

Online and Digital Learning in Minnesota

Report of the Online and Digital Learning Advisory Council January 2014 - December 2014

The Online and Digital Learning Advisory Council was created by the Minnesota Legislature Online Learning Option Act MS 124D.095 in 2005 and reauthorized in 2009 and 2013.

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Introduction

In an ever-evolving technological society, there are many things that continue to be of importance to education in our schools. There continues to be a divide among school districts in the technology and broadband Internet access available to students and staff. New open educational resources (OER) are being developed that districts need to tap into in order to bring cost-effective, standards-based instruction to their students. Teachers in training need to have the skills necessary to provide the classroom structure that can cultivate the resources and climate for their classrooms to personalize instruction for their students. Additionally, online programs and traditional school districts need to be provided a degree of latitude to meet state testing requirements and continue effective learning in unique circumstances.

Digital tools and skills increase the productivity, scope, and magnitude of potential activity and impact that students will have. These resources can be cultivated through the use of a repository of free, open educational units/lessons/courses that are available for use. There are a variety of Minnesota providers that are curating and creating these learning opportunities. The need is for the public funding to further develop these resources and to expand the breadth of these resources to impact students in more grade levels.

Teaching students to use these OER resources necessitates using an individualized approach that would also increase the productivity, scope, and magnitude of efforts we make moving students forward. In order to begin to utilize the tools, both students and teachers need high quality examples of the technologies that are available to improve learning. Teachers in training need to demonstrate their effectiveness in providing this type of instruction to their students in order to personalize their learning opportunities. To individualize instruction and maximize each student's progress, each student needs access to a device, a broadband Internet connection, high quality digital content and teachers trained to help them use it.

To make the best use of these resources and practices, online learning providers need to have the opportunity to test their students in ways that make the most sense to their programs and the students' needs. Districts must be allowed to engage in flexible approaches to student engagement and learning in the cases of emergency situations, such as inclement weather, while still maintaining attendance requirements for state aid.

We hope the Commissioner and the Legislature recognize the impressive accomplishments of Minnesota schools, teachers and educational leaders and understand the innovative initiatives under way. As you will read in this report, the State of Minnesota is very highly ranked in what we have already begun. It is our goal to continue this trajectory to become a leader in the area of online learning – to remove inequities in order to have fair and equal access to a wealth of free and accessible online learning resources for all students; to prepare our teachers for a career in providing individualized instruction; to promote online learning providers by ensuring that they can meet state expectations in a way that works best for their programs and students; and to be proactive in providing consistent learning opportunities for the students in our state despite inclement weather or other unforeseen emergency circumstances.

The Online and Digital Learning Advisory Council looks forward to your review of our work and a continuing relationship of seeking to serve Minnesota students to the best of our abilities.

K-12 Online Learning Advisory Council Members

- Christy Buxman, Charter School Teacher, Cyber Village Academy
- Jonathan Campbell (Business), Assistive Technology Specialist, PACER.org/Founder of Love It to Bits
- Gigi Dobosenski, Co-Director, EdVisions Off Campus
- Trish Harvey, Assistant Professor - Advanced Learning Technologies, Hamline University
- Douglas Johnson, Director, Media Technology, Mankato Public Schools
- Gary R. Langer, Executive Director, MN Learning Commons
- Kelly Dietrich, Assistant Principal and Special Education Coordinator, MTS-MN Virtual High School
- Jo McClure, Program Director, Infinity Online
- Edna McKenzie, Special Education Advisory Panel, West Metro Education District
- Lynette L. Olson, Solutions with a Purpose, Program Evaluation/Accreditation, Central Minnesota
- Sheri Steinke, Director of Online Learning, Normandale Community College
- Jonathan W. Voss, Director of Teaching and Learning, Intermediate District 287
- Michelle Yener, Capella University, Course Quality Assurance Analyst
- Ned Zimmerman-Bence (Business), National Repository of Online Courses (NROC), Implementation Manager

MDE Liaison

- Deborah W. Proctor, Online Learning and Digital Specialist

Purpose and Structure of the Advisory Council

Purpose: The advisory council shall make policy recommendations to the commissioner and committees of the legislature having jurisdiction over kindergarten through grade 12 education annually by December 15 of each year, including implementation plans based on recommendations from previous councils and task forces related to online and digital learning.

The third MN K-12 Online Learning Advisory Council was authorized in 2013 by the Minnesota Legislature in [statute 124D.095 Subd. 10](#). Members were appointed in September 2013 and the first meeting held October 11, 2013. The Council consists of 14 members representing education stakeholders from across the state. This report includes findings and recommendations from the first full year of the Advisory Council's operations.

Minutes from meetings and support documents are available at the [MN Online and Digital Learning Advisory Council website](#). All meetings are open to the public and dates are posted on the [MN Department of Education website](#).

Key previous documents

- [Historical Background of Online Learning Reports and Legislation](#).
- [Guiding Principles](#) for the current term.
- [Definitions of Online and Digital Learning Terminology for 2013](#).

[Council Report December 2013](#)

Summary of Recommendations

1. Open Educational Resources (OER)

- 1.1. Determine a funding mechanism to support OER.
- 1.2. Support OER initiatives that ensure quality and provide a structure to assist in teacher adoption.

2. Professional Development

- 2.1. Adopt standards, criteria and a review process to support teachers in meeting the requirements to gain the “knowledge and skills to accommodate the delivery of digital and blended learning and curriculum and engage students with technology.”
- 2.2. Support training to teach in a digital learning classroom that is delivered in a flexible, on-demand format and that models effective use of educational technologies and pedagogies in a blended or online educational format.

3. Broadband Internet access

- 3.1. Support the recommendations of the Governor’s Broadband Taskforce to ensure equity of access to high speed telecommunications for all Minnesotans.
- 3.2. Expand funding for the Telecommunications Equity Access program to ensure cost-effective, high-speed broadband access to schools.
- 3.3. Provide state funding at least at the level recommended by the Governor for programs that provide access to the valuable collections in Minnesota libraries and to a wide variety of digital services.

4. Online Learning Providers

- 4.1. Review testing requirements that have had an onerous impact on students in full-time online schools: specifically, allow districts/schools to provide ACT Plus Writing through ACT testing sites in SY 2016 and beyond whenever participation in the state administration is impossible.
- 4.2. Review the MDE re-approval process with the 18 programs which have undergone the process. Meet with stakeholders to discuss and identify improvements in the process based on stakeholders concerns and comments.
- 4.3. Maintain current balance of innovation and oversight and allow for implementation of current policies before making significant changes.

5. Emergency planning

- 5.1. Allow for flexible alternatives to engage students when they cannot attend school;
- 5.2. Define attendance based on academic work and progress;

Provide funding for days when students attend by participating in remote activities.

Status of online and digital learning in the state

Minnesota is recognized as a leader in innovative policies and programs that promote the expansion of student choice and opportunity in digital education. A full report of online learning in states is available in [Keeping Pace with Online Learning 2014](http://www.kpk12.com/reports/) (found at <http://www.kpk12.com/reports/>).

Minnesota is noted in this report as one of the few states that provides the full range of supplemental and fully online opportunities to all students in elementary, middle and high school.

Minnesota leads in the policy arena as well. The long history of support for student choice in open enrollment, charter schools and dual college enrollment extends to online opportunities. With a number of fully online schools that operate statewide, any student in grades K-12 has the opportunity to choose online enrollment. Minnesota is also one of the few states that allows for student choice at the course level through supplemental online enrollment options. When funding follows students to the course level, students can remain enrolled in their home district and enhance their learning opportunities with advanced courses, world languages, unique electives and flexible scheduling available through online courses. This has been an area of considerable growth and attention to oversight in the enrollment options available to students.

The [Digital Learning Now Report Card](http://digitalllearningnow.com/) developed by the Foundation for Excellence in Education (<http://digitalllearningnow.com/>) reported Minnesota as having the third highest ranking among states in 2013. While differences in emphasis exist on various elements, in the core areas of quality content, instruction and access to opportunities, Minnesota is identified as a national leader.

Blended learning has become a key element in educational planning and has received the greatest attention in school reform efforts. By allowing for a connection to home and school through the use of technology, blended learning promotes the transformation of how students learn and expands access. While it is difficult to measure how much blended learning is taking place because of the differences in definitions and reporting criteria, an overwhelming majority of schools are infusing digital learning into their classrooms through:

- device initiatives: provide laptops, tablets or other devices to each student in a school or grade level;
- flipped classrooms: offer ways for students to receive instruction outside the school day and use classroom time for working on collaborative projects;
- blended online courses: provide flexible scheduling where students meet part-time in a supervised school setting and work part-time online, either in school or remotely.

Support for school districts in exploring, developing, implementing and sustaining these initiatives is the most pressing need to ensure success. A variety of regional and statewide cooperative efforts have arisen to aid districts in their efforts:

- Minnesota Learning Commons (MnLC)
- Minnesota Online Learning Alliance (MNOLA)
- Minnesota Partnership for Collaborative Curriculum (MPCC)
- Minnesota Education Technology Network (METN)

State support for the goals and programs initiated by these organizations is critical to ensure success and continuing improvement.

Recommendations

1. Open Educational Resources (OER)

- 1.1. Determine a funding mechanism to support OER.
 - 1.1.1. Reward public schools, either individually or through consortia, that devote a percentage of their curriculum budget to the implementation, and development where needed, of high quality collaborative, open educational resources. A key benefit will be to focus critical funds on developing and sharing expertise and tailored curricula within and between individual schools and school systems.
 - 1.1.2. Commit a matching portion of the budget committed by a district or charter school to implement and create digital materials that are made available under an open license. These matching funds would be dedicated to training teachers in the implementation of digital curriculum in the classroom.
- 1.2. Support OER initiatives that ensure quality and provide a structure to assist in teacher adoption.
 - 1.2.1. Establish an outreach strategy to connect teachers and their administrators with OER options and benefits.
 - 1.2.2. Form a recognition program for teachers who have implemented OER and shown leadership in OER implementation through the professional development of their colleagues.
 - 1.2.3. Include training in the implementation (including understanding of copyright and licensing) and evaluation of OER in the pre-service preparation of teachers in Professional Development Recommendations (see Part 2 below).
 - 1.2.4. Provide support and facilitation of review processes that ensure quality for OER.
 - 1.2.5. Support efforts to create quality guidelines for OER adoption. The extraordinary expansion of open educational resources in the last few years has accelerated the pace of adoption by making it financially feasible for public schools to make a rapid transition to digital content. The availability of high-quality, low-cost digital resources for use across the spectrum of site-based classroom, blended, and fully online settings has become an important element touching fair and equal access, quality assurance and teacher training. As public schools move to implement digital learning through 1:1 device initiatives, flipped, blended, and other learning programs, the notion that all teachers will be using digital content is becoming a reality.

Implementation progress

- [Minnesota Learning Commons \(MnLC\)](https://mnlearningcommons.us/) (https://mnlearningcommons.us/): An organization established by a joint powers agreement of its three partners, the University of Minnesota, MN State Colleges and Universities, and the MN Department of Education, the MnLC implemented an Open Education Resources project in FY15. The inter-system project sponsored by the Minnesota Learning Commons will research and develop OER collaboration aligned across systems for quality resources and rubrics. In this effort, tools and resources for educator and subject matter experts in Minnesota are provided for collaboration, evaluating, sharing, and authoring Open Education resources for public education.

- [Minnesota OER Commons](https://www.oercommons.org/hubs/minnesota/) (https://www.oercommons.org/hubs/minnesota): A Minnesota hub site was established in 2014. This hub is within the national OER Commons and provides a robust platform for curating, storing, sharing, and developing OER. Each partner in the MnLC has a focused project around OER initiatives.
- [Minnesota Digital Curriculum Catalog](http://mndigitalcatalog.org/) (http://mndigitalcatalog.org/): The Minnesota OER Commons now houses the cataloged content. In the new hub it is possible to build a community of teachers in MN that use, share, remix, and author new content that is aligned to MN K-12 Academic Standards. The content moved into the Minnesota OER Commons was developed as a part of a legislative requirement to build and index a catalog of digital content aligned to MN K-12 Academic Standards.
- [Minnesota Partnership for Collaborative Curriculum](http://mncollaborativecurriculum.org/) (http://mncollaborativecurriculum.org/): Launched in 2013 with the goal of creating open digital courses for grades 3-12 in Math, English/Language Arts, Science and Social Studies, the Partnership has 180 educational district members and has developed 20 courses for partners to pilot. All courses are aligned to Minnesota academic standards and reviewed by teams of curriculum specialists from Minnesota districts.

Implementation plans

1. Continue the development of the OER resources in the existing structures.
2. Seek matching funds for the OER projects.
3. Continue to promote the awareness, use, expansion and support for OER.

2. Professional Development

- 2.1. Adopt standards, criteria and a review process to support teachers in meeting the requirements to gain the “knowledge and skills to accommodate the delivery of digital and blended learning and curriculum and engage students with technology.”
 - 2.1.1. Identify and adopt nationally recognized standards for assessing these skills;
 - 2.1.2. Identify criteria for quality training programs to meet those standards;
 - 2.1.3. Develop and implement in conjunction with teacher education programs the quality review process for the digital teacher training, including:
 - Definition of the parameters and the need;
 - Identification of support for review and improvement.
- 2.2. Support training to teach in a digital learning classroom that is delivered in a flexible, on-demand format and that models effective use of educational technologies and pedagogies in a blended or online educational format.

Implementation Progress and Plan

Reviewed research on standards for incorporating digital teaching in the classroom: Background from 2nd Council: [MNOLAC Sub-group on Professional Development](#). Proposed action for the coming year includes:

- Establish means for tracking teacher digital tool training requirements.
 - Consult with MDE, Board of Teaching, MACTE, MEMO, MNLC and ODLAC.
 - Consider funding a professional training portal.
- Together with the MN Learning Commons, conduct research on standards that are used to evaluate skills.
 - Develop and conduct a survey of all teacher programs.
 - Establish a Review for Online and Digital Teaching requirements or demonstrable skill-set that may include the following structure:
 - Foundations for Teaching and Learning Online is a requirement and must reflect the state-wide use of the most common innovative technology in practice.
 - Creating Your Learning Environment using Strategies for Active Learning Assessment (Getting started Basics Learning Management System, LMS)
 - Teaching with Technology training is incorporated into the regular training schedules for all districts, with innovative teaching techniques highlighted.
 - Share and educate on the use of digital literacy for students and teachers.

3. Broadband Internet access

- 3.1. Support the recommendations of the Governor's Broadband Taskforce to ensure equity of access to high speed telecommunications for all Minnesotans.
- 3.2. Expand funding for the Telecommunications Equity Access program to ensure cost-effective, high-speed broadband access to schools.
- 3.3. Provide state funding at least at the level recommended by the Governor for programs that provide access to the valuable collections in Minnesota libraries and to a wide variety of digital service, including:
 - Minitex
 - Electronic Library of Minnesota (ELM)
 - MnLINK
 - Minnesota Digital Library (MDL)

Rationale

The Council supports the proposals in the Information and Technology Educators of Minnesota (ITEM) Platform to increase public library and broadband Internet access in the state. These proposals have also been supported by the Minnesota High Tech Association (MHTA), the Minnesota Rural Education Agency (MREA), and the Minnesota School Board Association (MSBA).

The advantages and promise of digital learning can only be fully realized with equitable access to broadband Internet. Districts across the state are implementing digital learning initiatives to personalize learning, increase achievement, and reduce expenses. These initiatives include streaming media, cloud-based applications and real-time access to student data by parents.

Previous Reports of the Online Advisory Council have recommended that broadband access be made available to all students:

2013: ([Removing the Barriers to Digital Learning in Minnesota: A Review of State Laws and Rules and Policy Recommendations](#), p. 5).

Create a robust and reliable infrastructure. Digital learning requires an infrastructure that supports access by students to mobile devices and the internet 24 hours per day, 7 days per week, 52 weeks per year. There is no longer an "off hours" period when students are not connected to and supported by their schools. Without ubiquitous broadband access and adoption and one-to-one mobile computing devices, we have left students at the side of the road without a "bus" to school.

2012: ([Online Learning in Minnesota: Mid Term Report of the K-12 Online Learning Advisory Council, July 2010 – January 2012](#), p. 4).

3. Access to technology

- 3.1. Provide access for all students and schools to high-speed internet

Implementation plan

1. Support passage of legislation that furthers these measures.

4. Online Learning Providers

- 4.1. Review testing requirements that have had an onerous impact on students in full-time online schools. Specifically, allow districts/schools to provide ACT Plus Writing through ACT testing sites in SY 2016 and beyond whenever participation in the state administration is impossible.
- 4.2. Review the MDE re-approval process with the 15 programs which have undergone the process. Meet with stakeholders to discuss and identify improvements in the process based on stakeholders' concerns and comments.
- 4.3. Maintain current balance of innovation and oversight and allow for implementation of current policies before making significant changes.

Rationale

1. Testing Requirements

A number of full-time state-approved online learning providers face significant challenges in administering the newly required state tests by ACT.

- a. Full-time online programs are responsible for administering all state-mandated tests, including those that individual students are required to take before graduating. In the past they have dealt with assessments required for graduation (MCA/GRAD) by meeting students and administering the tests to them in public places such as their town libraries. The rules enacted by the new testing process under the ACT make this no longer feasible. Online providers may apply to be approved as ACT testing sites, and have done so. However, that approval does not extend past one physical site location. To test a student at another school or at a public place like a library, they must submit an off-site proposal by January 9. This means that they would need to know in early January which 11th graders will be enrolled on April 28—which under open enrollment is not possible.
- b. To further complicate matters, when an off-site proposal is approved, the test(s) will be delivered to the school/district submitting the proposal and must be delivered to the off-site location by 9:00 a.m. on the state administered ACT testing date. Now that there is only one state administered testing date and one makeup date, the traveling that was done to administer MCA/GRAD is no longer feasible.
- c. Small schools are also severely hampered by an ACT rule which disqualifies relatives of students who are taking the ACT from having anything to do with its administration. If even a small number of school staff are disqualified, the school's capacity to administer tests is severely diminished.
- d. Certain allowances for students to take the test required for graduation on days and locations other than the required state administrations are only available this year.

2. Approval and Re-approval Process

Stakeholders have requested the opportunity to be included in the discussion on the process to review its quality around criteria and standards and develop a path to improvement.

3. Balance in Statute

The Online Learning Enrollment Options Act (124D.095) has been revised repeatedly over the past 10 years. A balance has been achieved between providing high quality learning environments for students and involving school district staff in the decision-making process. As educational technology in teaching and learning continues to evolve, it is important to take the time to evaluate the effectiveness of proposed changes and their impact on students.

Implementation plan

1. **Testing Requirements:** Work with MDE to examine testing requirements and recommend modifications that provide flexibility in testing for students in unique settings.
2. **Approval and Re-approval Process:** Work within the MDE established process to support and enhance the approval and re-approval process.
3. **Balance in Statute:** Provide information and consultation to legislative committees on the educational opportunities provided by the current statute and evaluate proposed changes for their effectiveness.

5. Emergency planning

- 5.1. Allow for flexible alternatives to engage students when they cannot attend school;
- 5.2. Define attendance based on academic work and progress;
- 5.3. Provide funding for days when students attend by participating in remote activities.

Rationale

During the wave of record cold temperatures in the winter of 2013-2014, many schools were closed for a significant number of days. School closings create disruptions in the learning process and funding pressures on district budgets. With the availability of digital learning tools and curriculum, school can consider ways to support students in continuing their educational progress from home on days when the school is closed. To support districts in piloting innovative approaches to this dilemma, the state is developing guidelines for districts to ensure a quality, equitable educational experience that does not result in a loss of funding when students have been given the opportunity to continue their instructional progress.

Implementation plan

Continue to collaborate with MDE to establish guidelines for districts implementing digital/e-learning instructional days.

Conclusion

Our recommendations are concise and are made with the belief that, if adopted, they would provide the most efficient far-reaching benefits to all Minnesota students. With the intent that all students have access to high quality digital learning opportunities in every classroom at every grade level, providing support for systems improvement is the first step. It is important to keep in mind the cost of instruction and how the rapid changes in technology require teachers and administrators to improve their digital skills, just as much as it is important for students to improve their technology skills. Access for all students and consideration for all these changes is important.

Online learning provides opportunities and flexibility for all students. For students who do choose online learning options, it is also critical that they are given equitable opportunities to complete their graduation requirements and are not faced with significant challenges due to logistical testing requirements, or lack of broadband or technology resources.

The next stages of the ODLAC research will focus on additional student-centered topics to ensure that all students have equitable opportunities to participate in the wealth of digital learning experiences in the state. As initiatives continue to expand in competency-based instruction, project-based learning, and work-based instruction, the role of digital curriculum will become increasingly embedded in students' educational experiences. Just-in-time assessment data will allow teachers to make adjustments to meet the personal learning needs of students. These new models will require more flexibility and innovation on the part of districts and state oversight processes. In addition, the more digitized all learning becomes, the more essential it is for all students to have access to the technology and broadband at home.

The future of students within Minnesota is looking brighter with more and better technology, but many students will continue to struggle to have the essential basics of technology. As is seen in the Minneapolis Community Survey 2014, and other documents regarding the digital divide, where a Minnesota resident lives is often reflective of their access to technology and the internet. If we are to make improvements in student success rates, equal access is essential. The growing cost of broadband and cell phones, while the use of digital technology continues to increase, is going to be the biggest barrier to student success rates. It is our hope that schools, state leadership and stakeholders will continue to work together productively, with students as the focus.