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## **Digital Learning Advisory Council**

Meeting Minutes

February 5, 2021

### **Attendees**

- Susan Auchincloss — ReadyCT
- Katie Bauer — Trinity College
- Nick Caruso — Connecticut Association of Boards of Education (CABE)
- Doug Casey — Connecticut Commission for Educational Technology
- Jonathan Costa — EdAdvance
- Andy DePalma — EASTCONN
- Josh Elliott — Fairfield University
- Karen Kaplan — Hamden Public Schools
- Dawn La Valle — Connecticut State Library
- Laura McCaffrey — Archdiocese of Hartford
- 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 — Kolbe Cathedral High School
- Chinma Uche — CREC Aerospace Academy & CT CS Teachers Association

### **Agenda**

- Digital Inclusion — Closing the Digital Divide
- Post-COVID Recommendations
- AASL Standards
- Open Education Resources Planning
- Legislative Session

### **Welcome**

Shortly after 10:00 AM, Digital Learning Advisory Council Chair Nick Caruso called the meeting to order and provided a brief overview of the agenda topics. He asked Doug Casey to introduce the first topic regarding student devices and connectivity.



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## **Digital Inclusion — Closing the Digital Divide**

Doug provided a brief recap of efforts to date to equip students with a home Internet connection through Governor Lamont's Everybody Learns initiative. Most recently, he collected connection totals from the five cable Internet providers in Connecticut that provide broadband to students through the program, as well as utilization rates of cellular hotspots from Kajeet, also part of the Everybody Learns solution set. Doug sent these updates along with original connection request totals to district leaders, asking them to consider the reasons why fulfillment has fallen short of original requests. The intent was to equip schools with information to assist in identifying and addressing ongoing technology gaps to remote learning. He also requested that districts respond to a brief survey to offer their feedback on barriers to home broadband adoption.

Several members offered their perspectives on why students and families have not taken advantage of the free Internet offered through Everybody Learns. Jim Mindek of the Connecticut Technical High School System acknowledged that many of his students are connecting but not through the hotspots provided through the program. He also mentioned hesitation among families to connect via cable broadband, citing their concerns that doing so would obligate them to paid plans in the future. Andy DePalma of EASTCONN echoed these trends, with students not using the Kajeets they received but still showing up for online classes. He also shared that the Office of Early Childhood (OEC) would be leveraging the Everybody Learns connections to get 2,400 families of young children online. Karen Kaplan of Hamden pointed to ongoing struggles with fulfillment through cable companies. She mentioned that families with past due balances often hear they are not eligible for the program, though the State has ensured that families can connect regardless of payments in arrears. Kajeets are much easier to deploy and use, not requiring families to sign up for service. Regardless of whether students have Internet access, she expressed concern over the huge number of students who remain disengaged from remote learning, with high absentee and failure rates.

Doug thanked the members for their insights and asked Dawn La Valle of the Connecticut State Library (CSL) to share her team's work to address the digital divide. The CSL has engaged in a multi-pronged effort to address all aspects of technology access and use. Through a grant with the Connecticut Education Network (CEN), the CSL is connecting libraries to high-speed broadband. A recent survey in partnership with Southern Connecticut State University helped identify needs among libraries and their patrons around digital access, leading to the formation of a Digital Inclusion Task Force. The group includes Commission and Advisory Council members Burt Cohen, Josh Elliott, Sabina Sitaru, and Doug, among others. Work of the Task Force will include the development of a Connecticut Digital Inclusion Alliance, which will address the five components of digital inclusion: affordable, robust broadband Internet service; Internet-enabled devices; access to digital literacy training; technical support; and online applications and content to support self-sufficiency and participation in society (see full definition from the National Digital Inclusion Alliance, [www.digitalinclusion.org](http://www.digitalinclusion.org)).



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The CSL plans to launch a statewide Digital Navigators program, modeled in part on the [Tech League](#) initiative from the Salt Lake City, Utah, Library.

Members of the Advisory Council welcomed the CSL's plans. Andy as well as Greg McVerry of Southern Connecticut State University underscored the opportunity to engage students in the refurbishing of older computers to distribute to needy families and adult learners. Jim Spafford of Manchester Adult Education stated that he is speaking with technology companies to purchase low-cost computers coming off of multi-year leases. Katie Bauer of Trinity College commended Dawn's work and asked how academic libraries can help. She mentioned Trinity's provision of Internet access to community visitors as well as free access to digital content collections and the College's writing initiative. Dawn welcomed Trinity's participation and noted that the Digital Inclusion Task Force includes two academic librarians, who are committed to engaging with institutions of higher education as partners in this work.

Nick returned the conversation to connectivity and suggested the need for standard speeds for remote teaching and learning. Chinma Uche of the Aerospace Academy echoed this idea, citing difficulties in her household with she and her spouse teaching and two of her children working from home. Doug underscored the context of speed, with Chinma's situation as an example: Bandwidth needs increase with the number of users and types of usage. He also referred members to standards shared from the [Federal Communications Commission](#) (FCC) and the [State Educational Technology Directors Association](#) (SETDA) shared in advance of the meeting. Andy welcomed this idea and called for providers to allow for faster speeds as the bandwidth needs of households increase.

### **Post-COVID Recommendations**

Doug introduced the next topic, asking Advisory Council members for their thoughts and recommendations for the Commission regarding post-COVID education policy and practice. Prior to the meeting, Jonathan Costa of EdAdvance had suggested a single, statewide virtual academy. Andy welcomed this idea, citing the membership fee of \$5,000 to join Virtual High School. Instead, he suggested that districts could leverage a shared library of courses, especially those with typically low enrollments within a single school.

Greg strongly urged the adoption of a single catalog of online general education courses within the Connecticut State Colleges and Universities. Offering online courses could also help increase dual-enrollment programs, in which students attend courses and earn college credits. This approach would also allow professors to teach anywhere. Greg also mentioned the opportunity for teacher preparation programs to provide instructional services through its pre-service candidates to needy organizations. He mentioned SCSU's assistance with the Clifford Beers clinics as an example.



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Jonathan encouraged the use of online teaching approaches such as those mentioned when they benefit student agency and choice. He offered to host a "Thought Exchange," an open-ended survey tool asking visitors about what worked during the pandemic that they would like to keep. Other members welcomed this suggestion, and Nick pledged to share it with the Commission members for their official endorsement.

### **AASL Standards**

At the November 2020 meeting of the Digital Learning Advisory Council and December 2020 Commission meeting, discussion took place around adoption of the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) standards ([standards.aasl.org](http://standards.aasl.org)). As a follow up to those discussions, Doug shared the standards site as well as [supporting documentation](#) around how the AASL standards support media literacy. Barbara Johnson, who leads the Connecticut Association of School Librarians (CASL) as well as the Connecticut Educators Computer Association (Connecticut's ISTE chapter) has advocated for the adoption of the AASL standards but was unable to join today's meeting.

Doug did share that the State Department of Education was exploring a recommendation to the State Board of Education to adopt the standards as guidance for schools that have school library staff and facilities. Shelley Stedman of Kolbe Cathedral High School, and the past CASL president, endorsed the AASL standards for several reasons. First, they encourage a collaborative approach to teaching digital and media literacy, beyond the confines of a physical library and in partnership with other educators. She acknowledged the value of the ISTE standards ([www.ct.gov/iste](http://www.ct.gov/iste)), which provide a framework for students, educators, and leaders around digital learning and digital literacy. She offered that the AASL standards provide more specific language around the same competencies that everyone in the education community should possess. In Barbara's absence, Nick suggested that the group table the discussion for the next Advisory Council meeting.

### **Open Education Resources Planning**

Doug briefly mentioned that the Commission has received funding to design and launch an open education resources (OER) repository as part of the Go Open CT initiative ([www.GoOpenCT.org](http://www.GoOpenCT.org)). He welcomed members of the Advisory Council with interest in OER to contribute their expertise to the planning behind the site, scheduled to launch in the summer of 2021. Katie Bauer offered her assistance with the work.

### **Legislative Session**

In the midst of a long legislative session, the members discussed several different education concerns. First, Nick shared that he did raise during the December 2020 Commission meeting (see [related notes](#)) the issue of professional development mandates discussed at the last Advisory Council meeting. Given that the Governor's Workforce Council Strategic Plan already calls for a review of mandated teacher



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training (see [page 22 of the plan](#)), the Commission members did not take up any action on the matter of reducing the burden of required professional development. Jonathan Costa asked about legislation concerning data privacy (e.g., [HB-6169](#), An Act Establishing a Task Force to Study the State's Data Privacy Laws, and [SB-435](#), An Act Concerning Compliance with the Student Data Privacy Laws of the State). Doug noted the development and publication in 2019 of a report from the Data Privacy Task Force that he chaired, with a number of recommendations to strengthen the existing student data privacy law in Connecticut. He encouraged members and their elected officials to consider that set of guidance. He also mentioned that the Department of Administrative Services has requested modifications to the statute governing the Commission to reinstate four member positions, one each from CECA, CASL, and the two teachers' unions, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the Connecticut Educators Association (CEA).

### **Adjournment**

Nick thanked the Advisory Council members for their time, insights, and engagement. He encouraged members to continue to reach out to him or any member of the Commission with ideas or concerns tied to digital learning. He concluded the meeting at approximately 11:30 AM.