Infrastructure Advisory Council
Meeting Minutes
November 2, 2022

Attendees

- Colleen Bailie — West Haven Library
- Joe Campbell — Connecticut Technical High Schools
- Doug Casey — Connecticut Commission for Educational Technology
- George Claffey — Central Connecticut State University
- Burt Cohen — Office of Consumer Counsel
- Tom Dillon — Independent
- Kerri Kearney — Manchester Public Schools
- Ryan Kocsondy — Connecticut Education Network (CEN)
- Michael Mundrane — University of Connecticut
- Rob Wilson — Somers Public Schools

Discussion

Tom Dillon, Chair of the Infrastructure Advisory Council, welcomed members to the first in-person meeting in three years. After allowing time for introductions, he highlighted the objective of the meeting, to identify specific action items to recommend to the Commission in support of its June 2022 resolution.

Doug provided a brief overview of the four areas of concern: Leadership Commitment, Essential Conditions for Digital Learning, Digital Equity, and Educator Supports. He encouraged members to consider ways to bring about change in each of these areas, with a focus on outcomes.

A number of members identified the need for teachers to receive the training and support needed to make effective use of technology for instruction. However, educators by law must complete annual mandated training, which carries an opportunity cost by taking time away from learning how to use digital tools for instruction. Doug suggested that the Commission provide input to the Department of Education, tasked under PA 22-80 to review the statutes and regulations relating to teacher certification. This set of concerns about professional development echoed those expressed earlier in the day at the Digital Learning Advisory Council meeting.

Addressing the need to provide the essential conditions for digital learning, Colleen Bailie shared that 70 percent of the reference desk requests she oversees at West Haven Public Library are for digital navigation, or one-on-one support for getting online

and leveraging Web-based tools. State agencies and departments have referred residents to their local libraries for assistance with such tasks as submitting unemployment claims, though libraries receive no additional funding to support these service requests. Advisory Council members felt that when State and other agencies effectively outsource support to libraries, funding should be provided to cover these services.

A group of Connecticut libraries have received financial support through a federal Institute of Museum and Library Studies grant to provide for digital navigation services. More generally, libraries need help in offsetting the costs of providing these essential services to patrons. Libraries also provide direct instruction to build digital skills. Colleen shared that the Hamden Public Library has graduated 200 residents in its digital citizenship course this year.

George Claffey suggested that training 211 staff on basic digital navigation troubleshooting could also help Connecticut residents solve problems and find digital state resources. Those staff members could also reference federal aid programs such as the Affordable Connectivity Program and Emergency Connectivity Fund. These programs have assisted households, libraries, and schools in providing devices and Internet connections, and the State should advocate for continued funding for these initiatives.

Members of the Advisory Council encouraged stronger ties between schools and their local libraries. Support for digital literacy and digital navigation should leverage a network of local resources. Several members suggested that schools could remain open later to provide technology support to local residents, perhaps with the help of students under the supervision of teachers and administrators. Just as the Office of Early Childhood has accomplished by providing parents of young children with connected devices, digital tools, and training, the State could incentivize the use of technology as early as possible to get students and families online and developing digital literacy skills.

Doug cited a parallel model with school-based health centers. Some districts provide basic medical screening and treatments to residents after hours, leveraging school nurses and infirmaries. The Commission could encourage a similar model for the provision of digital navigation services. Ryan pointed to community anchors, many of which are connected to CEN, such as churches that already provide technology support to their surrounding communities. Colleen noted that an important reason why residents use such local resources is that they trust the people serving there to help them, much more than they do commercial telecommunications providers.

On the topic of digital equity, Michael Mundrane noted that many people have only ever used a smart phone with a cellular connection. While people can accomplish many basic tasks using their phone, the absence of a computing device and dedicated, high-speed connection limits their experience significantly. However, if

residents have never had the chance to use a computer with a fast connection, it may be hard to convince them of what they are missing (e.g., the ability to revise a resumé, write a term paper, correspond with their state representative, etc.). Colleen noted that her library has given devices to patrons, but only after they have attended digital literacy classes and demonstrated a basic level of proficiency in using the computers. Other libraries have taken similar approaches to ensuring effective use of devices before providing them to patrons. Educating residents, at scale, on the value of a dedicated broadband connection and computer may pose a significant challenge to digital adoption, given the need for one-on-one support.

Advisory Council members discussed ways of demonstrating the impact of digital inclusion efforts. They referenced the mixed results of the Everybody Learns initiative. Many families did not take advantage of free home broadband service offered by the State, and many students did not leverage the cellular hotspots they received through the program. Simply measuring broadband adoption rates does not tell an accurate story of outcomes, rather than inputs (e.g., money spent) or outputs (connections made). The Commission's digital equity efforts will need to define and reflect benefits tied to learning, economic development, public health, and other measures.

Joe Campbell raised the topic of housing, pointing to the opportunity to connect traditionally disenfranchised groups by wiring their residences. Tom Dillon agreed and called for a mandate to provide high-speed access free of charge through public housing and residences that take housing assistance credits. Doug welcomed these suggestions and referenced the "braiding" across current programs, including the Digital Equity Act (Commission lead); Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (DEEP lead); and Community Wireless (CEN lead) to partner with housing agencies and programs to connect our state's residents.

Tom thanked the Advisory Council members for the spirited dialog and specific recommendations, which he promised to take back to the Commission. The meeting adjourned as approximately 3:00 PM.