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VDOE Unveils New Digital Learning Resources
Virtual Course and EduWidgets Take Students Beyond Traditional Textbooks

Superintendent of Public Instruction Patricia I. Wright today announced the availability of a new virtual astronomy course on Virginia on iTunes U and the beta release of "EduWidgets," an online authoring application that teachers and students can use to create interactive digital content for classroom devices, tablets and the web.

Wright unveiled the new resources during a visit to Pulaski Elementary in Pulaski County. The rural Southwestern Virginia school division was among the first in the state to replace traditional textbooks in some classes with tablets and Standards of Learning-aligned content, media and apps.

"Tablets loaded with quality content help lighten backpacks and provide experiences that enhance instruction and student learning," Wright said. "And with EduWidgets now available, Virginia teachers will be able to create their own interactive content using a platform developed specifically for them."

The virtual astronomy course is aligned with the commonwealth's science standards and may be used as a stand-alone minicourse or as a supplement to full-year courses in earth science, physics or astronomy. The course is available at no cost via Virginia on iTunes U and is optimized for delivery on iPad. A companion iBook is under development.

Students taking Astronomy will satisfy a state diploma requirement (effective with this year's first-time freshmen) that they complete at least one virtual course. The Virginia on iTunes U course does not require constant Internet access, making it an option for students who lack access at home.

EduWidgets, available at www.eduwidgets.org, can be used to create, share and customize apps (self-contained packages of code) to enliven digital content on websites, e-books, interactive whiteboards and other digital classroom devices. Teachers can use EduWidgets to create interactive timelines, sequences, graphs and images.

"Our teachers look forward to using these tools to create learning experiences for their students that will take them beyond minimum standards and prepare them with college- and career-ready skills," Pulaski County Superintendent Thomas Brewster said.

EduWidgets software was developed using HTML5 to create widgets that work with tablets. For best performance, it requires Chrome, Firefox or Safari. Although Internet Explorer 11 supports many features, it is not fully compliant with HTML5. Earlier versions of Internet Explorer will not support EduWidgets.

Astronomy and EduWidgets were developed by the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) in support of its eLearning Backpack Initiative. The initiative provides grants to help school divisions purchase tablets and content-creation packages for high schools that are not fully accredited.

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