

SOUTH CAROLINA EDUCATION OVERSIGHT
Special Called Meeting
January 11, 2021
Minutes of the Meeting

Members present: Ellen Weaver, Chair; Neil Robinson; April Allen; Rep. Raye Felder; Rep. Terry Alexander; Rep. Neal Collins; Sen. Kevin Johnson; Sidney Locke; Melanie Barton; Sen. Greg Hembree (Remote); Barbara Hairfield (Remote); Dr. Brian Newsome (Remote); Dr. Bob Couch (Remote);; Jamie Shuster (Remote); and Patti Tate (Remote)

EOC staff present: Matthew Ferguson; Dr. Kevin Andrews; Dr. Valerie Harrison; Dr. Rainey Knight; Dana Yow; and Hope Johnson-Jones

Others Present: David Mathis, SCDE Deputy Director

Ms. Weaver welcomed everyone to the meeting. She informed the group that the purpose of the special called meeting was to receive information on the EOC’s Review of Remote Learning’s Impact on South Carolina’s Students, Part 1.

Ms. Weaver stated that since COVID-19 threw schools into remote learning overnight in March of 2020, educators and parents have worked tirelessly to adapt instruction to the realities of a global pandemic. It was quickly apparent, however that this unprecedented upheaval would have long-term implications for the education progress of students across our state, especially those already at greatest risk of being left behind.

The EOC’s mission to report facts, measure change, and promote progress been never been more essential to South Carolina’s education future. In reading the report over the weekend, the findings are sobering. But “while we breathe, we hope.” As Sen. Hembree said in his letter our hope “is that out of this crisis, we will find lessons of innovation to help us unlock the door of opportunity for every student in our state.”

Good decisions for students start with timely, credible research and analysis and that is something the EOC is committed to continue to provide.

At the direction of Ms. Weaver, Mr. Ferguson provided a review of the report’s content, data collection process and key findings. Key areas of focus included: obstacles and innovations; impact to school finance; plans to mitigate lost instructional time, and best practices. He reported that EOC staff conducted interviews as a part of the Review of Remote Learning’s Impact on Students in South Carolina. Fifteen (15) public school districts participated in the study. Over 75 individuals were interviewed as a part of the process. Districts and their individual responses were guaranteed anonymity, participating districts were purposefully selected to be representative of all South Carolina school district and included representation from large and small districts, rural and suburban districts, and school districts from across the geographic regions of South Carolina. Additionally, districts interviewed also provided diversity in the instructional approach applied during emergency remote learning, to include eLearning districts, printed instructional packets

only districts, and districts providing a blend of both virtual and printed instructional packets. Interviews were conducted by EOC staff from July 2020 to November 2020. Information was gathered about obstacles and opportunities district policies, district and school plans for fall reopening, and incurred and anticipated financial costs of the pandemic.

Mr. Ferguson shared the findings about primary obstacles to student learning during emergency remote learning:

1. Unequal distribution of internet access and 1:1 devices. Many students and teachers lacked access to the internet in their homes. Lack of access to the internet was experienced by students in poverty as well as by students and teachers who live in rural areas without the infrastructure for high-speed internet access. As of December 2020, school districts reported to SCDE that 25,257 student devices and 990 teacher devices are still needed. Of these, 19,490 student devices and 907 teacher devices had been ordered but had not yet been received.
2. Lack of a digital ecosystem to support virtual long-term instruction. Some districts felt prepared to deliver instruction virtually and remotely for short periods of time, such as an inclement weather event of a few days. Many of the districts who felt most prepared for short term closures had participated in the EOC's eLearning pilot. However, all districts interviewed emphasized the difference in delivering instruction to students for short periods of time versus the ongoing delivery of remote, virtual instruction over the long-term. The long-term delivery of remote, virtual learning was a reality for which most felt ill-prepared.
3. Lack of clearly defined instructional strategies for forward progress in remote learning. Districts described having to transform over a weekend in the spring. This turn-on-a-dime pivot resulted in responses that were in some cases reactionary and fragmented. Districts described chaotic scenes of trying to create and disseminate instructional packets, secure devices for students, and deploy virtual instruction with new or rarely used learning management systems while providing professional development to staff on the new tools and structures.
4. Challenge to navigate relationships in a virtual environment. A variety of those interviewed described the need to focus on building and sustaining relationships with stakeholders, even, and perhaps particularly, in a virtual environment. This included administrators seeking to maintain relationships with teachers and staff that recognized the tireless efforts and shifting personal needs, such as the need for teachers to care for their own children while teaching or living in homes with family members with compromised immune systems

Mr. Ferguson also provided information on the overall impact on student learning and plans to mitigate instructional loss:

1. Lack of instruction in new material during spring 2020 emergency remote learning will have negative impact on student achievement. Principals and teachers, particularly, mentioned the decline in student engagement after the SCDE and district announcements of 'grace over grades' policies.

2. Vulnerable student populations are expected to be more negatively impacted. Several student groups were consistently identified as being of specific concern to those working in districts and schools: 1) PK-2 students, 2) special education students, 3) English Learners (EL), and 4) pupils in poverty (PIP). Emergency Remote Learning has the potential to exacerbate already significant achievement gaps.
3. No clearly articulated district plans developed to mitigate instructional loss. Though districts expected and recognized the instructional loss of students, there were no operational, long-term plans shared during the interviews to make-up for lost instruction or add additional instructional time beyond the 180 school days. Districts mentioned future work to develop priority standards and adjust curriculum guides. There were no plans shared to extend the instructional day, instructional week, or instructional year.

Mr. Ferguson provided information on the impact of emergency remote learning to school finance:

1. Some COVID expenses will be recurring. Superintendents reported using CARES funding to purchase additional student devices to move towards 1:1 technology and digital curricular resources. They also reported additional expenses related to staffing, cleaning supplies, cleaning frequency. There were, however, no significant savings reported by districts.
2. With additional CARES funding, minimal impact on district general funds during spring 2020. During the district interviews, no superintendent or district finance officer shared concerns with the general fund budget during the spring of 2020.

Mr. Ferguson shared emerging issues that provided opportunities for the future as well as cause for concern. Best practices from across the state and the research were also shared.

Opportunities include:

1. Accelerated student access to technology across South Carolina.
2. Investment in instructional technology resources by districts and SCDE.
3. Increased learning opportunities for students, flattening the classroom and providing a global perspective.
4. District virtual school offerings will remain, but state level guidance needed.

Emerging issues:

1. Many vulnerable students are opting for virtual instruction while more resourced students are opting for brick-and-mortar schooling.
2. Concerns with integrity of results from assessments delivered remotely.
3. Recognition that end-of-year state assessments should be given in spring 2021.

Best Practices:

1. Focused professional development for staff to support students and families during remote learning.

2. Prioritized face-to-face instructional for students for elementary and vulnerable student populations, as soon as safely possible.
3. Provided access to high quality virtual curriculum, resources and course.

Mr. Ferguson shifted from the district interviews to provide data analysis from Summer 2020 Academic Recovery Camps. Findings from the data analysis of Academic Recovery Camps (ARCs) include:

1. Students began ARCs with significant learning deficits in reading and mathematics.
2. Students made statistically significant gains in both reading and math during ARCs.
3. Despite ARCs gains, students remained significantly behind expectations for grade level proficiency in reading and math after ARC.
4. There was overall low student enrollment in ARCs despite many students identified as in need of intervention.

Recommendations for adjustment to any future ARC program include:

1. Provide reimbursement funding to districts only for students with a pre- and post- ARC assessment.
2. Consider lengthening the instructional day minimums during ARC.
3. Create a process to allow districts to develop and create innovative programs and/or community partnerships to provide after-school, summer, or Saturday ARCs in mathematics and reading/writing. Pre- and post- assessments should be required to measure and produce results in student performance.

After discussing Summer 2020 ARCs, Mr. Ferguson shared data from South Carolina's fall 2020 formative assessments. The EOC partnered with NWEA for this analysis. The overall sample included 222,007 K-8 students from 67 South Carolina public school districts. Overall findings include:

1. On average, 7 out of 10 South Carolina students in grades 2 through 8 are projected not to meet grade level proficiency standards in mathematics and English Language Arts in spring 2021.
2. In comparing fall 2019 to fall 2020 in mathematics, the COVID slide was most dramatic, with between 10% and 16% fewer South Carolina students expected to meet grade level proficiency in grades 2 through 5. Comparing this same period in grades 6 through 8, approximately 5% less students are projected to be proficient on grade level standards in mathematics: only 1 out of 4 South Carolina students is projected to be proficient in mathematics in grades 7 and 8.
3. In comparing fall 2019 to fall 2020 reading, South Carolina students demonstrated fewer declines in reading, with between 4% and 6% fewer students expected to meet grade level proficiency in grades 2 through 5 in spring 2021. In grades 6 and 7 there was no change in projected proficiency and only a 1% decrease in grade 8. However, despite scoring nearly

the same as students last year, nearly 7 out of 10 South Carolina students are projected not to be proficient in reading.

4. South Carolina students declined in median percentile rank in all grades other than Kindergarten in mathematics compared to South Carolina students in the same grade in fall 2019. The largest percentile declines were in mathematics.
5. South Carolina students declined in median percentile rank in grades 1 through 5 for reading compared to South Carolina students in the same grade in fall 2019.

Additionally, Ferguson shared an analysis of a Cohort of students from the sample. This Cohort analysis allows for an apples-to-apples comparison. To be included in the Cohort, a student was required to test in fall 2019, winter 2019, and fall 2020. The Cohort analysis included approximately 118,000 K-8 students from 67 districts in South Carolina. Findings from this analysis include:

1. The 2019-2020 South Carolina Cohort declined in median percentile in all grades in mathematics.
2. The 2019-2020 South Carolina Cohort declined in median percentiles for reading in all grades other than the grade 2 cohort, but the largest percentile declines were in mathematics.
3. Substantially larger percentages of South Carolina students decreased in their achievement quartile standing from 2019 to 2020, both for reading and for mathematics, though more so for mathematics.
4. Significant achievement gaps among historically underachieving students and their higher achieving peers continue to exist but do not appear to have widened during emergency remote learning. However, vulnerable student populations may be missing from the sample.
5. South Carolina students decreased in median percentile rank less in mathematics than their national peers in grades 4 through 7 during emergency remote learning.
6. South Carolina students decreased in median percentile rank more in reading than their national peers in grades 3 and 4 but decreased less than their national peers in grades 5 through 7 during emergency remote learning.

An analysis was also conducted on a sample of fourteen (14) districts to see if there was a statistically significant difference in the COVID slide of students who experienced different instructional delivery methods during emergency remote learning. The analysis found that there was no statistically significant difference observed in the COVID slide of students with respect to instructional method (eLearning, blended learning, and instructional packets) during emergency remote learning.

Finally, Ferguson shared recommendations included in the Review of Remote Learning, Part 1 Report. He noted that further work is needed to provide support, increased instructional time, and targeted interventions, especially in mathematics, to students while school is disrupted and beyond. There is also a need to collect and transparently report student data around opportunities to learn

as-well as academic achievement in order to guide curriculum and instruction and support students. Recommendations were made in response to the findings of this report related to the impacts of COVID-19 school closures on student achievement but are applicable to other long-term school closures.

Impact on Student Learning:

1. Strategically design and implement curriculum focused on student learning gaps and priority standards.
2. Better coordinate efforts to accurately track student attendance, completion of assignments, and mastery of grade level standards.
3. Require coordinated efforts and deploy strategies to establish communication with students who are not attending school or disengaging from instruction.
4. Continue regular assessment of all students, allowing for individual and system academic performance to be monitored, guiding instruction and policy decisions.
5. Conduct further research to determine the most effective instructional delivery method for remote learning.

Obstacles

1. Continue to address disparities in learning opportunities by ensuring that supports, such as access to the internet and a device, are in place for students.
2. Provide access to a robust virtual curriculum for students in remote learning.

Impact on School Finance

1. Continue to review and monitor district expenses related to COVID.
2. Continue to review and monitor student enrollment.

Plans to Mitigate Loss

1. Provide tutoring services and extra interventions for students identified at-risk.
2. Create a process to allow districts to develop and create innovative programs and/or community partnerships to provide after-school, summer, or Saturday ARCs in mathematics and reading.

Best Practices

1. Provide meaningful and responsive professional development to staff to address needs in remote learning.
2. Prioritize the return to face-to-face classrooms as soon as safely possible.

Ms. Weaver offered the EOC committee the opportunity to ask questions and seek clarification from staff about information provided in the report.

Rep. Collins inquired about limiting factors related to knowing about accessing technology and devices. He wanted to know if 19,000 students and 900 staff members were still lacking needed technology or waiting for deliveries. He also inquired about the 13 districts that are still providing virtual only delivery of instruction for students. Mr. Ferguson shared that gathering information from parents about available technology and infrastructure deficits cause limited or incomplete

information. David Mathis of SCDE added that at this time only one district remained on virtual only delivery, student devices are on back order because of nation-wide demand, and the SCDE is in the process of updating information about the device availability, technology access and current district instructional delivery models.

Rep. Alexander stated that he wanted to know more about districts using the instructional packets method for instructional delivery. He also asked 1) the different ways districts approached grading/accountability; 2) the number of districts still using packets; and 3) the academic performance of students using instructional packets. Mr. Ferguson responded that the selection of instructional delivery model was up to the districts. He added that districts made decisions based on availability of technology, teachers and grade level considerations. According to available assessment data, there is not a difference in academic performance between the students working with instructional packets. Mr. Mathis pointed out that timing had some impact on district decisions; they had to move quickly to get the instruction done.

Rep. Collins noted that per the report (page 23), every district is doing its own thing, He wanted to know what guidelines were given from the state. Mr. Mathis responded that the flexibility granted districts this year will not be in place next year.

Ms. Weaver inquired about reasons why most vulnerable students are opting for virtual instruction. Mr. Ferguson responded that reasons gathered while compiling the report included: 1) many communities worrying about students being in large crowds; 2) parents and students not feeling safe; and 3) lack of access to health care.

Rep. Collins asked why only 37 districts participated in the ARCs. Mr. Mathis informed the group that the timing of the offering and the face-to-face requirement were factors that caused limited participation by districts. Ms. Allen and Rep. Alexander inquired about transportation being available for ARCs. Ms. Barton verified that transportation was provided for ARC participants.

Sen. Hembree informed the group that his concern is discussing how we are going to get students caught up. He noted that from July to November there should have been a clearly articulated plan by SCDE and districts for this and wanted to know if staff had talked to any districts with such a plan. Mr. Ferguson responded that no district shared a specific plan beyond working to adjust and focus curriculum. Sen. Hembree asked what could be done. Ferguson shared that districts might consider after school programs, offering students a double dose of instructional time in math and reading, and extending the instructional time, to include afterschool and Saturdays. Dr. Mathis shared that districts will now be asked to submit plans to SCDE for how they will deliver quality instruction and focus resources, implement priority standards, and offer additional instructional time in reading and math. However, the plan format has not yet been developed and no deadline has yet been set for submission of district plans.

EOC members shared additional comments about the remote learning review. Mr. Robinson added that there may be certain factors that all plans need to include. Ms. Barton commented that we have a systems issue - systematic changes are needed. Mr. Locke thanked staff for the data, variables, comparisons and factors included in the Review of Remote Learning, Part 1. He commented that we should consider how to move the system forward with these data.

Mr. Ferguson informed EOC of next steps to be taken by staff as they complete the review of the impacts, challenges and status of remote learning efforts: 1) conduct a survey and focus groups on the experiences of families and teachers during emergency remote learning and the fall 2020 restart (anticipated completion in February 2021); 2) analyze student pre- and post- assessment data from fall and winter 2020 (anticipated completion in April 2021); and 3) further research to determine the most effective instructional delivery method for remote learning.

There being no further business, the special called meeting was adjourned.