

# **SOUTH CAROLINA EDUCATION OVERSIGHT COMMITTEE**

## **Full Committee Meeting**

Minutes of the Meeting

April 8, 2024

**Members Present (in-person or remote):** Melanie Barton, Russell Baxley, Representative Neal Collins, Bob Couch, Representative Bill Hager, Barbara Hairfield, Senator Kevin Johnson, Senator Dwight Loftis, Brian Newsome, Melissa Pender, Senator Ross Turner

**EOC Staff Present:** Dana Yow, Dr. Rainey Knight, Riley Dixon, Dr. Jenny May, Hope Johnson-Jones, Tenell Felder, Dr. Matthew Lavery

**Guest(s) Present:** Matthew Dr. Ferguson (SCDE), Martha Strickland (SC First Steps)

EOC Vice Chair Brian Newsome opened the meeting and asked for a motion to approve the minutes from the February 12<sup>th</sup> full committee meeting.

After the minutes were approved, Newsome introduced SC Broadband Office (SCBBO) Director Jim Stritzinger and Chief Technology Officer at the Office of Regulatory Staff Tom Allen to provide an update on broadband connectivity in South Carolina.

Stritzinger thanked EOC Director Dana Yow and Newsome for the opportunity to present to the committee.

He provided a brief overview of the broadband office which was created on July 1, 2001 with a \$30 million budget. As of May 2022, the General Assembly has allocated \$400 million which Stritzinger described as extraordinary growth.

SCBBO's strategy in South Carolina is to ensure all main street municipalities have high speed internet.

Stritzinger shared that once construction completes in Norway and Ridge Spring, there will be high speed broadband connectivity to every mainstream municipality in South Carolina.

He also shared that the SCBBO completed the final piece of a \$185.1 million grant program.

Stritzinger presented the agency's broadband mapping repository website, [SCDigitalDrive.org](https://SCDigitalDrive.org). The website provides maps of all 46 counties though Stritzinger noted the maps had not been refreshed recently.

He then showed how the maps illustrate areas that the state and federal government have invested in, along with tracking construction. The map is also used to ensure that the same areas are not being invested in by both entities.

Stritzinger then expanded on how the SCBBO prioritized providing broadband infrastructure where K-12 students lived, particularly in communities where the US Housing and Urban Development has categorized as low-income or places with no internet service providers.

The total number of Broadband Serviceable Locations (BSL) was approximately 60,000 – which equaled to roughly 50,000 residential homes and 10,000 businesses total that are missing broadband investment.

Stritzinger pointed out that in comparison, North Carolina has more than 200,000 remaining BSLs. The SCBBO will utilize \$35 million to reduce South Carolina's BSLs.

Stritzinger asserted that a key job of the SCBBO is to ensure its investments come into production. To help monitor this, the SCBBO has a construction dashboard that illustrates in real time broadband infrastructure that is being built.

Following this, Stritzinger introduced Allen to discuss digital equity.

Allen stated that while Stritzinger had presented on how the SCBBO is expanding infrastructure and service to all homes and businesses throughout South Carolina – he would present on what the state is doing to ensure that digital equity is achieved.

A main aspect of digital equity is to provide educational programs to help people learn how to use broadband services more successfully.

After the Governor's office transferred the Digital Opportunity Department to the South Carolina office of regulatory staff, Allen and his team created the vision for all South Carolinians to have access to affordable and reliable high-speed internet and the necessary skills to use this technology.

Allen reviewed the department's five Digital Equity goals for South Carolina which are as follows:

- Broadband affordability: Ensuring all households get this broadband infrastructure and can afford to use the internet.
- Online Accessibility and Inclusivity: Ensuring everyone has access to reliable high speed broadband service in their home and business.
- Digital literacy: Teaching the skills needed for online privacy and cybersecurity, making sure that all citizens in South Carolina are cyber-aware.
- Online Privacy and Cybersecurity: Ensuring every South Carolina resident can safely and securely utilizes broadband services. The agency's plan was approved and made them eligible for \$12 million in federal funding.
- Device Availability and Affordability: Every resident of South Carolina can access a desktop or laptop computer at home or in an accessible location.

Following this, questions were accepted.

Representative Neal Collins asked if the construction dashboard was publicly available.

Stritzinger clarified that the dashboard is not publicly available, and that it is currently used as an in-house tool. He added they are trying to make some of the data more user friendly for public consumption.

Barbara Hairfield then asked if the Digital Opportunity Department had connected with any high schools to offer cybersecurity courses and if they have used any cross curricular support.

Allen answered that while they had not, one of their goals is to create a standardized cybersecurity curriculum throughout the state. He further explained that the department would like to take the best practices from each of the districts where there are programs in place and have guidelines for underserved districts.

Yow asked Allen to clarify if the mentioned partnerships would be with all school districts in the state and if it would focus on cybersecurity.

Allen responded that the partnership would be focused on the five Digital Equity goals.

He emphasized that they planned on working with South Carolina school districts.

Next, Senator Loftis asked about the public/private partnership between the SCBBO and private internet providers – specifically which entity provided internet connection.

Stritzinger clarified that the central role of the broadband office is to make investments in projects through the one-time cost of construction – and that they do not connect homes or run fiber. He further explained that there is always a private sector match for every project that ranges from 25% to 60%.

Senator Loftis then asked if a homeowner would be dealing with a private provider for internet access.

Stritzinger stated that Loftis was correct and added that the individual homeowner would pay for monthly internet service. He also stated it was his department's responsibility to help ensure that internet service comes at an affordable price to the consumer, most of which was done through a grant application process where they evaluate the monthly consumer cost in scoring the grant.

Senator Loftis then asked if the department considered overhead wiring since running underground is expensive.

Stritzinger confirmed this through stating that it takes approximately \$80,000 a mile to build fiber underground and about \$50,000 a mile to attach the telephone poles, though also clarifying that most projects are hybrid. He then stated that part of consideration of how projects are built depends on where they are located geographically, for example underground infrastructure might be used in a hurricane prone environment.

This concluded the question-and-answer period.

Next, Collins invited ASA Vice Chair Barbara Hairfield to give the report from the March subcommittee via Zoom.

Hairfield updated the committee on two information items that the ASA subcommittee received. First was the CERDEP 2022-23 and 2023-24 annual report. Hairfield shared the annual evaluation helps determine if the state's investment in educating four-year-olds is having a positive impact. The report showed that the state spent \$106.6 million on state funded 4K - the largest investment to date. In addition, pupils in poverty are more likely to demonstrate kindergarten readiness at 37% on the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment than other pupils in poverty who did not participate. This data point does indicate that the program is beneficial for four-year-old pupils in poverty.

Hairfield called EOC staff member Dr. Jenny May forward to answer questions from the committee then asked Dana Yow to facilitate.

Committee member Melanie Barton asked if state 4K programs had considered providing hearing referrals and screenings since they are currently done for kindergarteners

Dr. May responded that she thought this would be an innovative idea that would benefit students and should be a part of the early childcare infrastructure. She referred that it was recommended in the report that all the Early Childhood stakeholders come together to look at these types of things to help ensure that all children are screened and referred that way.

Dr. Ferguson, special guest from the South Carolina Department of Education, added that many districts are currently screening 4K students and that he believes those screenings are dependent on the cost and the availability of the screeners.

Barton then commented that Governor McMaster was supportive of the recent CERDEP legislation, and that the governor's office was hoping to get more districts to participate, especially with the high reimbursement rate of \$5100 per student. She then asked if anyone was aware of new districts looking at getting state funded CERDEP programs.

Dr. Ferguson replied that there were three holdouts – Greenville, Beaufort and Horry counties and added that public charters are also another large district that does not currently participate in CERDEP because of concerns they would not be able to provide as many 4K slots.

Melanie Barton then mentioned the governor's support to train 4K teachers in early literacy. She also emphasized the need to look at chronic absenteeism from a holistic perspective for children who are in a 4k program. She stated that children need to get in the habit of attending school and for there to be a statewide emphasis on taking attendance. Barton then mentioned the statistic that 25% of SC students are absent for more than 10% of the school year.

Dr. May agreed with the need to collect accurate attendance data and said she believed that some conversations around that were happening at the state level. She noted the districts take daily attendance, but that it is not accessible at the state level. She then noted that First Steps has a different attendance policy and program where daily attendance is accessible.

She then reiterated the importance of attendance so that students receive a "full dose of 4K" which shows if invested money paid off on higher academic achievement and greater social wellbeing for SC four-year-olds.

Barton then reiterated the report shows that 37% of children in CERDEP were ready for kindergarten as compared to 27% who were in poverty who did not attend full-day 4K and that that kind of difference has a noticeable impact. She then thanked Dr. May for doing the report as it shows how the state's 4K investment is doing.

Yow commented that there is proviso language to expand the landscape of data the EOC receives, especially for the dashboard. She agreed with Barton that the main takeaway is that CERDEP is working.

Senator Loftis then asked if there was any insight into why some schools were not participating in CERDEP.

Dr. Ferguson said that some schools claim that it is because of CERDEP's cost but that he sees that as a less convincing argument as the reimbursement rate has gone up. He stated his opinion that the state reporting requirements is the issue. There are some requirements for certification curriculum, assessments that districts just choose not to participate in.

Loftis then asked if the number of students not receiving CERDEP is known.

Dr. Ferguson responded that the EOC produced a dashboard a few years back that shows this data.

Melissa Pender then asked for clarification about if CERDEP funding can be used in mixed classrooms where some kids are CERDEP and some are not.

Dr. Ferguson responded that it is allowed under certain circumstances.

Pender said she asked the question to try to get clarity into why her county was not participating in CERDEP. She stated she was under the impression that they wouldn't be able to serve nearly as many students if they utilized CERDEP funds.

With that, Barbara Hairfield, then spoke about the next information item of the Data Trailblazers Award. She updated the committee that 20 submissions had been received thus far and that the winners would be presented in August.

Next, Dr. Matthew Lavery was invited forward to present an information item on the Education Analytics Level Linking Study Results.

Dr. Lavery reviewed why the studies were done which included the following: to give educators guidance on how interim and benchmark scores correlate with SC READY, to independently verify the vendors' linking studies between their own products and to provide understanding on how well interim and benchmark growth predicted growth on SC READY.

Next, he reviewed that a Linking-Level Study determines the relationship between two different tests of similar constructs to find a roughly equivalent score on one given a specific score on the other.

He then showed that the studies indicated that the independent results were remarkably similar to the vendor conducted linking studies.

He then advised members to keep in mind that educators should not "over interpret" the I&B assessment scores as the scores give useful, but not complete information. He also reiterated that the cut scores are set a 50% likelihood of making a specific achievement level and are not a guarantee of a particular score. He also noted that the assessments measure important content and skills related to SC standards, but not the standards themselves.

Questions were then accepted.

Barton asked if the data used for the three assessments were South Carolina data and if they were from the most recent year or from multiple years.

Dr. Lavery clarified that they were from South Carolina and that the most recent data were used.

Barton then asked if teachers needed more explanation and guidance of the parameters of the probability of the test score.

Dr. Lavery stated that any support would likely be helpful and opened up the question to any educators on committee who would be able to provide insight.

Pender said that she would be able to and stated that she and her teachers make predictions based on assessment data and that they are able to target students who are showing that they are struggling in a particular area.

Hairfield also provided insight in stating that teachers and coaches use the data for goal setting for individual students.

Newsome agreed with Hairfield and commented teachers look at the biggest impact they can make to get more kids to move.

Dr. Couch then asked about the outlier groups, what percentage of those students passed or failed the assessment.

Dr. Lavery stated that while he has not personally calculated those data, that the predictions on a group level were very accurate but that on an individual level, probability was the better way to consider pass/ fail rates.

Dr. Ferguson then asked what information the EOC could use to assist districts in determining the best assessments to use.

Dr. Lavery responded that that would likely depend on what each district was specifically looking towards as its priority in assessments.

Following no other questions, Dr. Lavery gave an update of the field test of the WIDA- ALT assessment. He reviewed that WIDA recently conducted a field test for the new version of the test on March 8th.

Dr. Lavery stated that he believed the changes are positive and that the change is being made as an improvement.

He then shared that he expected the impact of the update to be very small for indicator rating points, extremely small on indicator ratings and negligible on overall ratings.

Dr. Lavery then accepted questions.

Barton asked roughly what percentage of SC's 1284 schools have an MLP.

Dr. Lavery responded that approximately half receive a rating on the Multilingual Learners Progress Metric.

Following no other questions, Dr. Lavery presented on the changes to the added-value growth scoring.

Dr. Lavery stated that for many years, SC used a norm-referenced value-added model and that we are in the process of transferring to a new Criterion-Referenced value model which is designed to encourage students to move up to the next highest level.

He then reviewed the main points of the new Added-Value Growth Model and how the target points are calculated.

Melanie Barton asked when the Federal government would approve or not approve the proposed changes to which Dr. Lavery responded that they had it currently at the time of the April 8 meeting.

Yow commented that the goal was to move students to grade level proficiency.

Dr. Ferguson commented that the Federal government had 90 days to provide a response from the last time that the request was made and that they have committed to having an answer before the report cards come out in October.

With no other questions, Newsome called Yow to present on the Beating the Odds Investigative Study, the 2024 EOC retreat, and the Military Task Force Meeting.

Yow stated she wanted to provide an update on the Beating the Odds Investigative Study as it had been a main part of EOC staff during the previous five months. She shared that the purpose of this stage of the study was to identify the practices and common characteristics of elementary schools with a high percentage of students in poverty that are demonstrating either high rates of achievement or rapid improvement. She also shared that a comment by Senator Kevin Johnson on wanting to see where students were doing well and excelling is what spurred EOC staff to develop the BTOIS.

Yow then reviewed the criteria of the BTOIS partner schools which included the following:

- Elementary school with enrollment of more than 100 students
- Overall rating of “Excellent” with no “Below Average” or “Unsatisfactory” indicator ratings
- At least 77.6% of students are classified as Pupils in Poverty (PIP)
- Open enrollment policies that do not permit or deny admission based on application or criteria.

She emphasized that the BTIOS was not to be considered a list of nominated schools, but rather were determined by the above criteria developed by EOC staff. She also emphasized that BTOIS was not to be considered to be an awards program.

Newsome commented that he applauded the EOC staff for undertaking the study as often time the negative is focused on. He anticipated the information being used to benefit other schools.

Yow then updated members of the retreat to be held on August 11-12 in Beaufort, SC and that additional information would be made available in future weeks.

Concerning the EOC Military Readiness Task Force, Yow updated the committee that the task force would meet again on April 22 and that the group’s recommendations would be presented to the EOC at the June 10<sup>th</sup> meeting.

With no other comments, the meeting was adjourned.