

Digital Learning Advisory Council

Meeting Minutes

April 23, 2020

Attendees

- Katie Bauer — Trinity College
- Nick Caruso — CABE
- Doug Casey — Connecticut Commission for Educational Technology
- Kevin Corcoran — Connecticut State Colleges and Libraries
- Jonathan Costa — EdAdvance
- Larry Covino — Bristol Adult Education
- Andy DePalma — EASTCONN
- Josh Elliott — Fairfield University
- Karen Kaplan — Hamden Public Schools
- Greg Mcverry — Southern Connecticut State University
- Jim Mindek — Connecticut Technical High School System
- Brandon Rush — New Milford Public Schools
- Karen Skudlarek — University of Connecticut
- Jim Spafford — Manchester Adult Education
- Shelley Stedman — Bridgeport Diocese
- Chris Weiss — Riverside School (Greenwich Public Schools)
- Scott Zak — Connecticut State Colleges and Universities

Agenda

- Challenges to the Shift in Remote Learning
- Priorities for Statewide Appropriations
 - Teacher Professional Development and Certification
 - Connecting Students (and Faculty)
 - Shared Instructional Materials (OER)
 - Other
- Recommendations for Policy and Program Next Steps

Meeting Minutes

The items below represent an assimilation of ideas rather than a strict verbatim or chronological record of points shared. Given institutional closings as a result of the Coronavirus outbreak, the meeting took place via Web conference. Members provided input orally and via chat tools, both of which appear in the minutes that follow.

Nick Caruso, Chair of the Digital Learning Advisory Council, welcomed the members and convened the meeting shortly after 9:00 AM. He then turned the meeting over to Doug, who provided a brief overview of the agenda items.

Challenges to the Shift in Remote Learning

The majority of the meeting addressed the steps colleges, schools, and libraries have taken to support learning since closures took place in March to reduce the spread of the Coronavirus.

The conversation began with a discussion around some of the fundamental questions and challenges around remote learning. Several members expressed the need to measure and address deficits in student connectivity. Many learners have limited or no access to the Internet from home. The Commission is conducting a survey that asks schools about the "homework gap," with plans to address these challenges through possible approaches such as volume purchasing of cellular hotspots, or "MiFi" devices. He also noted the Keep Americans Connected Pledge (www.fcc.gov/keep-americans-connected), signed by dozens of Connecticut Internet service providers. These companies have promised to help students get online for free through the company's public wireless access points and by providing free or reduced-price home service for educational purposes.

Karen Kaplan expressed frustration with Comcast in its requirements to provide access MiFis to qualifying families. She mentioned that the company has required individual families to create Comcast accounts to receive MiFis, even though her district (Hamden) was purchasing the devices. She also mentioned that Comcast requires existing customers to terminate and go without services for 30 days in order to receive free service. Others shared that through its Internet Essentials program for lower income families, Comcast takes two months to connect homes to the Internet. Jim Mindek of the Connecticut Technical High School System ordered 200 hotspots from another provider because of Comcast's delays. Onboarding with most providers remains lengthy and complicated, he explained.

Greg McVerry stated that Comcast has successfully deployed many MiFis in his town of New Haven. Even when providers can efficiently roll out such devices, Andy DePalma reminded the group, many rural towns in Connecticut have poor cellular coverage to make MiFis useful to students. Many of the towns in the EASTCONN region do not have 1:1 computer programs and have been scrambling to prepare and deploy devices.

Doug thanked the members for sharing the specific challenges they have encountered and encouraged them to contact him directly with provider issues in the future. The Commission can aggregate and bring these issues to Internet service providers, either directly or in partnership with other State agencies such as the Office of Consumer Counsel, which has a membership role on the Commission.

Several members expressed concern over the mental health of students. Karen Kaplan noted the increased demand for school counselors and the likely increase in funding necessary to hire additional social workers. She also mentioned concerns among districts around grading, attendance, and other otherwise ordinary aspects of teaching and learning. She felt that schools now should try to help maintain a sense of normalcy in students' lives, given the disruptions and changes they are experiencing, rather than insisting on brick-and-mortar models of education standards and metrics.

Advisory Council members also shared administrative concerns facing schools and colleges. Institutions are considering issues such as how to take attendance and whether to continue using letter grades or simply pass/fail marks for the spring semester, given the challenges of ensuring that students have access to high-quality educational experiences, and the underlying inequities that remote learning amplifies. Greg, Shelley Stedman, and Larry Covino noted that many schools have shifted their schedules to provide for synchronous instruction four days a week, instructing students to use the fifth day for self-paced activities and catch-up study. They all expressed a need for a common remote learning model and practical resources that teachers can use to support online instruction.

Andy shared that the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) has tapped the Regional Education Service Centers (RESCs) to provide local support for school districts. Part of their charge will be to provide guidance to teachers on how to accommodate different learning styles in remote learning environments. While the RESCs have strong capabilities in areas such as teacher training, Andy expressed concern that the CSDE's dependence on these agencies to provide school supports represents an unfunded mandate. Jonathan shared his recent experience in working with one of his region's districts in addressing remote learning and the return to school. Staff members' concerns centered almost entirely around physical safety, rather than on digital learning practices. The regional information gathering taking place through the RESCs will help identify and address similar concerns.

Members of the Advisory Council discussed the challenge of quickly configuring and deploying computers for student use. Karen Kaplan acknowledged the generous [gift from the Dalio Foundation](#) of 1,600 Windows laptops to Hamden alone (60,000 statewide). However, she also noted that the computers come with unexpected support demands that were unbudgeted as well as direct costs, such as a \$40,000 antivirus subscription renewal that Hamden will need to assume next year. Andy echoed these concerns, citing the challenge that district technology departments have of troubleshooting family-owned computers.

Priorities for Statewide Appropriations

Following a discussion of current and expected needs, the group addressed where federal relief funds might best support education in Connecticut. Doug provided a brief overview of the education components of the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act. The [Governor's Emergency Education Relief Fund](#) (GEERF) provides \$27,881,682 to Connecticut schools and colleges, and the [Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund](#) (ESSERF) provides \$114,748,937 to districts and the CSDE. Both funds are designed to support remote learning during COVID-19 closures and specifically point to technology investments as a means of providing continuity of learning. Larry noted that adult education programs do not qualify for either fund. (Following the meeting, the U.S. Department of Education did announce forthcoming [Reimagining Workforce Preparation Grants](#).)

Greg expressed concern that these funds would not cover the cost of supporting remote learning, given the economic downturn that the state and country will face. Jen Widness did note that the State has a \$2B Rainy Day Fund that can help address budget shortfalls. Nick expressed his concern that some towns may look at cost savings this current school year, which have resulted from schools being shut, as justification for reducing budgets for next year.

Several members highlighted the challenges that teachers and professors face in switching to distance learning, virtually overnight. Greg shared some of the courses and training he has provided at Southern Connecticut State University (<https://inside.southernct.edu/online-learning>). Karen Skudlarek of the University of Connecticut is providing intensive supports to her faculty as well. Josh Elliott discussed efforts at Fairfield University to ensure instructional continuity. The University has a triage team that can address professors' questions and connect them to specialists who provide guidance and best practices in remote learning. In K – 12 education, districts across the state have provided training to teachers, though some were more prepared than others.

Greg, Shelley, and Josh all supported the idea of a statewide effort to support teacher professional development. Nick mentioned a recent call with leaders of the five largest school districts in Connecticut, where teacher and student support needs are acute. Greg suggested a virtual "unconference," an event in which facilitators could crowd-source the most popular topics, and attendees could enter virtual "rooms" to discuss common challenges, learn from peers, and share best practices. Teachers need grade-specific models of instructional best practices. Greg offered to reach out to [Connecticut EdCamp](#) organizers to share the idea and discuss a collaborative approach to planning the event. Advisory Council members supported the idea and felt that early summer would be the ideal time to hold the conference. Doug agreed to follow up with a call for volunteers to help plan the conference.

As part of this event or as a separate set of deliverables, Shelley expressed the need among teachers for simple, practical guides to online learning. She noted the

availability of many lists of tools and tips, but educators do not have the time to go through all these resources. Having a more authoritative set of guidance would help teachers learn while they serve the needs of students. Karen agreed with this recommendation and noted the need for common sense guidance around the use of video, synchronous versus self-paced learning, and privacy issues. Doug noted the resources already posted to the Commission's [Remote Learning Web page](#), many of which address these concerns, and welcomed additional contributions to share with the broader education community.

To engage students in digital learning, Greg shared the Elm City Webmakers initiative (www.elmcitywebmakers.com) he leads with New Haven Public Schools and the New Haven Public Library. The program allows students to develop Web sites as a way of honing digital storytelling skills through project-based learning. He is looking to scale up the effort through additional funds beyond the grants he has received to date.

Greg, Karen, and other members expressed interest in using television as a medium for instruction. One suggestion was for Connecticut Public Television (CPTV) to provide programming specific to Connecticut schools and learning standards. Doug shared the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) app ThinkAlong and standards-aligned content at www.pbslearningmedia.org. He encouraged districts to partner with their local access television stations to provide airtime for teachers, especially at the elementary level.

As discussed earlier, providing students with devices and Internet connections should remain a top priority for the use of federal funds. Doug noted that districts will receive 90 percent of the ~\$114M awarded through the ESSERF, which they could use to get students online. He shared that increases in and changes to the E-rate program might also provide funding for home access. Larry, Karen Kaplan, and Greg all favored the use of federal dollars to build municipal broadband networks to connect homes to the Internet. Nick echoed this key concern of ensuring broadband for all learners and highlighted this as a central takeaway for the Commission.

Scott Zak positioned the current challenges that schools and colleges face as an opportunity to encourage, if not formalize, regional efficiencies in purchasing, training, and other education activities. Nick pointed to years of CABE research showing that most districts already engage in regional partnerships. Other barriers to cost savings include statutory restrictions and residents' opposition to board proposals. Nick commented that the Commission and Advisory Council have for years developed and promoted best practices in remote learning, advocating for creative and effective uses of technology for teaching and learning. He believes that the rapid shift to remote learning will accelerate this process and help underscore the potential of digital learning tools and practices.

Adjournment

Nick thanked the members for their time and input and encouraged Advisory Council members to continue bringing topics of concern and opportunity to the Commission. He concluded the meeting at approximately 3:00 PM.