

Virtual High School Program Presented to Committee

School Committee members were in favor of the pilot program that will offer students many more course options via online instruction.

By [Lauren Costa](#) | 4/11/12



At Tuesday night's School Committee meeting held at [Western Coventry Elementary School](#), Lynne Burke, [Coventry High School](#) Assistant Principal for Student Services presented the [Virtual High School](#) (VHS) Pilot Program to committee members.

The program being tested in its first year with seniors, will allow Coventry High School administrators to offer courses to students that might not normally be offered due to a lack of enrollment requests or faculty. The courses would be taught online in an asynchronous environment by a teacher from Coventry, another district, another state, or even outside of the country.

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Burke explained that the school's Advanced Placement (AP) Biology class enrollment requests went from 18 last year down to six this year, a number too small to fund a face-to-face class. With VHS, the course would still be able to take place, despite the low enrollment at Coventry. Other enrollment fluctuations as well as the inability to offer very specific courses catering to only a small group of students limits the school's ability to offer a more personalized and expansive education.

"The kids dictate what's run and we can't offer everything," said Burke. "When the data tells you that something might not be possible for kids, you have to start to think twice."

The Virtual High School curriculum is made up of rigorous reading and writing assignments, class discussion via message threads, pre-recorded instruction videos, evaluations and personalized communication between students and teachers. VHS also offers a 25:1 student-to-teacher ratio in all of its courses.

The virtual courses are not meant to replace face-to-face ones that are currently offered, instead, they are meant to supplement a student's course load with a subject or area of study that they would not get to take part in otherwise. Students participating in VHS classes would log in to the online class daily and participate for 90 minutes every other day in the school library during one of the normal class periods. VHS teachers are required to respond to a student's questions within 24 hours, grades are posted every two weeks, in-school and online progress is monitored by administrators and parents have access to the student's course password, allowing them to also monitor their child's progress and view grades.

Apart from the monitoring, students taking part in the programs will benefit from an experience that greatly mirrors a growing percentage of courses offered online at colleges and universities, ultimately

preparing them for continued education after high school.

Currently, Coventry High School has two teachers who have signed on to instruct VHS courses, allowing for a total of 50 "seats". Burke explained that having Coventry teachers take part also saves a substantial amount of money compared to solely using instructors outside of the school.

"The total cost is much less than you would think," said Asst. Superintendent James Erinakes. "Everything is approximately \$30,000 and it will go down greatly because a lot of the fees are one time, up-front fees."

At this time, there are 26 senior applications for the program and Burke expects this number may rise one registration begins. Pilot program courses chosen by interested students are Chinese, German, Russian, Computer Science, Engineering, Pre-Vet, Blogging/Wiki Technology and Video Gaming. AP Spanish 5 and AP Environmental Science are also choices that have never been offered at the high school before.

Burke stressed to committee members, as well as CHS students, that the program is not for everyone and after an informational school assembly about the program, students were given a survey about their homework/study practices, focuses and other variables so that administrators could get a better idea about whether or not it would be a good fit.

"We tell students to look at what they're signing up for," said Burke. "The level of rigor, the level of individual work won't work for everyone. This is an option. It's a choice."

"The program gives us different options to think about and offers another point of reference to compare face-to-face with virtual environments," she continued. "Because the kids interact with people from other places, it also exposes them to other perspectives and ways of thinking."

Superintendent Michael Convery explained that Coventry is certainly not the first district in the state to utilize VHS.

"In my point of view from going to various conferences and things, Coventry is ahead in a lot of areas, but in this modality of education, we are behind."

Committee members agreed with the pilot program that is being carried out very quickly.

"I think it is wonderful that we're going to have another choice," said Committee member Nancy Sprengelmeyer. "Some students may even do better in this kind of environment rather than face to face."

"I just feel that if we don't try, we will never know," said Burke. "I think this is going to promote a lot of good conversation when we talk about policies and procedures going forward."