

Online and Digital Learning in Minnesota

Report of the Online and Digital Learning Advisory Council

January 2015 - December 2015

The Online and Digital Learning Advisory Council was created by

the Minnesota Legislature Online Learning Option Act Minnesota Statutes 124D.095 in 2005 and reauthorized in 2009 and 2013.

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Introduction

The recommendation areas for online and digital learning have remained stable for this reporting period. Further research and implementation has been conducted on areas of Open Educational Resources, Professional Development, Broadband Internet Access, Online Learning Providers and Emergency Planning. New findings and recommendations are highlighted in this report. Details on the background of these issues can be found in the Council Report from 2014.

One key new recommendation is that the Council be renewed for the next three years. As the state grapples with the demands of preparing students for a future of accelerating technological change, gathering information and plans for on the needs of schools to meet these challenges will be of increasing importance.

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

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MDE Liaison

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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 second 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 [Minnesota 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](#)
- [Council Report December 2014](#)

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 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;
- 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.

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 K-12 Digital Learning: An Annual Review of Policy and Practice \(2015\)](#). Minnesota is noted in this report as one of the few states to provide a full range of supplemental and fully online opportunities 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](#) developed by the Foundation for Excellence in Education has again reported Minnesota as having the third highest ranking among states in 2014. 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.
- 1.3. Create an official vetting process for the use, delivery and essential funding for open educational resources.
 - 1.3.1. Provide support and facilitation of review processes that ensure quality for OER.
 - 1.3.2. Support efforts to create quality guidelines for OER adoption.
- 1.4. Provide for equal course access to assistive technologies, such as text to speech tools within any digital learning platform.
 - 1.4.1. Provide support and facilitation for incorporating Universal Design for Learning

Implementation progress

- [Minnesota Learning Commons \(MnLC\)](#): 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](#): 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](#): 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](#): 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 202 educational district members and has developed 30 courses for partners to pilot. All courses are aligned to Minnesota academic standards and reviewed by teams of curriculum specialists from Minnesota districts. The MPCC recently won a Local Government Innovation Award from the Humphrey School of Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota.

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.
4. NEW: Establish a vetting process through existing structures, including review of UDL design principles.

Rationale for new recommendations

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.

The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) reports on the OER State of the States and shows the one area of vetting open educational resources as an area for improvement for Minnesota. The following image shows the areas of planning OER initiatives, promoting/using OER, maintaining an OER repository, vetting process for OER, value in a national repository, and interest in learning about other states and or partnering with OER.

2015 Updated Table 1: A Selection of State Survey Responses

	Is your state currently planning any OER initiatives?	Does your state currently use or promote OER at any level (state, district/school)?	Is your state promoting policies to support OER and/or open licensing of other publicly-funded learning materials?	Is your state currently collecting OER learning materials and/or maintaining an OER repository?	Does your state have a vetting process for OER learning materials?	Does your state see value in a nationwide repository of OER learning materials?	Is your state interested in learning more about OER, and/or what other states and partners are developing?
Alaska*	Don't know	No	No	No	No	Don't know	Yes
Alabama	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
Arizona	No	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
BIE							Yes
California	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes
Colorado	No	No	No				
Connecticut							Yes
Delaware	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Don't know	Yes
DODEA	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
Florida							No
Georgia*	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Guam							Yes
Idaho*	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Illinois	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Indiana							Don't know
Kansas	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
Kentucky*	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Maine	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes
Massachusetts	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Minnesota*	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Mississippi*	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	Yes

Source: [CCSSO Council OER State of the States report \(2015\)](#)

Existing initiatives as outlined above have adopted vetting processes for their audiences and purposes. Support from the state will be necessary to ensure alignment with state requirements and avoid duplication of effort.

In order to expand upon the recommendations for the continuation of further open educational resources, there is a gap in technical resources that are readily available for utilization by students of diverse populations. To close the achievement gap among the diverse populations, access to technologies which level the playing field are essential. The development and use of open educational resources that utilize Universal Design theory are key to closing the achievement gap. An issue exists that all teachers and providers are aware of Universal Design methods and tools

which could be vetted to provide better opportunities for these diverse populations within an online environment. Additionally, communication of the available resources is still needed.

iNACOL 2015 cites the ongoing work of Digital Learning Now within their brief surrounding open educational resources and within their equal course access reports. ([Course Access: Equitable Opportunities for College and Career Ready Students](#), [iNACOL Report: Online Learning Can Close The Opportunity Gap](#), [Open Educational Resources \(OER\) Stories, Policies, and Resources](#)) An essential area of need is support for student success and the needs of students with disabilities and English Language Learners so that they may have equal access to learning. Providing tools and designing only classes with defined special needs students does not allow for struggling students and struggling readers with the opportunity to utilize tools and methods which may provide them with much needed support for a successful educational experience. Having access to these tools and resources is key to bridging the gap for low performing students.

“Although still emerging, lessons to guide Course Access efforts are starting to develop from early adopters. It is clear in our research and elsewhere that success will depend on many factors: academically rigorous course offerings within a high-quality curriculum, strong approval and monitoring systems for providers, support for student success, attention to the needs of special learners (including students with disabilities and English language learners), research on what constitutes quality digital learning, effective system integration, proactive engagement with a variety of stakeholders and – like most innovative education initiatives – a lot of learning by doing.” [Digital Learning Now Course Access Report \(2014\)](#)

Traditional learning methods allow only for the same learning style of reading unassisted “Materials designed using UDL concepts have built-in accommodations. Add-on technology is less often needed to translate the material into a mode that enables” and learning is improved. Support of [Universal Design methods and products is defined by Great Schools 2010](#) as including:

- Multiple methods of presentation
- Multiple options for participation
- Multiple means of expression

Digital Learning Now suggests a movement away from traditional methods for students that are struggling with “more targeted assistance or support”, (page 9, Digital Learning Report 2014). A systematic, or state-wide approach to providing struggling learners and English Language Learners and their parents with easy to use and reliable technology products, such as improved text to speech products that students and parents could use, read aloud options for texts and electronic materials and captioned universally designed video materials may be options to aid struggling students and keep advanced students engaged in more personalized learning environments. This will take legislative support for using and providing funding for better support materials for online learning.

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 Task Force 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](#), page 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](#), page 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 requirement of offering the ACT (or SAT) to 11th and 12th graders.

- 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. This means that they would need to know in early January which 11th or 12th graders will be enrolled on a specific pre-determined school day—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 school determined 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 ACT test required on national test dates with state reimbursement 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 progress and plan

- 1. Testing Requirements:** Work with MDE to examine testing requirements and recommend modifications that provide flexibility in testing for students in unique settings.
 - Modifications for the implementation of the ACT were made in consultation with MDE, so that online schools were not unduly affected by the testing process.
- 2. Approval and Re-approval Process:** Work within the MDE established process to support and enhance the approval and re-approval process.
 - A plan for revisions to the re-approval process was submitted to MDE for implementation in the next re-approval cycle.
- 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.
 - The Council remains open to consult with legislative committees in the upcoming session.

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

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

6. Conclusion: Renew the Council charge and term

- 6.1. Review the charge and consolidate the areas of consideration;
- 6.2. Introduce legislation to authorize another 3-year term.

Rationale

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.

Implementation plan

1. Work with MDE and Legislative committees to introduce an extension to the Council.

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 December 15, 2015

Minnesota Online and Digital Learning Advisory Council