

Virginia e-Learning Backpack Initiative

Background and FAQs

BACKGROUND

MPCS will now have two different technology programs -

- One is the standard technology refresh that happens each year. We strive to replace outdated equipment in a timely manner. Industry standard is around every three years. Before the tough budget years, we were around a five year replacement schedule. The timeline for replacement has expanded rapidly, so we are currently trying to bring it back down to acceptable usage – around a five year replacement again. The TV's in the classrooms are a good example of this. They have been around for 14 years old. If we hadn't experienced the recession, those would probably have been replaced five years ago. Now we are trying to both replace and add technology to the buildings.
- Two is the e-Backpack grant which is separate from the building refresh. The VDOE provided a grant opportunity for high schools that weren't fully accredited. The grant money provides up to \$400 per student to purchase a tablet for each class of 9th grade students, for four years. There is a 20% matching cost that the schools must provide to fund this, however, the money that they are providing is very significant. Being a grant, we had two options – take the money and the opportunity, or say no. It is hard to pass up an opportunity to add technology to the schools, especially since it is really needed at the HS. Tablets will be purchased this summer, and we will hopefully roll out a pilot in September to Pre-AP and ELL level 1 students, depending on the final schedule and funding. This can still change, however. The pilot will run during the 1st semester, with full rollout to 9th and 10th grade students at the start of the second semester. Again, this is hinging on funding and pilot results. If funding is available, there is a possibility that this will be expanded too and additional grades can be added to the 2nd semester rollout. Again, this hinges on funding and pilot results.

The steering committee is headed up by Jen Braswell. She is the program manager, and the rest of the steering committee includes Krista Kelly, Shannon Watson, and Eric Neff. Chris Konig leads the Instructional Technology Committee; Ginny Bowerman, Professional Development; Matt McCormack, Infrastructure; Krista Kelly, Finance; Pam Blake, Communication, each brings recommendations to the steering committee. Each week Jen Braswell meets with each committee lead and receives recommendations, concerns, etc. regarding the project. She then tasks each team with something that fits in the realm of the initiative. Each team works on the tasks and they bring their findings and recommendations to her during my weekly meeting. Questions can be forwarded to Jen and the rest of the steering committee for clarification. It's a pretty efficient operation!

DEVICES

Welcome to Windows 8! We are moving forward with Windows 8 for the entire division, one school at a time. Windows 8 is a powerful platform for a number of reasons, but it is also a bit different than what we have used before. Even if we weren't doing a 1:1 conversion, we would still be upgrading to Windows 8 at some point because that is the next Windows product, and we are a Windows school division. Windows 9 will be out in a year – we are typically about one version of Windows behind. Both teacher and student devices will be Windows 8. Teachers will have laptops to replace pod and classroom computers, and students will have tablets. If funding and everything else works out well, teachers may even have their new laptop before

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leaving for summer break. The plan is to replace the teacher computers here with laptops as soon as possible, so that teachers are given enough time to become comfortable using the new device.

Device Questions:

#1 - So all students will receive a device next year?

Answer: No – right now we are only slated for 9th and 10th grade students starting second semester, as long as funding and the pilot results bring us favorable news. There is a small chance that it can be expanded to 11th grade students, but that hinges completely on funding and pilot results. One thing to remember is that we have upwards of 100 laptops in circulation at the HS already. Once all 9th and 10th grade students have a tablet device, it is possible that some of these laptops can be repurposed to meet additional needs (example: having one or two seniors in a class of all 9th or 10th graders. We can repurpose equipment once we know how funding will play out for next year).

#2 - How will we use the laptops?

Answer: The laptop will be the primary computer. Teachers may have some sort of docking station for their laptops so that they can move easily between the classroom and the pod. This will depend on the model of laptop that is purchased. A docking station is like a tray that a laptop sits into. However, with a laptop, we are hoping to do things in a more wireless environment, so docking stations may not even be needed. Once laptops are chosen for the staff, we can discuss this in further detail.

#3 - I'm lost in Windows 8. How can I learn to use it?

Answer: We are planning to provide multiple training formats to alleviate this concern. There will be online training modules available so that you can learn on your own, but face to face training will be scheduled both during the summer and in August when we return on an optional basis for teachers that would prefer more help.

#4 - Do you really expect teachers to come for an optional training over the summer? That's not really feasible. Who would come in on their summer break? We have to have alternative options for training. And it can't be done on the last day of school.

Answer: That is why there will be an online training module set up for teachers that would like to learn on their own. If teachers want further support, they can come in over the summer. This is an optional training. Those teachers that feel that they want extra support will be welcome to attend over the summer, as they feel the need. Part of being a teacher requires us to be lifelong learners. I'm offering the training as an additional layer of support to accommodate multiple learning styles. The online training will be available all year – not only over the summer. Face to face training will also be scheduled during the year.

#5 - What happens if we break the laptop, or forget it at home the night before?

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Answer: We will most likely have some sort of loaner program. Details such as these are still being worked out. Stay tuned for more info.

#6 - The kids are always breaking their phones. And that is a device they care about. What happens when they start breaking their tablets?

Answer: Some breakage is to be expected. There are many examples of school divisions doing a 1:1 program, and each of them have a way for factoring this in. Some schools charge a yearly usage fee to compensate for the accidental insurance and repair fees. Other schools work out a different system for this. Some schools even have loaner programs for students when they forget or damage their device. These details are still being worked out, and we will gather input from all those involved before any policies are made. Stay tuned – more info will follow once the plan comes together more.

#7 - What if kids try to sell or steal devices?

Answer: Again, this is something that has been thought of already. School divisions typically work with their local police and area pawn shops to try to prevent this from happening. This has already been taken into consideration, and more info will follow.

#8 - Is every teacher getting a device, or will it just be core teachers?

Answer: The plan is for every teacher to receive a device. By teacher, I mean that they are the teacher of record of a class. Instructional assistants, office staff, and guidance will most likely not be included in this, although depending on funding, this may change. Teachers with classes should be familiar with Windows 8 since their students will bring tablets into their classes using Windows 8.

#9 - Have laptops been ordered for teachers? If not, can teachers take the tablets home for the summer to learn to use them?

Answer: I don't know the status of this. It will be difficult for a teacher to take a tablet home for the summer, because we need that summer time to get them ready to give out to students. Again, I don't know definitely here at all. I'm just giving my option here. I can check with the steering committee on this. The overall goal is to get teachers familiar with Windows 8 by providing them with their laptop ASAP. The sooner the better is my recommendation.

TRAINING

Training, this is a central focus for the steering committee. There are committees set up to work on different aspects of the program. For instance, the Instructional Tech committee looks at digital resources, and best practices for including devices in instruction. The professional development committee is tasked with compiling and planning for the delivery of all of the PD needed to get this program up and running, and to support it as the program expands.

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One key area of focus is the types of training offered. Should it be online, face to face, or both? Should it be optional or mandatory, and how much should be mandatory? Our goal is to provide teachers with a “menu of options” for training.

Training Questions:

#1 - Has any consideration been given to how busy teachers are already, and how much they have on their plates?

Answer: Yes – this is at the heart of all the conversations. We all know how hard teachers work each day, so we are mindful of that as decisions are being made.

#2 - Any thoughts on how often teachers are going to be asked to use these devices in class daily?

Answer: A change like this has to be gradual. Nobody expects teaching and learning to be transformed overnight. This will take a few years, maybe 3-4 years to really get to where we want it to be. Lasting change needs to be gradual.

#3 - Are teachers going to be expected to work all night now? Since students have a device, and they are working from home, what happens if they email us at 8:00 at night? Are we expected to respond that evening? The work day ends at 2:30 or 3:00.

Answer: What’s the expectation now when a student emails you at 8:00 at night? Are you expected to respond right away? Can you respond at night? I think this is dependent on teachers. Some teachers will respond that night. I know a few that receive homework help questions now at night, and they reply back to the student. This will not be mandatory, though. Just like it is now. I believe that you should respond to any e-mail within 24 hours, just as we are expected to do now if we get parent emails. “Turning off” when you leave school is up to you. Those teachers that want to turn off will. Those teachers that are responding to students at night now will still respond to students later.

LEARNING MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS (LMS)

One key component of the program is a learning management system. It is sort of like our teacher websites, but it includes blogging, assignment sections, etc. Blackboard, Moodle, Virtual Virginia, etc. are all examples of LMS’s. We are currently evaluating some different systems to see what would be the best fit for us. The biggest thing to keep in mind is that it will be like an empty bookshelf when we purchase one. We are responsible for filling it. It is just the same as if you were to receive a new teacher website today. You would need to build it. That’s what we will need to do when we acquire one. And it will take a couple of years to fill it with enough stuff.

LMS Questions:

#1 - How long will we have to fill it up? Will it be expected to be filled up during that first year?

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Answer: No, a learning management system will take a few years to be filled up. We don't currently have one, so I can't give a firm estimate of time that it will take to get it up and running fully, but I would imagine needing at least 2-3 years before it becomes a robust tool. Once we acquire one, it will take us at least a few months to get it up and ready to even begin using. Just like your teacher websites, you built the basic bones of it when you first created it. Throughout the first year, you continued to fill it with resources as needed. That will be the same thing with an LMS. After your first year, it will be a better tool as you build upon it all year.

BUILDING A DIGITAL CURRICULUM

It's no surprise that we need to start compiling resources. Textbooks haven't been adopted on a large scale in a number of years. We also haven't acquired too many new resources recently. Teachers all have access to Learn 360, which is a great tool, but we need to keep expanding what we have available and to align it to our curriculum maps. Recently, we acquired another tool – eMediaVA – which is curated by PBS, to provide VA teachers with videos and other resources that can become a valuable part of the curriculum. We will need to keep adding to our arsenal of tools though. This is one of the areas that the Instructional Technology Committee is heavily invested in. We currently have a trial of a product called netTrekker. This product takes resources that are available on the internet and curates them by standard and keyword search. It has to go through a 127 point inspection process before it is even included in the resource library. Sometimes even resources from organizations such as NASA gets rejected because it doesn't meet their stringent criteria. We are excited about the possibilities this will open up for us.

The Instructional Technology Committee's job is to identify needs, and find products and resources to help fill our gaps. They are also looking at best practices from around the country to formulate a plan for MPHS. Some of this is on hold until the new high school principal comes on board and will be instrumental in leading the change that we are hoping to see.

Digital Curriculum Questions:

#1 - Will there be an adoption process, like there is currently with textbooks?

Answer: We don't know yet, and are taking a look to see what is out there and getting feedback from teachers to see what they feel they need to be successful. What we are finding is that we don't really know what is needed, because we have not gone out to look for stuff on a large scale before. Often, teachers do their lesson planning with a small group, or individually, even. This is new territory for the division and we continue to investigate. Feedback is definitely necessary from all staff.

CULTURAL SHIFT: MOVING FROM A TEACHER TO A FACILITATOR AND MOVING FROM A STUDENT TO AN ACTIVE LEARNER

Once technology is available to students and teachers 24/7, learning changes, and this doesn't happen overnight. The role of the teacher begins to change because they are directing students to make their own learning. Teachers guide students to create their own understanding of topics. Students need to be taught how to process all of that information. The internet is a vast place, and students need to be taught how to evaluate all of that info that is available to them, to decipher what is credible and what is not. An increase in critical thinking and creativity skills change the way we do business. The teacher is still an important part of this equation. We are currently looking at the research and including this in the plan. What do we want

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students to be able to do? How are we preparing students for their future careers? What skills do today's students possess that makes them different than previous students? How do we meet their needs? These are all questions that we are asking ourselves.

Other Questions? Thoughts? Concerns?

Communication:

Good communication is needed for this to work. Right now we don't feel like we are receiving communication in a timely manner. The meeting with Dr. McDade and Jen Braswell was over a month ago and I haven't heard anything more about it since that date. If teachers are going to receive a laptop before school gets out, this is information that is needed already to begin planning. You can't just spring this on teachers at the last minute. The end of the year is really busy. Would we be expected to sit through professional development on the last day of school? Now really, is this going to be successful if it is starting off on the wrong foot?

Answer: A couple of factors are affecting this initiative right now. One is the final budget. We won't know anything about the final budget until May 20. The second main factor involved here is the fact that our new high school principal hasn't started working here yet. They are going to be directing some of this too. The current plan is moving forward, although it is dependent heavily upon the final budget numbers, as well as end of year funding. We are working hard to get the best device for teachers to use. We cannot be hasty in this process, as this will be the teacher's primary device for the next five years, at least. We agree that good communication is necessary and if you have questions or concerns, please contact Jennifer Braswell-Geller or any of the members of the steering committee. Jen is the program manager for the entire program, so when in doubt, email her. As for the training and PD on Windows 8, there will be multiple opportunities for training and online training will always be available.

All questions and answers provided by the Instructional Committee Team Lead – Chris Konig