacher determinations) prior to completing 50% of the course. Students in the completed failing category completed over 50% of the course and were dropped or completed all of the required coursework earning a grade of F.

Virtual education only receives state funds for courses that are successfully completed. Successful completion at the secondary level is one in which the final grade earned is equivalent to a D or higher. With the close of the 2013 legislative session, Florida once again changed the face of virtual education. Beginning July 1, 2013, each student could only earn one full-time equivalency of funding. The value of the funding would be apportioned to the providers of the educational service. For example, a student who takes seven courses, five at a traditional school facility, one at a state or community college through dual enrollment, and one through virtual, the funding would be split five-

sevenths allocated to the traditional school facility and one-seventh each to the college and virtual education program.

Under the funding process, it was imperative to the fiscal stability of the virtual education program and the school district that all students taking virtual courses successfully complete the courses. Virtual education moved from a cost avoidance support for the district to an accountable, self-funding status. For the district virtual education program to maintain its viability as a solution for the students, schools, and district, it was crucial to ensure successful completion of all course work. It was especially important that courses taken by students enrolled in brick-and-mortar schools were completed successfully. Failure of successful completion equated to a loss of per-student funding from the district general budget. If students were not successful through the district virtual education program, they would elect to complete their courses with the state virtual program and the funding dollars would flow from the district to the state virtual program.

In the economic times, any loss of funding by the school district was a detrimental impact on the budget and was unfortunately passed on to the stakeholders served through the loss of programs, services, and in some cases schools. Online course completion as a graduation requirement further exacerbated the need for educational institutions and systems to address the learning gaps that occurred amongst socioeconomic groups. Local school districts must develop processes and protocols that ensure that all students were afforded the time and place to complete the online requirements. My policy proposal was planned and designed as a structural solution to address the inequality of student access to the computers and Internet caused by socioeconomic deficiencies.

It was imperative that leadership and the community we served have an understanding of the revenue and cost factors. On June 25, 2013, at the FAMIS (Florida Association of Management Information Systems) Summer Conference, a presenter stated that the projected base student allocation for the 2013-2014 school year (FLDOE, 2013) and the 2013-2014 General Instructions (FLDOE, 2014) reinforced it would be \$3,752.30. If a student at a high school student takes fourteen half credits during the school year, each half credit would be equivalent to 1/14 or approximately \$268.00. If 150 students complete a course, in a semester, that would represent \$40,203.00 for a semester and would be a total \$80,406.00 a year.

For 2014-2015, the base FTE was listed as \$4,031.77. Using this value, the comparative calculations included the following: 1/14 would be \$287.94; 150 completed half credits would be \$43,191.00; and a total of \$86,382.00 for the year. The proposed cost of the paraprofessional virtual education lab facilitator, salary and benefits, is \$23,961. If 300 students did not successfully complete their online courses, there is potential loss of \$80,406.00 and \$86,382.00 for the 2013-2014 and 2014-2015 school years respectively. That would have been the cost for a single school; SCPSD had thirty-nine traditional secondary schools. The potential loss translated to \$3,135,834.00 conservatively for 2013-2014 and \$3,368,898.00 for 2014-2015. All of the secondary schools have computer labs. However, if a school needed additional computers or had elected to create a dedicated lab, laptop computers were available for \$726 each through the district approved vendor using funds allocated for technology and digital learning support. A twenty-five station laptop computer lab would have cost \$18,150.00.

Conclusion

I advocated a policy that meets the needs of the students of SCPSD. The state and district policies require that school systems provide access to enroll in virtual courses, but did not deliver guidance or directions in how to develop successful online or virtual learners. My policy proposal did just that. My policy advocacy proposal provided that a full-time virtual education lab facilitator position be allocated to all secondary schools in a dedicated computer lab to address the ethical and moral responsibilities of the schools and the district. It also addressed, positively, the educational needs of the students.

SECTION THREE: ADVOCATED POLICY STATEMENT

My policy proposal was designed to address the virtual learners who are taking courses as part of their daily secondary school schedule. My policy sought a full-time virtual education lab facilitator position to be allocated to all secondary schools and assigned in a dedicated computer lab. Roblyer and Davis (2008) noted that the adult supporter (teacher, facilitator or parent) was essential to the success of the student. My policy was designed to facilitate a partnership between the brick and mortar secondary schools and the virtual education department. As a team, we meet the needs of the students and other stakeholders through serving and ensuring that students, parents, and school-based personnel understand how to function as virtual or online learners and were able complete all attempted online courses. Virtual education was another educational solution of choice and serves in addressing a variety of special issues based on time, distance learning, scheduling, certified instructors in high need subjects, and equity of offerings.

Goals and Objectives of the Policy

My policy advocacy proposal and goal was that a full-time virtual education lab facilitator position be allocated to all secondary schools serving in a dedicated computer lab. The purpose and effect of my policy was to provide all secondary students electing to take a virtual class with structured support. My aspiration was to guarantee time for computer and Internet access, navigational guidance, document and file creation and manipulation, and the development of personal accountability strategies. To accomplish this aspiration and meet my goal, an adult advocates for the students was imperative. Tucker wrote, “The key to successful supplemental online programs is the support they

give their students” (2007, p. 3). Building the capacity of the facilitators to monitor student progress, communicate with parents and school-based personnel, and provide additional support training for site-based personnel, students, and parents was essential.

An anticipated by-product was an improved district graduation rate. My commitment was to ensuring that none of the 2014-2015 seniors or those in future graduating classes were denied a high school diploma due to not meeting the graduation requirement of successfully completing an online course. The graduating class of 2015 was the first in Florida required complete an entire online course. If the course was designed as one semester only, then a half credit is all that was required. Examples of such courses were physical education or personal fitness. If the course was comprised of two semesters such as biology, the student must complete successfully both semesters of the course to meet the graduation requirement.

Stakeholders Related to the Policy

Webster’s Young People’s Edition defined advocacy as “speaking or writing in support of something” and policy as “a plan, rule, or way of acting” (Editor, 1981). Dictionary.com defined advocacy as the act of pleading for, supporting, or recommending and policy as “a definite course of action adopted for the sake of expediency” and a course of action adopted and pursued by a government, ruler, political party (Dictionary.com, 2014). My policy advocacy spoke for the needs of the stakeholders and provided a plan for supporting student learning and achievement that when adopted by a school or district, propagates. The parents, students, administration (school-based and district), community, and virtual educators were the stakeholders. My policy advocacy proposal addressed the needs of the stakeholders.

All of the stakeholders shared the common expectation and need: that all students successfully complete high school and become productive citizens, paying into the economy of our country. A rationale for my advocacy was that students earn their high school diplomas and graduate from high school, enabling them to move forward developing a set of job skills. In Florida, one of the graduation requirements was to complete an online or blended learning course and earn a passing grade. My policy advocacy proposal provided a framework for supporting student learning and assisting all students to successfully completing any courses necessary for graduation.

The community and district administration expected a fiscal return on their investment of funds in the new personnel positions. The financial return was to be in the form of retaining per-student funding dollars within the district and avoid the cost of an additional year of schooling. Levins and Rouse posted in 2012 that “each new graduate confers a net benefit to taxpayers of about \$127,000 over the graduate’s lifetime.”

A part of my underlying ambition was for students to be productive citizens paying into the economy of our country. Without education, students would not be able to share in the fiscal opportunities that come with increased education and responsibility of citizenship. In 2006, an article on nbcnews.com stated that students not receiving a high school diploma earn sixty-five percent less than those who earned a diploma. Crossley and Media (2012) shared on their blog that people who graduated high school earned an average of \$143 more per week than those who did not graduate. Kokemuller and Media (2012) stated the differences in earnings were roughly \$181 a week. It was evident that a sensible and solid proposal structured for facilitating an increase in graduation addressed the economic needs of all stakeholders.

Rationale for the Validity of the Policy

It was the responsibility of all educators to provide for the education of students. The validity of my proposal rested in the school district and my moral and legal obligations. The standards of ethics for educators and principal leadership competencies all address the expectations that educators put the safety, well-being, and education of students at the forefront. Our moral obligation was supported further by the work of Michael Fullan (2013), Tony Wagner (2008), George Woods (2005), and Diane Ravitch (2010). They all wrote about the urgency of meeting student needs and improving learning. I designed the facilitator position to provide students with training and support of the online learning system and its operational requirements. If students and parents have a clear understanding of the processes and protocols for online learning, the students will have the tools necessary to complete successfully the online course.

Another point supporting the validity for my proposal remained in the legal obligation placed on school districts by state statutes. These legal obligations were delineated for schools, teachers, school board members, and the institution of education as a whole. Violations of the state statutes can incur fines, loss of certifications, and even jail-time. If not for the sake of students learning and success or the economic standing of our country, then for our own personal and professional good standing, we must obey the law. My policy advocacy proposal created a mechanism by which my district and I can fulfil our legal obligations.

SECTION FOUR: POLICY ARGUMENT

The Center for Public Education (2012) addressed virtual education as follows: "Its place is not a matter of debate: it is inevitable. But school leaders and education policymakers do need to consider how to manage the influx of online learning opportunities in order to make sure students get their full benefit and not end up lost in cyberspace." The intention of my policy advocacy document was to impact directly and influence the success of students participating in online learning and ensuring that they were not lost in cyberspace.

My policy advocacy proposal promoted the installation of a virtual education lab facilitator in all secondary schools within the district. The secondary level included schools configured as middle schools (sixth through eighth grade), high schools (ninth through twelfth grade), and middle-senior (sixth through twelfth grade) schools. With the enrollment and enacting of ACCEL (Academically Challenging Curriculum to Enhance Learning) legislation (1002.3102 F.S.), the Florida laws from the 2012 legislation session, and virtual learning opportunity mandates from Florida Statutes (1002.45 and 1003.4282), more students were first time online learners.

Pros

A pro argument for a local support position, the virtual education lab facilitator as proposed by my policy advocacy, was evident in the survey results extracted and reported in my program evaluation project and the change leadership plan. The program evaluation project had two open-ended questions, one of which focused on what students and parents wanted to see changed about their experience with the district virtual education program. The overwhelming theme was a desire for more support with the

processes of virtual learning and guidance for students and parents when they begin their online learning course(s). This theme was extracted from my responses from my open ended questions. In addition, Tucker (2007) and Roybler and Davis (2008), stressed the necessity of the adult advocate in direct support of student learning.

The Change Leadership Plan revealed that 53% of the students agreed and strongly agreed that face-to-face and real-time courses helped them understand the course work better. Twenty-eight percent of the parents agreed and strongly agreed that face-to-face and real-time assistance helped their children understand the course work better, yet 60% of the parents indicated that they did not know if face-to-face and real-time assistance helped their student understand the course work better. Ninety-four percent of the virtual instructor agreed or strongly agreed that virtual courses require students to be technology literate. Fifty percent of the virtual instructors agreed or strongly agreed that students should be required to participate in live lessons.

Another pro argument for my policy advocacy was supported in the research. Researchers have stated that online learning and virtual education is considered an economical solution to class-size, overcrowding, geographic school zones, and inequity of access for students attending small secondary schools versus large secondary schools, and personalization of educational courses and sequences. The most recent issue of *Keeping Pace with K-12 Online & Blended Learning* reported that the number of online and blended learning educational options and implementations are increasing (Watson, Murin, Vashaw, Gemin, & Rapp, 2013). Virginia and Texas were noted as having 102% increases in high school enrollments in their state-supported supplemental options (Watson, et al., 2013). Florida was leading the other states as the only state mandating the

offering of both full-time and supplemental course choices for all students. The annual report also noted a 35% increase in student participation in online learning (Watson, et al., 2013).

Many today's students were accustomed to the systems of software and computer-based gaming and the startup sequences designed to guide and propel players through a specific and intentional series of steps and levels. Virtual education is not an intuitive process for the youthful gamers. Virtual education requires that students read the lessons from start to finish, have an internalized level of independent motivation for completing the reading, submit assignments, and follow the pace charts. At the time that virtual education began to gain momentum, the students who were taking online courses were doing so as an option. Those students chose to take classes in an online format to meet a personalized educational goal or address a course scheduling conflict.

With the Florida mandate that all students earning a standard twenty-four credit diploma must successfully complete an online course, virtual education was experiencing an influx of students that were not natural virtual learners. These were students who did not wish to take online courses, or were not prepared (either academically or personally motivated) to participate in online learning. In some cases, it simply was not the best learning strategy for them. The virtual education lab facilitator was crucial to the success of these students as virtual learners.

Cons

In January 2012, *Education Weekly* reported that per-pupil cost of virtual education was less than that of brick and mortar, on a national level. The article identified five cost factors: labor, content development and acquisition, technology and

infrastructure, school operations, and student support services. These areas were similar to those discussed by iNACOL (Watson, et al. 2012; Watson, et al., 2013). Odden's (2012) writing took these concepts a step forward. He identified two major classifications under which he clustered the cost factors. They were direct and indirect cost. He included hardware, software, technology, and systems maintenance in his list of direct costs. He lists indirect costs as application development, user support, and training.

A con to my policy proposal was the indirect costs. According to Odden (2012), the virtual lab facilitator position was considered an indirect expense to providing virtual education services. The facilitator position was not a required position to offer online learning and virtual classes. It was, however, an essential element in providing a successful learning experience for our students. I classified my proposed virtual lab facilitator position as an indirect cost under the categories of labor and support services.

In 2012, Anne Bryant posted (on her blog) that online courses were beneficial to districts. Online courses allow districts to expand the variety course offerings as well as increase the availability to address disparity of course offerings in smaller schools and districts. Bryant noted that many of the promoters of online learning were the for-profit vendor companies. Evidence of this fact can be seen in the list of sponsors and contributors on the back cover of any of the annual Keeping Pace with K-12 Online and Blended Learning publications. A second con to my proposal was the argument that via this avenue, we were supporting for-profit vendors.

Another area that will draw public and administrative concern, with my program advocacy proposal, was the cost factor. The total cost of virtual and online learning varies based on the components included in the calculation method. In order to understand the

impact of online learning the direct and indirect costs must be considered. The costs that would be incurred to support my policy advocacy proposal would be the funds allocated for the addition of the virtual lab facilitator position to each secondary school. The school district and physical schools had begun the process of amassing the technology and bandwidth required to meet the needs of the students. The brick and mortar schools were investing in providing the appropriate tools and access for the students enrolled in their specific schools.

I calculated the average cost of a virtual education lab facilitator to be \$23,961 including benefits. The position was to be alignment with the paraprofessional category. The virtual education lab facilitator position would not be a certified teacher; the position was intended to be filled with a staff member that was comfortable and capable of using spreadsheets, databases, word documents, and navigating within computer-based programs.

An *Education Weekly* (2012) article noted that the initial cost of investing proper planning, time and support resources is often overlooked when calculating the cost of virtual education services. In 2012, the Center for Public Education stated that education think tanks were focusing on online learning citing the cost and benefits as instructional advantages. The virtual education lab facilitator position adds additional costs to the district as part of the annual staffing plan. However, it was important to consider the alternative, the loss of per student funding for students who do not successfully complete their online courses. Due to the laws set forth by the Florida legislature, virtual education was no longer an option; it was a mandate. Florida's public schools were bound legally to provide access to virtual education for all students.

High schools in the school district had been adding computer labs and laptop stations to meet the access mandate for our students. The school district has rural areas in the far corners where Internet access was at best intermittent and limiting. The additional labs and Internet access points needed for my policy implementation required an investment in the success of our students' futures and the full extent of the expense incurred had yet to be realized. The major argument against my program advocacy proposal was the additional cost of the thirty-nine positions and that of providing access at each secondary school. On the other hand, we must make this investment to effectively meet the law and enhance students' learning.

For each of the students that takes a virtual course and was not successful, there would be a loss of \$287.94 during the 2014-2015 school year. The virtual education facilitator position was a key to supporting the online learning (Staker & Horn, 2012; and Burns & Thongprasert, 2005). If the students were taking the virtual courses through the district's virtual education program, the funds for successful completions would be retained within the district's budget and offset the cost of the lab facilitator positions.

If we, as a school district, did not invest in providing virtual learning opportunities and appropriate accesses for our students, they would turn to outside vendors and charter schools to meet their virtual learning graduation requirement. If our students take online learning courses through charter schools, Florida Virtual School, dual enrollment programs, and other Florida school districts, the per-student funding dollars would have been allocated to these alternative virtual learning programs and options. Using the \$268 per half credit per student funding value, the school district would lose \$134,000 for every 500 half credit completions provided by an external

vendor. If we used the 2014-2015 FTE figure of \$287.94, the financial loss would be \$143,970.00. Additionally, 500 half credits at the high school level was equivalent to a loss of 20 (500/25) class sections or 3.3 (20/6) instructional units. At the middle school level that was equivalent to 23 (500/22) sections or 3.83 instructional units.

Conversely, students who elected to take and successfully complete online courses through the district virtual education department generated State FTE funding for the district. The Fordham Institute (2012) estimated that virtual learning costs were between \$5,100 and \$7,700 dollars and blended learning between \$7,600 and \$10,200 per student. Odden (2012) estimated that the cost per student per course was between \$500 and \$700.

Conclusion

The purpose of my proposed virtual education lab facilitator is to provide students with the necessary structured support and monitoring. The virtual education lab facilitators would teach online students how to navigate through their virtual education courses, submit assignments, redo and resubmit for improved learning and grades, and follow pace charts. The virtual education lab facilitators would work directly with the virtual education course instructors. The facilitator would serve as a liaison between the students and instructors, especially in situations in which the virtual education instructor was a part-time teacher and work during the school day in a traditional school position.

Many of the crucial arguments against my policy advocacy proposal were countered by the moral, ethical, and legal obligations of the school district to meet the educational needs of our students. Our legal obligation was delineated by Florida State Statutes 1002.45, 1002.39, and 1003.428. These statutes prescribed the services and

expectations of virtual opportunities to be provided to the students of Florida. It was the responsibility of our elected School Board to uphold the laws and rules of state as per F.S. 1001.42 (15). Florida State 1001.42 (23) specifically states “VIRTUAL INSTRUCTION.—Provide students with access to courses available through a virtual instruction program option, including the Florida Virtual School and other approved providers, and award credit for successful completion of such courses.”

Fullan (2005), Woods (2005), Wagner (2008) all stated that it was the moral and ethical duty of all educational leaders and, therefore, schools and school systems to meet the educational needs of the students within their schools, district, systems, and states. Educational writers agreed, either directly or indirectly, that failure of the school system to meet its moral and ethical obligations would completely derail school improvements, educational reforms, and all steps toward student achievement. The imperative for improvement and increased student achievement was delineated in the works of Collins (2005), Ravitch (2010), and Payne (1996). These authors have all devoted years of research and writing around the structures, processes, and systems for school reform that improve student learning and achievement.

Virtual education was no longer an option for our local high school students. As a graduation requirement, the obligation to provide access, support, and opportunities for online learning belongs to the school district and the brick and mortar schools of enrollment. The virtual education lab facilitator position my policy advocacy proposes would provide the necessary technical and virtual program guidance to facilitate student success as online learners, meeting our moral, ethical, and legal obligations we have to meet their individual needs.

SECTION FIVE: POLICY IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

My policy advocacy proposal recommended the placement of a virtual education lab facilitator in a dedicated lab at each secondary school within the school district. The intended function of this position was to provide support and navigation services to the virtual education students and their families. With the increased number of students taking virtual education courses, the school district and virtual education department must work together to provide the additional framework of support in response to the students' lack of interest, motivation, and preparedness for online learning.

The first step in the implementation process, starting in December, was to demonstrate and explain the need for the virtual education lab facilitator position with school-based and district leadership. Key reasons for consideration are that the successful completion of a virtual learning course is a graduation requirement, loss of income earning potential for students, and district budgetary implications of unearned funding. Students who did not successfully complete an online learning credit would not earn a high school diploma. For students, who failed to earn a high school diploma, employment and postsecondary educational opportunities became limited, subsequently having a negative impact on their future both academically and financially. District and school-based graduation rates were dependent on the number of students who earn their standard high school diplomas. If an increased number of students failed their online learning classes, thereby not earning their high school diploma, the district-wide and school-based graduation rates plummet.

The need for the virtual education lab facilitator position was based on the number of public school students who did not experience success in their virtual

education course during the 2011-2012 and 2012-2013 school years. During the 2011-2012 school year, of the 1711 public school students in grades sixth through twelve who attempted virtual education classes, 22.7 % were withdrawn within the grace period, 7% were withdrawn without completing the course, 18.2% completed with an F, and 52.1% successfully completed their online learning course through the district virtual education department. Seventy-four and one tenth percent of all students (public, private, home school, and charter) who completed their online course earned a passing grade. For the 2012-2013 school year, of the 2281 public school students in grades six through twelve who attempted virtual education classes and 18.5% were withdrawn within the grace, 5.7 % withdrew without completing the course, 14.9% completed with an F, and 61% successfully completed their online learning course through the district virtual education department. The 2012-2013 school year showed an increase in overall successful completion rate; 80.2% of the students earned a grade of D or better.

It was necessary to have continuous conversations with the community, district leadership, and school-based leadership to make clear the intensified importance of supporting online learners due to the online requirement for graduation and the changes in the Florida educational funding model. My policy proposal provided students without online learning capacity in their homes with the necessary access and support to be successful. Regular access to internet and computers was important for meeting their needs through their daily schedule. It was a moral imperative to provide the best learning option for each student regardless of their at home resources for learning.

The Florida educational funding model now states that each student had a maximum per pupil equivalent value of 1.0. The per-student funding was allocated proportionally to the programs and schools providing the educational and curriculum services to the students. An additional caveat exists regarding online learning courses; in order for the virtual education provider to be allocated per-student, funding dollars the student must successfully complete the online learning course. Successful completion of an online learning course was defined as earning a passing grade of D or higher for the course.

The next step in the implementation plan was to write a job description and determine the cost for the proposed virtual education lab facilitator position. The virtual education lab facilitator position that I proposed required an associate's degree (or equivalent number of college credits) and was funded as a higher tier paraprofessional position. Additionally, the position required strong oral and written communication skills, competency in using spreadsheets and word documents, and an understanding of processes, protocols, and procedures for software and internet based programs. The position, based on the job description and placement on the paraprofessional salary schedule, cost \$23,961 per facilitator including benefits. The proposed policy advocacy added the virtual education lab facilitator position to all secondary schools for thirty-nine positions and a cost of \$934,479.

The district virtual education department consisted of 13 full-time teachers, a guidance counselor, a principal secretary, and a director. The principal's secretary also served as the registrar, terminal operator, front desk secretary, and guidance secretary. Additionally, the virtual education department employed between twelve and seventeen

part-time instructors for course overflow and non-core courses requiring specialized certifications such as music and art. With the addition of the thirty-nine virtual education lab facilitators, the partnerships between the virtual education department and the brick and mortar schools needed to be further enhanced to allow for joint supervision of the virtual education lab facilitators. At this time, the structure of the virtual education department did not allow for a consistent observation and monitoring schedule. For this reason, as part of my policy advocacy, I recommended that the positions be assigned to and hired by the site-based administrative team with the requirement that an experienced member of the virtual education department be included as part of the hiring and selection committee. The purpose was to find the most skilled facilitator best fitting the school and its community, adhering to Collin's (2005) advice to get the right people on the bus to foster achievement of the vision.

In February, when planning for the next school year, the virtual education lab facilitator position was proposed to the staffing plan committee. The staffing plan committee was comprised of district departmental representatives and principals from elementary, middle, and high schools. I then clarified the positions' purposes, requirements for hiring, and the cost of adding one virtual education lab facilitator at each secondary school. Once the staffing committee accepted the proposal, I then submitted the positions for placement in the staffing plan document and submission to the school board for approval as part of the school district's school-based staffing plan.

The submission process occurred in May. Once the school board approved the school-based staffing plan, it was sent to the union for its review. The superintendent then placed it on the agenda for bargaining with the union. The district and union then

negotiated the job description and pay level and after reaching agreement returned it to the school board for final approval. Next, the district added the virtual education lab facilitator position to each secondary school's staffing allocation sheets and opened it for hiring. The virtual education lab facilitator positions were to be under the direct supervision of the school-based principal and the hiring process to include a member of the virtual education departments. It was anticipated that the schools select the virtual education lab facilitators prior to the first week when instructors return.

During the pre-planning week of the new school year, the virtual education department hosted and trained the newly hired virtual education lab facilitators. During the training, the school introduced the trainers and instructed the facilitators in the processes, procedures, and protocols for managing, monitoring, and communicating with students, parents, and teachers within the virtual learning system(s) employed by the virtual education department. The school connected the virtual education lab facilitators with the full-time and part-time virtual education teachers during the initial training sessions. The virtual education trainers provided a review and tour of the courses, pace charts, and important areas that were key components of students' successful completion of the online courses. The district provided the virtual education lab facilitators a copy of the weekly and monthly communication expectations when working with students, parents, and virtual education instructors. The plan called for the virtual education department to be responsible for the schedule of follow-up and just-in-time support refreshers for the virtual education lab facilitators in September, November, February, April, and June.

The virtual education lab facilitators monitored students' progress in their virtual education courses. If students were behind pace or earning a grade of D or F, we required the virtual lab facilitator to inform the parents via email and phone of the students lack of progress on a weekly basis. The virtual education lab facilitators communicated and collaborated with the virtual education course instructors to support student learning. Facilitators also worked to ensure that students and their families understand how to navigate through the course, read the grade books, submit and resubmit assignments, communicate with instructors and facilitators, and monitor their progress. We trained the facilitators to grasp the processes, procedures, and protocols of online learning. Future plans might even use them as tutors..

The virtual lab facilitators' evaluations were based on the number of students from their labs that successfully complete their virtual education courses and the number of weekly and monthly contacts completed. Historically, research has paired the completions of virtual education courses with the content instructor assigned the responsibility of providing instructional support, academic guidance, academic evaluation, and issuing the students grade for the course work. During the first year of implementation, a team composed of representatives from the virtual education department, facilitators, and school-based administrators will develop and administer a student and parent satisfaction survey. The development team will research and review available sample surveys and recommendations from ISTE and iNACOL.

My policy advocacy proposal was to allocate a full-time virtual education lab facilitator position to all secondary schools serving in a dedicated computer lab. The purpose of the proposal was to provide support for online learners, a trained adult

advocate, and improve the district graduation rate. A desired outcome of my policy advocacy proposal was increased student learning and achievement. Block (2009); Childress, Doyle, and Thomas (2009); Kotter and Cohen (2002); Murphy (2010); Odden (2012); Payne (1996); Ravitch (2010); Reeves (2009); Staker and Horn (2010); and Wagner (2008) all have written books and are respected for addressing educational “dos and don’ts,” plans and proposals, possibilities and opportunities for the express and sole purpose of improving student achievement and the educational system.

The main obstacle to implementing my policy advocacy proposal was the possible rejection by any of the key leadership groups: staffing plan committee, union, or school board. Another obstacle was having the staffing plan committee dismiss my proposed because it determined that it would not benefit a sufficient number of schools. In addition, the school board may have elected to reject the proposal, if it had concluded it was not in the best interest of the students or was fiscally unwise. The union may have disagreed with the job description or projected compensation level. These roadblocks could only be prevented or resolved through communication. Another potential obstruction to my proposal might have been our failure to find an appropriately credentialed facilitator.

The most important fact to share with the staffing plan committee and the school board was the impact on the graduation rate and the cost connected with the students not completing successfully the online graduation requirement. If the school district did not serve the students by aiding them in successfully completing their online graduation requirement, students would seek virtual course providers outside the school district. There were a number of vendors and online educational organizations waiting to

capitalize on meeting the needs of our students. The conversation with the union was to focus on the negative impact of failure to serve these students. If our student were not successful, the district would experience a loss of per-student funding and instructional and support personnel positions.

Continuous communication was the crucial process in approval and implementation of my policy advocacy proposal supporting the employment of a virtual education lab facilitator at all secondary schools. The purpose of my policy advocacy dissertation proposal was to provide a structural support system, adult advocate, and an increased number of graduates. Additional benefits of my policy proposal were improvements in student grade point averages and retention of per-student funding dollars within the local district budget.

SECTION SIX: POLICY ASSESSMENT PLAN

The evaluation was a mixed methods design, collecting data in the form of fixed-choice surveys and data analysis (Patton, 2008). The survey results were used to determine steps toward improvement for the following year in the services provided by the lab facilitators. The statistical information was to provide a guiding expectation for increase in student participation in virtual education and continues staffing of the virtual education lab facilitator positions.

We planned the virtual education lab facilitator as an extension of the virtual education department located at each secondary school. The virtual education lab facilitators were responsible for ensuring that students understand the operational expectations of being an online learner. Students taking their first online education class needed support and assistance not only in the content of the course, but also in the processes employed to complete, submit, and resubmit work within the virtual learning platform. Additionally, students needed to be taught self-monitoring practices and strategies.

We planned to evaluation the success of the policy advocacy proposal of the virtual education lab facilitator based on the number of successful completions of the students that were assigned to a lab managed by a facilitator, the numbers of students meeting graduation requirements, and the per student funding earned and retained within the district for local online learners. It was the expectation that our virtual education department would experience an increase in the number of students successfully completing their online learning courses.

Evaluation is the process and means of determining the merits, value, and significance of a program (Patton, 2008). It was imperative that we recognize the facilitator position as having merit and providing a significant level of support to the students of our school district. “Utilization-focused evaluation is inherently participatory and collaborative in actively involving intended user in all aspects of the evaluation” (Patton, 2008, p. 177). The development team planned to include the evaluation elements in a survey of students assigned to the virtual lab facilitator and their parents, the successful completion rate of the students supported by the virtual lab facilitator, and the amount of FTE retained (approximately \$287.94 per half credit for 2014-2015 school year) within the district by students successfully completing virtual education courses offered by the local virtual education program, and supported by the facilitator position.

The leadership of the virtual education department worked with the district finance department and the FTE specialist to track and monitor the per-student funding earned by the local virtual education program, the amount allocated for students working in labs supervised by a virtual education lab facilitator, and the loss of per student funding to outside virtual education programs and online service vendors. The virtual education department worked with the student information department to determine the number of students who met the graduation requirement of successfully completing one online learning course. The virtual education department worked in partnership with the local brick and mortar schools to ensure that students needing their online learning credit for graduation were placed in virtual courses and scheduled into a lab supported by a virtual education lab facilitator. Each semester going forward, the virtual education leadership will present a report on the progress of the students to include the number of

successful half credit completions, anticipated per student funding earned by virtual education students working in a supported lab, and the number of students meeting their online graduation requirement.

The 2014-2015 per-student funding is \$4,031.77. The majority of the SCPSD secondary schools are on a seven or eight period day, equating \$287.94 for a seven period day and \$251.99 for an eight period day. Successful completion of these courses through the supportive efforts of the virtual education facilitator maintain FTE dollars in the local district budget and curtail the potential loss through failed courses. If 300 students do not successfully complete their online courses, there was potential loss of \$86,382.00 for the 2014-2015 school year. A cursory perusal of the SCPSD website for school grade level enrollments reveals that there are now over 300 students on average in the fourteen high schools' freshmen classes. The potential loss would be \$1,209,348 for fourteen high schools and \$3,368,898.00 for the thirty-nine secondary schools.

The plan is that as each semester came to a close, the district would ask students and parents to complete an anonymous virtual education survey focused on the communication and support provided to the students and parents by the virtual education lab facilitators. The virtual education leader would share the results with the site-based administrative team and the virtual education lab facilitator and use the information as a conversation guide to determine areas of strength and needs for improvement in the services being provided. At the conclusion of the first year of implementation, I would evaluate the virtual education lab facilitator positions for cost effectiveness based on the percent of students assigned to the lab facilitators who successfully complete their online learning class. It was anticipated that during the first year of the virtual education lab

facilitator program, the virtual education department will see an overall increase in the number of successful completions by students enrolled in brick-and-mortar schools and assigned to work in facilitated computer labs.

The successful implementation of the virtual education lab facilitator position, as proposed in my policy advocacy portion of my dissertation, was essential to the success of our students, retention of per student funding, and an increase in the graduation rate. Growth and continual improvement are based in the cyclical processes of evaluation and feedback (Marzano, Walters, & McNulty, 2005).

SECTION SEVEN: SUMMARY IMPACT STATEMENT

Virtual and online learning will continue growing as an educational solution as school districts face the challenges of limited funding and resources, finding teachers with specialized certifications, disparity of offerings, and expanding diversity of the student population. Online and virtual education courses were the outgrowth of the distance learning programs of the 1980s and 1990s. Since 1997, Florida has enacted online learning related statutes 1002.37, 1002.415, 1002.45, and 1002.455, as well as added an online course to the list of graduation requirements. However, I think it also stems from our acting on our responsibility as educational leaders and members of the global community to safeguard educational options and opportunities open to all students. State Board of Education rule 6A.10.080 the Code of Ethics of the Education Profession in Florida and 6A.10.081 the Principles of Professional Conduct for the Education Profession in Florida delineates the behaviors of professional educators. The Code of Ethics states: “The Educators primary professional concern will always be for the student and for the development of the student’s potential” (2013). In addition, the Florida Leadership Standards are comprised of four domains: student achievement, instructional leadership, organizational leadership, and professional and ethical behavior. The professional conduct and code of ethics for educators are referenced in the Florida Leadership Standards. Student Achievement Domain includes the standards for student learning results and student learning as a priority.

The virtual education lab facilitator position, proposed by my policy advocacy, is part of an overall strategy to meet the codes and legislation addressing the student learning environment, safety, learning opportunities, achievement, and faculty and

leadership behaviors. My proposal is sensitive to the socio-economic disparity between students in our schools and the schools themselves. It may be that a student does not have a computer or internet access at home. Educational leaders that are student centered view course offerings as a matter of equity that cannot be ignored. Small sites within our district are not unable to offer a variety of courses requiring specially certified teachers, nor can they fiscally afford to hire such a diversity of staff. Online education can address that need. This equity issue demands to be addressed; virtual is a solution.

As virtual education expands, states are legislating course offerings, environments, access, growth, and funding. While the legislature passes statutes that become governing public policies, the Department of Education often must create implementing rules and regulations.” Out of necessity, schools, districts, and educators then often develop local policies, procedures, and protocols to address state expectations and student needs.

My policy advocacy proposal is that a full-time virtual education lab facilitator position becomes a standard personnel allocation for all secondary schools. The virtual education department would collaborate with school based and district leadership to allocate, hire, and train a virtual education lab facilitator to provide students support and instruction in the procedures and protocols of online and virtual learning that are essential to student learning and achievement. Furthermore, successful implementation of my policy proposal is designed to retain per student funding in the budget, maintain or improve graduation rates, and serve as a tool for meeting the state mandates. I believe my proposal can make all that happen.

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