Digital Learning Advisory Council
Meeting Minutes
April 28, 2022

Attendees

- Nick Caruso — Connecticut Association of Boards of Education (CABE)
- Doug Casey — Connecticut Commission for Educational Technology
- Jonathan Costa — EdAdvance
- Larry Covino — Bristol Public Schools
- Andy DePalma — EASTCONN
- Barbara Johnson — Colchester Public Schools
- Dawn La Valle — Connecticut State Library
- Laura McCaffrey — Archdiocese of Hartford
- Jim Spafford — Manchester Adult Education
- Chinma Uche — CREC Aerospace Academy & CT CS Teachers Association
- Scott Zak — Connecticut State Colleges and Universities

Agenda

- Commission Recommendations

- Digital Inclusion

- CEN Conference

Welcome

Commission member and Advisory Council chair Nick Caruso welcomed members to the meeting just after 1:30 PM. Following a brief overview of the meeting agenda, he transitioned into a discussion around recommendations that the Advisory Council wished to see the Commission adopt.

Commission Recommendations

Nick provided some background to the conversation, citing work during the 2021 summer and fall to collect feedback on the technology-enabled practices that began during the pandemic and that should continue. He noted the limited feedback the Advisory Council received to this prompt, though the group expressed a desire for sustained policy and programs that support the effective use of technology for learning. That work resulted in a draft resolution that Commission members reviewed at the March 2022 meeting. Those recommendations address a number of concerns, including the following:

- Leadership: Encourage and provide guidance on how best to leverage technology for learning.
- Teacher Supports: Ensure that teachers have the opportunity to achieve mastery in their use of digital tools to support personalized learning, with ties to teacher evaluation and continual improvement.
- Student Digital Literacy: Define and support the development of digital literacy skills for all students to support lifelong learning.
- Digital Equity: Identify and support the programs and resources to ensure all students have the devices, broadband, technical support, and skills to tap technology's potential to support learning.

The goal of the meeting would be to hone the set of recommendations contained in that resolution for the Commission's review and potential adoption at its June 6, 2022 meeting. To support the review and revision of the resolution, Doug Casey had previously set up a virtual white board populated with each recommendation, where Advisory Council members could add additional ideas, move concepts into clusters, and engage in both real-time and asynchronous planning.

Jonathan Costa asked that the Commission adopt recommendations that focus on policy and practice around effective teaching and learning, rather than specific funding allocations. He expressed concern that financial investments alone will not bring about positive changes in education and wanted to reduce the risk to program support if changes in funding allocations take place. Nick agreed with this point and wanted to see the Commission take a firm stand, to call agencies and organizations to participate actively in bringing about policy and program changes that leverage technology to strengthen learning outcomes. The group acknowledged that policy often drives funding, so there remains a strong connection between the two.

Members of the group suggested several additions to the above list of recommendations. Advisory Council member Karen Kaplan could not join the meeting and asked Nick to add a recommendation to ensure equity in security and privacy. She highlighted the differences in capabilities that educational institutions have in protecting against cyber-attacks and privacy breaches. Doug welcomed this suggestion and pointed to support coming through the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) to the State and local towns to support this work.

The group also discussed a recommendation around computer science (CS) education. Chinma Uche provided additional background, sharing that the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) is working with Sacred Heart University to pilot a program to support districts in integrating CS into their academic programs. A key challenge in bringing CS to all students is the lack of qualified teachers, which the CSDE's plan addresses: https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/SDE/Computer-Science/Connecticut_Computer_Science_State_Plan_FINAL.pdf.

The increased demand to use technology during the pandemic raised teachers' awareness of their own skill deficits. She expressed the need for ongoing support of teachers in using digital tools effectively, which includes an understanding of CS basics such as computational thinking and basic networking.

Barbara Johnson tied this recommendation to the need for teacher development and evaluation that include the effective use of technology. Without this requirement, educators may not take advantage of current best practices in teaching with technology. Andy DePalma supported this idea and called for a list of discrete, measurable skills. He noted the strength of the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) standards (www.iste.org/iste-standards) as general frameworks, but that these remain difficult to measure. Barbara suggested using a crosswalk of the ISTE and American Association of School Librarians (AASL) standards (standards.aasl.org) for school leaders and educators to identify performance measures. The crosswalks provided by AASL also help educators define, support, and measure student proficiencies in using technology for learning. Doug endorsed this approach and mentioned that the State will provide free professional development, funded by relief dollars, in partnership with ISTE for the second summer in a row.

The volume of and inefficiencies in teacher training remain ongoing challenges in effecting positive change in digital learning. Jonathan Costa cited the existing burden on educators to take annual training in areas such as bloodborne pathogens, without an option to demonstrate mastery in this or any other mandated practice. These mandates mean that teachers may not have time to develop skills in using digital tools and pedagogies. Andy estimated that for $1 per teacher, the State could provide online, mastery-based training for all educators. Taking such an approach would save time and money and create space for teachers to develop skills in teaching with technology.

Larry Covino expressed similar concerns in adult education. He has found it difficult to enlist teachers to serve during the summer and expressed concern that the technology skills that instructors developed during the pandemic may dissipate with the return to in-person learning. Without proper direction and funding from the CGA and other leaders, shifts to in-person–only learning options may continue. Given the challenges that adult learners face — including full-time work, parenting, and other obligations — having self-paced or after-hours digital options remains essential for this group of students.

Advisory Council members discussed the organizations that should champion each initiative. An initial draft identified the Office of the Governor, Connecticut General Assembly (CGA), CSDE, and other groups to lead or support these priorities. The group agreed that defining the recommendations would help identify which stakeholders to engage, based on intended outcomes. For example, given that professional development stems largely from state statute, the process of incentivizing training for teachers around technology should come from the CGA. Doug cited legislation that

empowers the Commission to "request any office, department, board, commission or other agency of the state to supply such reports, information and assistance as may be necessary or appropriate in order to carry out its duties and requirements" (see CGS § 61a). So, the Commission remains in a strong position to call on partner agencies to help put in place its recommendations.

Nick explained that the CGA sets most mandates around curriculum, teacher practices, and other core components of teaching and learning. The CSDE supports and implements these mandates, which should reflect current practices using technology. Various groups have a stake in various aspects of learning, and identifying a single lead may oversimplify the need for coordinated efforts by multiple champions. Dawn La Valle noted that the Connecticut State Library (CSL) sees similar governance challenges in adult learning. Questions of who should lead and who should implement programs, in the midst of local inequities in resources, persist. She did express the opportunity for the Commission to cast a strong vision for digital learning. Nick concurred and encouraged the multiple Commission members participating on the Advisory Council to share these takeaways with the full Commission in June. Before that meeting, Doug agreed to update the list of recommendations — based on the Advisory Council's input — for the Commission to consider adopting.

Digital Inclusion

Doug provided brief updates on upcoming opportunities to address the digital divide. Through the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA), all states are eligible for a Digital Equity planning grant (broadbandusa.ntia.doc.gov/digital-equity-programs). The Commission will lead this work for Connecticut. Doug expressed gratitude for the expertise among Advisory Council members and said he would depend on them as well as their constituent groups for input on program planning and design. As an example of existing, exemplary programs, he noted the CSL's work in convening libraries in support of digital navigator programs underway in libraries across the state. He promised to share additional details about the Digital Equity program following the release of a federal notice of funding opportunity, expected by mid-June.

CEN Conference

Doug welcomed Advisory Council members to the annual CEN Conference on Thursday, May 5. The event features outstanding keynote speakers, dozens of breakout sessions on a variety of educational technology topics, and time to reconnect with colleagues following two years of remote (online) events.

Adjournment

Nick thanked the Advisory Council members for their time and insights and adjourned the meeting at 2:30 PM.