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Digital Learning Advisory Council

Meeting Minutes

January 30, 2024

Attendees

- Nick Caruso — Connecticut Association of Boards of Education (CABE)
- Doug Casey — Connecticut Commission for Educational Technology
- Jonathan Costa — EdAdvance
- Larry Covino — Connecticut Association for Adult and Continuing Education
- Andy DePalma — EASTCONN
- Josh Elliott — Fairfield University
- Shaune Gilbert — ReadyCT
- Jody Goeler — Connecticut Association of Boards of Education (CABE)
- Barbara Johnson — Colchester Public Schools
- Josh Smith — Region 15 Public Schools
- Chinma Uche — CREC Aerospace Academy
- Scott Zak — Connecticut State Colleges and Universities

Strategic Plans

Digital Learning Advisory Chair Nick Caruso began the meeting by welcoming those in attendance and sharing two agenda items: an overview of national and state strategic plans, and policies addressing the use of smart phones and the use of artificial intelligence (AI). Following introductions among the advisory members, Doug Casey provided an overview of several strategic plans:

- National Educational Technology Plan: On January 22, the United States Education Department (USED) released a revised National Educational Technology Plan (tech.ed.gov/netp). The document includes best practices and recommendations in three areas: equity of access, equity of design, and equity of use. This framing of digital learning best practices addresses the essential conditions of connections and computers (equity of access) that enables educators and administrators to create lessons, units, and assessments that fully leverage technology for learning (equity of design). Student engagement with technology in meaningful ways can help to personalize and deepen learning at scale, leading to equity of use. The new plan provides recommendations to state leadership organizations and local districts. [Page 76](#) of the plan highlights Connecticut's work in linking digital equity to learning.



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- Connecticut Digital Equity Plan: The Commission has led the federal Digital Equity Program on behalf of the state and released a draft digital equity plan, "[Connecticut: Everyone Connected](#)," on December 20. The plan reflects a year of research, with input from more than 7,000 residents through surveys and focus groups regarding the barriers they face to affording, accessing, and using technology. Doug shared that nearly 500 people have submitted feedback on the draft plan, which addresses gaps in broadband, device, training, and support across Connecticut. The Commission will submit the plan for final approval in February.

Josh Elliott and Josh Smith both offered input on the definition of "covered populations," those groups prioritized under federal Digital Equity Program guidelines. Regarding the covered population of those living in households at or below 150 percent of the poverty line, both members stated that people living above this income level still struggle with basic needs, including access to technology

- Connecticut State Education Technology Goals and Plan: Doug thanked the Advisory Council members for their engagement in developing the state ed tech plan, which the full Commission approved at its [December 4, 2023 meeting](#). The plan includes initiatives across five areas: technology-enabled learning, digital equity, competencies, sustainability, and data privacy and security. Commission members have identified funding sustainability as a top priority, and so the advisory council members began a discussion around this topic.

Technology Policy

Nick welcomed Jody Goeler, CAFE's Senior Staff Associate for Policy Services. Jody served most previously as the superintendent of Hamden Public Schools and now develops model policies for school boards across the state. Soon after joining CAFE, he began research into the use of AI in schools, a topic that districts are still wrestling with in Connecticut and nationally. Following that work, he developed an AI policy for Connecticut schools. He and his team are conducting a broad review of technology-related policies, especially given the expansion of digital tools and teaching practice brought about through the shift to remote learning during the pandemic.

In addition to an AI policy, CAFE has prioritized a review of cell phone policies, given research indicating the social and emotional harm extensive use of mobile apps may cause. Jody questioned the need for student-owned cell phones in school, given the provision of computers on a 1:1 ratio in most schools, at most grades. Pressure for students to have phones at school often comes from parents, who want to remain in contact with their children. And yet even well-intentioned parents, in addition to mobile apps, can disrupt learning through persistent interruptions delivered through student cell phones. Jody characterized the current model policy from CAFE as extremely permissive, leaving it to building administrators and teachers to determine appropriate



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use. He welcomed input from members of the advisory council regarding guidance that CABE should offer to schools on these topics.

Jonathan Costa encouraged thoughtful, responsible use of phones and other devices, leveraging the educational environment as an opportunity to teach and model such use. The current confusion around policy reflects in some ways a failure of leaders and educators to refer to simple “all-or-nothing” policies rather than teaching students the upside and downside of technology. He encouraged statute, policies, and practices that are not just designed to avoid worst-case scenarios. Chinma Uche agreed and underscored the need for teacher training needed.

Andy DePalma echoed these comments and called for schools to address the cultural aspects of technology use, not just the device. Specifically, apps on mobile devices vie for the attention of students and adults. As Jonathan had noted, schools need to teach learners on how apps are engineered to monopolize attention so that learners can use discernment in how — and how much — to use technology. Josh Smith agreed, underscoring the challenge of teaching students healthy use of devices not just during school day but also afterward. He noted that often parents demonstrate poor etiquette and do not respect healthy barriers to using technology. Jonathan sees the beginnings of a legislative reckoning with technology companies as federal and state lawmakers look at addressing the addictive nature of apps that companies have engineered.

Doug thanked the members for their comments and welcomed specific suggestions for the contributions that leadership organizations such as the Commission and CABE can make in support of the challenges schools face with technology-related policy and behavior. Jody saw phones as covered under general responsible use policies and welcomed any model language members wished to recommend. Jonathan encouraged a “positive-first,” affirmative approach, with policies that point to the beneficial uses of technology rather than listing behaviors to avoid. Josh agreed and commended the work of Josh Elliott at Fairfield in preparing teachers to model effective use of technology.

Nick argued for relief of or restructuring of mandated professional development in other areas to create the space needed for educators to learn how to account for technology in instructional practice. He noted that CABE frequently counsels districts on how to translate policy into practice when technology and other types of challenges emerge. Doug agreed to follow up with Nick and Jody on next steps and suggested at the least that both the Commission and CABE continue to share best practices and resources for leaders and educators.

Online Learning

For the final topic of the meeting, Doug welcomed input and suggestions on furthering best practices in online learning. As background, he mentioned the State’s Remote Learning Commission (<https://portal.ct.gov/SDE/Remote-Learning-Commission>), which



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addressed the request from State legislators to assess the cost and scope of establishing a statewide online school. That group did issue guidance and a final report on the narrow scope of legislators' research question. Doug suggested that a broader view of current and promising practices would support creative and effective uses of technology to expand learning opportunities. Chinma agreed with the need to explore such models. She noted the example of schools not having the demand to hire a teacher for, say, a BC Calculus class but still wanting to meet the needs of students wishing to take the course. Context, landscape study of current best practices, background of committee.

Josh Smith cited work in Waterford to develop a model combining in-person and online learning, with leaders there working with legislators to address limits in blended learning that are restricted by state statute. Many districts use services such as Virtual High School and have teamed with institutions such as Brigham Young University and Johns Hopkins University to have their graduate students provide K – 12 students with tutoring services. Doug expressed interest in assessing data sets that may reflect the use of online courseware for students, perhaps through the teacher-course-schedule (TCS) report that districts submit. Josh Smith offered to design a brief survey on virtual learning to share with superintendents. Larry Covino shared a promising use case in adult education taking place in Kentucky. That state is developing an all-online school to expand course offerings.

With several takeaways from the meeting, Nick thanked the members for their insights and called the meeting to a close at 4:30 PM.