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## **Digital Learning Advisory Council**

### Meeting Minutes

February 3, 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
- Josh Elliott — Fairfield University
- Dawn La Valle — Connecticut State Library
- Laura McCaffrey — Archdiocese of Hartford
- Jim Mindek — Connecticut Technical High School System
- Karen Skudlarek — University of Connecticut
- Josh Smith — Region 15 Public Schools
- Jim Spafford — Manchester Adult Education
- Chinma Uche — CREC Aerospace Academy & CT CS Teachers Association
- Scott Zak — Connecticut State Colleges and Universities

### **Agenda**

- Recommendations on Continuing Best Practices in Digital Learning
- Digital Literacy Supports for Adults
- Go Open CT
- Use of Personal Devices for Learning

### **Welcome**

Nick Caruso, Chair of the Commission's Digital Learning Advisory Council, welcomed members to the meeting just after 1:00 PM. He reviewed the agenda with attendees and transitioned into the first topic.

### **Recommendations on Continuing Best Practices in Digital Learning**

Nick summarized work to date on a statewide survey of best practices. In the summer of 2021, Jonathan Costa proposed and provided hosting for the survey, which allowed any member of the public to respond to the question, "What about school during the pandemic is worth keeping as we return to in-person education?" The [final results](#) come from a total of 190 individuals, 140 of whom identified themselves as schoolteachers. Most pointed to the benefits of using technology for tactical purposes, such as conducting parent-teacher conferences, leveraging learning-management systems for



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assigning and collecting homework, and the need for more training for educators. Nick encouraged the group to recommend to the broader Commission specific action items from the survey.

Several themes came out of the ensuing discussion. Jonathan pointed to the lack of responses and the type of suggestions as indicators that remote learning during 2020 – 2021 reflected a reactive versus intentional approach to learning with technology. He encouraged the adoption of a design approach to any use of technology as opposed to jumping to extremes (e.g., all remote or all in-person). He provided the example of learning during inclement weather days, which has taken place successfully using a mix of technology and print instructional materials, synchronous and asynchronous instructional approaches.

Andy DePalma encouraged the use of technology to allow students to demonstrate mastery of learning and to avoid the simple substitution of digital tools to emulate in-person learning (e.g., Zoom lectures). He and Josh Smith pointed to the current and future demands of the workforce, which call for the creation and remixing of content to communicate ideas. Teachers need support to teach these higher-level skills, a point Barbara Johnson reinforced. Josh reiterated that these demands require nothing short of a holistic rethinking of the education system to ensure proper funding and resources for schools. Chinma Uche encouraged a balance between what students know (mastery of content) and what they can apply with that knowledge. Technology affords powerful ways to support both of those objectives.

On the topic of sustainability, Nick pointed to the need for local schools to pay for the devices and student Internet connections that federal relief funds, the State, and the Dalio Foundation paid for over the last two years. Barbara mentioned that some districts are deciding not to continue with 1:1 computer programs because they are too expensive to maintain. She cited Colchester's choice to discontinue its 1:1 program at the elementary level.

Equity of access remains a challenge for learners of all ages. Dawn La Valle noted that 23 percent of households in the state do not have high-speed Internet. Ensuring digital equity also requires access to devices, technical support, and skill development so that K – 12, college, and adult learners can fully engage in school and society. Jim Spafford echoed these ideas, underscoring the benefits of supporting multiple generations within the same household. Chinma shared her firsthand experience as a teacher, where she sees some students applying digital tools in masterful ways, whereas others clearly do not have any experience with content creation and problem-solving using technology. Educators need support in the form of ongoing professional development, and she encouraged openness to developing new teaching approaches. She stated that many teachers are happy to be done with remote learning and do not embrace the use of technology as part of their pedagogy.



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Nick thanked the members for their input and suggested that he present these ideas to the Commission as a list of digital learning priorities. Doug agreed and saw the publication of a formal report as a means of encouraging dialog and application of such best practices that can help guide the next statewide educational technology plan and improve educational opportunities at the local level.

### **Digital Literacy Supports for Adults**

The earlier discussion of effective technology use for younger students transitioned into the next topic on the agenda, how best to support the development of digital literacy skills among adults. Doug asked the group to consider ways to support these efforts, whether through the definition of specific standards, microcredentials, funding streams, or legislative changes.

To provide context for the group, Larry Covino shared some details about current programs in Connecticut. Funding exists for three central activities in adult education programs: high school degree (graduate equivalency diploma, or GED) attainment; English as a second language (ESL); and U.S. citizenship. None of these tracks mandates the inclusion of digital literacy training, even though the effective use of technology remains central to college and career readiness, the application of English language skills, and engaging fully as a U.S. citizen.

Jim Spafford referenced the latest [Adult Education Program Profile](#), which highlights the 322,234 Connecticut adults without a high school degree and 120,195 who do not have a mastery of the English language. Nick encouraged the Advisory Council members to compare those totals to the 513,079 students educated in Connecticut public schools during the same time period (2020 – 21). Jim noted that many adult education classes require students to use tools such as learning management systems and the [Adult Virtual High School](#) platform and yet receive no discrete funding to teach digital literacy skills. As Larry pointed out, the State of Connecticut demands some level of technology proficiency from users of its hiring portal, [CT Hires](#), and yet does not fund the development of such skills.

The group acknowledged the need to support adult technology skill development and explored various approaches to meet this demand. Larry noted past attempts to obtain a statewide license to the Northstar digital literacy curriculum and assessment platform (see [www.digitalliteracyassessment.org](http://www.digitalliteracyassessment.org)). Changes to the state statute defining adult learning objectives and allowable activities ([CGS § 10-69](#)) could also include specific language around technology training and mastery.

Doug mentioned the possibility of a statewide digital literacy “badge” or credential and noted the one developed already by the Connecticut State Colleges and Universities. Jim agreed that a common badge would be helpful and underscored the importance of having employers engaged in the development of such a credential, one they would acknowledge and value in considering job candidates.



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Dawn highlighted work underway through the Connecticut Libraries and Partners for Digital Equity initiative. The group is conducting asset-mapping activities to determine where digital navigator programs already exist and has developed resources aligned with the National Digital Inclusion Alliance ([NDIA](#)) to spur an expansion of such programs in communities across the state. She invited members to consider joining these efforts, coordinated through the Connecticut State Library.

Jonathan suggested linking strategic planning at the K – 12 level to adult literacy efforts. For example, districts develop their own “portrait of the graduate,” and efforts to unify these matriculation goals into a common standard should include digital literacy outcomes. He also mentioned the Connecticut State Department of Education’s development of a five-year plan around equity and excellence and suggested a listening session with the Commission and its Advisory Council members to identify goals tied to digital literacy. Doug and Nick pledged to bring these ideas to the Commission and encourage alignment of efforts with other agencies, such as the Office of Workforce Strategy, that are invested in learning and economic development.

### **Go Open CT**

Doug briefly encouraged members to visit [www.GoOpenCT.org](http://www.GoOpenCT.org), the statewide open education resources repository. He welcomed ideas for using the platform. For example, districts and colleges can use it to develop curriculum during the school year or over the summer, either at the local level or by combining forces with teams working on similar initiatives at other institutions.

### **Use of Personal Devices for Learning**

As context for the last agenda item, Jonathan explained that some schools have taken a strict approach to the use of personal devices in the classroom. One district has plans to purchase bags where students drop their cell phones during the day. This type of policy removes the opportunity for students to learn how to use their devices in productive ways. As a public school superintendent, Josh pointed to such practices as futile and noted the damage that some students experienced during the pandemic where they received little positive guidance on appropriate device use. Andy agreed, given the ubiquity of devices and need to model effective technology use for students. Jim Mindek pointed to parents as important partners in this work, though engaging them can often prove challenging.

Nick and Doug welcomed the input and suggested that the Commission consider issuing a statement encouraging the continued use of devices for learning and positive social interactions.

### **Adjournment**

Nick thanked the Advisory Council members for their time and insights and adjourned the meeting at 2:20 PM.