

Online and Digital Learning in Minnesota

Report of the Online and Digital Learning Advisory Council January 2016 - June 2016

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

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Introduction

The Online and Digital Learning Advisory Council term expires June 30, 2016. During its tenure the Council has met with a variety of stakeholders in online and digital learning, and advanced a number of policy issues. A brief review is included here, along with links to the relevant reports. For further information, please contact any of the council members or Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) Liaisons.

Minnesota is recognized as a leader in innovative policies and programs that promote the expansion of student choice and opportunity in digital education. Blended learning has become a key element in educational planning and has received the greatest attention in school reform efforts. 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 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.

Recommendation areas

1. Open Educational Resources (OER)

The extraordinary expansion of OER 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.

The Council supports the promotion of cooperative efforts to expand the development and adoption of OER in the state. We recommend that state policy-makers consult with organizations that are making significant progress in this area on a state and national level:

- [Minnesota Learning Commons \(MnLC\)](https://mnlearningcommons.us/) (https://mnlearningcommons.us/)
- [Minnesota OER Commons](https://www.oercommons.org/hubs/minnesota) (https://www.oercommons.org/hubs/minnesota)
- [Minnesota Partnership for Collaborative Curriculum](http://mncollaborativecurriculum.org/) (http://mncollaborativecurriculum.org/)

2. Professional Development

As the breadth of resources and tools expands, the need for training and support in making the most efficient use of resources and tools for implementation is growing just as rapidly. School districts and colleges of teacher education will need to work together to align efforts and prepare teachers for an environment that frequently changes in terms of platforms, tools, devices and

access. Developing a mindset of innovation and flexibility is critical for teacher and student success.

The Council has reviewed research on standards for incorporating digital teaching in the classroom and worked to identify teacher training requirements, standards, opportunities and existing resources. A survey is in process with Colleges of Teacher Education to identify the next steps in supporting this process. We recommend that this work continue among existing groups:

- [Minnesota Learning Commons \(MNLC\)](https://mnlearningcommons.us/) (https://mnlearningcommons.us/)
- [Minnesota Association of Colleges of Teacher Education](http://mnacte.org/) (http://mnacte.org/)
- [Minnesota Partnership for Collaborative Curriculum](http://mncollaborativecurriculum.org/) (http://mncollaborativecurriculum.org/)

3. Broadband Internet access

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. Digital learning requires an infrastructure that supports access by students to mobile devices and the internet 24 hours per day, seven 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.

The Council supports the proposals in the Minnesota Broadband Vision that “Everyone in Minnesota will be able to use convenient, affordable world-class broadband networks that enable us to survive and thrive in our communities and across the globe.” We recommend support for proposals to increase public library and broadband Internet access in the state as articulated in the platforms of the following organizations:

- [Minnesota Education Technology Networks \(METN\)](http://www.metn.k12.mn.us/) (http://www.metn.k12.mn.us/)
- [Information and Technology Educators of Minnesota \(ITEM\)](http://mnitem.org/) (http://mnitem.org/)
- [Minnesota High Tech Association \(MHTA\)](https://www.mhta.org/) (https://www.mhta.org/)
- [Minnesota Rural Education Agency \(MREA\)](http://mnrea.org/) (http://mnrea.org/)
- [Minnesota School Board Association \(MSBA\)](http://www.mnmsba.org/) (http://www.mnmsba.org/)

4. Online Learning Providers

The approval, support and monitoring of state-approved online learning (OLL) programs is a key area of responsibility for MDE. OLL is no longer a new phenomenon, as a majority of approved programs have provided quality education for over 10 years. Innovative programs continue to be proposed under the OLL options act, and the role of MDE is critical in providing guidance and support to the emerging issues that arise. A balance has been achieved between providing high quality learning environments for students and involving school district and online program leaders in the decision-making process.

The Council has examined a number of issues involving the program approval and re-approval process, state testing impact on online students, and other legislative requirements. We recommend continuing collaboration among stakeholders through the MNOLA to ensure that the balance of innovative opportunity and quality assurance is sustained.

- [Minnesota Online Learning Alliance \(MNOLA\)](https://sites.google.com/site/mnolapage/) (https://sites.google.com/site/mnolapage/)

5. Emergency planning

During the wave of record cold temperatures in the winter of 2013-2014, many schools were closed for a significant number of days. A variety of other phenomena can result in school closings, including weather, pandemic illness, utility disruptions, transportation challenges and testing schedules. School closings create disruptions in the learning process and funding pressures on district budgets. Many districts have also explored the revision of site-based instructional time to deliver instruction more efficiently. With the availability of digital learning tools and curriculum, schools can consider ways to support students in continuing their educational progress from home on days when the school is closed.

The Council has reviewed a number of district responses and pilots in this areas, and has consulted with MDE on guidelines for districts to ensure a quality, equitable educational experience in these situations. We recommend continuing exploration of and articulation of the guidelines to encourage innovative approaches to educational delivery that receive equitable financial support.

6. Conclusion: Renew the Council charge and term

The Council has provided a critical platform to advise MDE on matters of policy as they relate to online and digital learning. Key decisions on testing requirements, online provider approval, and emergency planning have been initiated or reviewed by the Council to address matters of concern to schools and students. Providing this voice and resource is imperative to effective policy development and implementation for the state of Minnesota. Efforts have been limited by a lack of resources for communicating the findings and recommendations to a wider audience.

We recommend that stakeholders work with MDE and Legislative committees to establish a process for continuing communication on these topics.

We thank the Minnesota Department of Education and the Education Committees of the Minnesota State Legislature for their attention to this report and its recommendations.

Respectfully submitted June 30, 2016

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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.
- 1.3. Create an official vetting process within existing initiatives for the use, delivery, and essential funding for open educational resources.
- 1.4. Provide for equal course access to Universal Design (UDL) technologies, such as text to speech or speech to text tools, within the digital learning platform.

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 school year 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.
- 5.3. Provide funding for days when students attend by participating in remote activities.

6. Renew the Council for another term

- 6.1. Review the charge and consolidate the areas of consideration.
- 6.2. Introduce legislation to authorize another three-year term.

References

[Minnesota Statutes, section 124D.095 Subdivision 10](#): authorizes the establishment of the Council.

[Minnesota Online and Digital Learning Advisory Council website](#): Minutes from meetings and support documents.

[MDE website](#) online learning program and enrollment information.

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](#)
- [Council Report December 2014](#)
- [Council Report December 2015](#)