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VDOE and Virginia Ed Strategies to Develop Professional Learning Community For STEM and Computer Science Teachers

BOYDTON, Va. — Governor Ralph Northam and Superintendent of Public Instruction James Lane announced today that the Virginia Department of Education and Virginia Ed Strategies will collaborate to create a professional development program to increase teacher effectiveness and improve in-person, remote and hybrid instruction in science, mathematics and computer science.

The five-year effort is funded through a \$10.8 million dollar Education Innovation and Research grant from the U.S. Department of Education awarded to Virginia Ed Strategies, a South Boston-based nonprofit that supports the efforts of Virginia schools, businesses and communities to prepare students for life and careers.

The grant and project were announced this morning during a news conference at the Mecklenburg County School Board office in Boydton. Joining Northam and Lane for the announcement were Virginia Ed Strategies CEO Jennifer Stevens, Bristol Superintendent and Coalition of Small and Rural Schools of Virginia President Keith Perrigan and Mecklenburg County Superintendent Paul Nichols.

Working in partnership, VDOE and Virginia Ed Strategies will create and implement the Professional Learning by Choice Community — or CHOICE — project to provide high-quality, teacher-directed professional development opportunities and experiences for up to 2,100 middle and high school science, mathematics, and computer science teachers.

“Of the 138 proposals submitted for EIR funding from the U.S. Department of Education, only 20 grants were awarded nationwide in fiscal year 2020. I am proud that Virginia Ed Strategies brought one of these grants home to the commonwealth to support our incredible educators at a time when they need it most,” said Northam. “The CHOICE project will help ensure we are strategically creating opportunities for students who lack access to high-quality STEM education, by equipping Virginia educators in rural school divisions with increased capacity for teaching STEM disciplines in a variety of learning environments.”

“In the short term, participating educators will be better prepared to meet the instructional needs of their students while in-person instruction is limited by COVID-19,” Superintendent of Public Instruction James Lane said. “In the long term, the creation of the Professional Learning by Choice Community will help address statewide and regional shortages of effective teachers for courses that are essential in preparing students for high-demand careers in the STEM fields, including computer science.”

Also supporting the CHOICE project are James Madison University, the Coalition of Small and Rural Schools of Virginia, the Virginia Association of School Superintendents, Virginia ASCD, CodeVA, the Virginia Association of Secondary School Principals, the Virginia School Consortium for Learning, and the Commonwealth Learning Partnership.

“I am thrilled to have such a wealth of knowledge and expertise working with our organization on this new initiative,” Stevens said. “These partners will provide critical guidance in developing and implementing the tools and resources of the CHOICE community, and their collaboration will no doubt be instrumental to the success of this project.”

As one of its first deliverables, the CHOICE project will develop an online dashboard that will include a self-assessment tool allowing teachers to identify their professional development needs. After completing the assessment, teachers will use the dashboard to select and register for courses and professional development programs aligned with their specific needs. The professional development selected by teachers will be paid for by grant funds and will replace 100% of the training required under school division employment contracts during the time teachers participate in the project.

“Teachers participating in the project will access a custom tool to evaluate their professional learning needs relative to their specific context,” Stevens said. “This, in turn, will provide a sense of agency for individual teachers to select classroom-embedded professional learning experiences that align with their individual professional learning needs.”

The grant will also support follow-up instructional coaching, peer-to-peer collaboration and networking, and administrator support to build a sustainable program to increase teacher effectiveness and improve student learning.

CHOICE will begin during the 2021-2022 school year with a pilot program involving approximately 100 teachers selected by Virginia Ed Strategies. The initiative will expand over the course of the five-year grant to include 2,100 teachers.

“By providing teachers with this opportunity to increase their content knowledge and improve their effectiveness, this initiative will make a difference in the lives of tens of thousands of Virginia students,” Lane said. “And we will create a platform that can be expanded and impact teaching and learning statewide. I congratulate Virginia Ed Strategies for its leadership and vision in pursuing this opportunity to improve teaching and learning in the commonwealth.”

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