

M-G OKs contract for permanent virtual option

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Madison-Grant will begin offering a long-term virtual schooling option this fall after reaching an agreement with virtual learning business ACCEL Schools.

The M-G school board approved the contract Monday following several months of research and negotiations. At a previous school board meeting in January, Superintendent Scott Deetz said the current pandemic-induced virtual option the district offers is unsustainable as it includes in-person classroom teachers doing extra work for additional stipends.

“ACCEL schools is a virtual education provider for public charter and private schools throughout the country, and actually they run some versions of this model around the world,” Deetz told the board Monday. “We felt like this opportunity to continue to provide a virtual education to our Madison-Grant students is really wrapped up by the 10.5 percent of our student body that’s enrolled in it right now.”

Deetz said the district formed a committee consisting of administrators, parents whose children are currently learning virtually, virtual classroom teachers and board President Mary Jo Brunt to research and discuss the potential partnership with ACCEL and other partner schools that have set up similar models. The committee voted unanimously to recommend that the school board approve the partnership, he said.

Under the agreement, the district will create up to three virtual schools, proposed to be named the Virtual Preparatory Academy of Indiana at Madison-Grant, which highlights that it’s a virtual offering available only to Indiana students with M-G serving as the partner school. Deetz said one K-12 school could be formed, or the schools could be broken up by primary, intermediate and high school grades.

Deetz said the new virtual school would be able to service special education, Title I and English as a second language students and will follow all state requirements for curriculum, assessments and teacher certifications and evaluations.

While M-G is not investing any of its financial resources to get the new school(s) started, Deetz said ACCEL will receive the majority of the basic tuition money the state provides to public schools for the number of students enrolled in the virtual option, based on the Average Daily Membership (ADM) state calculation.

Students enrolled in virtual learning currently receive 85 percent of the full basic tuition amount for a student attending in-person classes, Deetz said. M-G will receive 4.25 percent of the total amount based on the virtual ADM for oversight of the virtual learning.

Deetz said the school district will still be in charge of verifying data and reports, facilitating State Board of Accounts audits and ensuring special education and Title I education is functioning properly.

“Now ACCEL has all those departments and staff members dedicated to that, so they will prepare everything. But it’s still passed in front of us,” Deetz said. “So in our internal controls we need to verify that everything is still correct and running appropriately and then it passes in front of you as the board, because that’s where the oversight fees come in.”

Attorneys for the district have worked to minimize the risk to M-G, Deetz said, but as in any business venture there is some amount of risk involved on both sides. Though it will not be a financial investment, he said Madison-Grant still has an important part to play in getting the school up and running.

“Our responsibility is to become a knowledgeable partner and help our ACCEL partners come in and make a smooth transition into the Indiana education landscape,” Deetz said. “Because the healthier that the ACCEL schools are, the healthier our partnership is...We do have a human capital output at the beginning to help make sure that this transition goes well.”

The initial agreement calls for a five-year partnership between the district and ACCEL with a planned scaled growth over that time to ensure the program’s quality, Deetz said. After the initial five years, there is language in the contract to allow the partnership to be renewed 10 years at a time twice more, for a possible total length that the original agreement could run for 25 years.

Board member Ronald Stewart asked about language in the agreement that states the district needs to give notice of its intent to continue with the partnership 18 months prior

to the end of the first five-year term, wondering about the process if the district does not want to continue.

Deetz said information regarding the virtual school will be regularly delivered to administrators and the school board, so any issues could be addressed as the contract continues. When it comes time to give notice of an intent to continue, he said it would most likely take the form of a recommendation from the administration voted on by the board whether to move forward or end the partnership.

“There are different scenarios in which would qualify us to be able to request an exit strategy, both for ACCEL and for us the school district,” Deetz said. “If the relationship is not working out like either one of us expected, there is language in here for a mutually agreeable separation as well.”

The contract also allows for the possibility of good faith renegotiation on certain aspects at any time if needed, Deetz said. He said this could cover any number of areas, including potentially renegotiating the percentage of the tuition money the district receives for oversight if the ACCEL school’s ADM skyrockets.