Online Learning in Minnesota

Mid Term Report of the K-12 Online Learning Advisory Council

July 2010 – January 2012

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Introduction

Jon Voss, Chair

The forces set in motion by online learning have put Minnesota on a path toward deeper and wider innovation--nearly every school district is now examining how online learning in some form can improve its ability to prepare its students for participation in a global workforce and society.

When Minnesota opened the door to supplemental and comprehensive online enrollment in 2003, the system responded. School districts, charter schools and regional consortia embraced the opportunity to create innovative learning options for students. As a result, Minnesota has a unique system of multiple providers that offers a richness of opportunity unparalleled in other states.

Many of the proposals being promoted nationally have been in operation in Minnesota for nearly a decade: funding for online learning follows the student to the credit level, supplemental online funding is based on course completion, and there are no geographic restrictions on enrollment.

Minnesota is well positioned to continue its national leadership. By investing in raising the capacity of all teachers to assemble and deliver digitally based instruction, Minnesota could lead a change in the face of education on the planet. To accomplish this, every teacher should be trained in the adoption and implementation of digital learning curriculum so that every student is engaged in digital learning activities in every class at every level.

K-12 Online Learning Advisory Council Members

- Stacy Bender, Dean of Students, Minnesota Virtual High School
- Gigi Dobosenski, Co-Director and Advisor, EdVisions Off Campus High School
- Karen Johnson, Director of SOCRATES Online, South Central Service Cooperative
- Dr. Gary Langer, Associate Vice Chnacellor for Academic Innovations, Minnesota State Colleges and Universities
- Mary Mehsikomer, Technology Integration Development & Outreach Facilitator, TIES
- Elissa Raffa, Dean of Academic Programming, Minnesota Online High School
- Cecelia Retelle, Manager, Minnesota Chamber of Commerce (through September 2011)
- Curt Tryggestad, Superintendent, Little Falls Public Schools; Board of Directors, Infinity Online
- Dr. Jonathan Voss, Supervisor of Academic Programs, Intermediate District 287
- Dr. Jessica Wiley, Director of Educational Services, Northeast Metro 916 Intermediate School District
- John Weisser, Director of Technology, Bloomington Public Schools

Summary of Recommendations

Program Development

- Encourage innovation in hybrid and online programs;
- Provide support for new and developing programs;
- Articulate system changes to support expansion of online learning for all students at all levels.

Teacher Quality

- Identify and support quality training for all teachers;
- Promote opportunities for online teacher training through the Minnesota Learning Commons;
- Identify and promote standards for online teachers;
- Identify criteria for evaluating online teaching;
- Promote online delivery of teacher training and mentoring to expand the reach of effective solutions;

Access to technology

- Provide access for all students and schools to high-speed internet;
- Encourage the use of digital resources and textbooks to improve student outcomes and realize cost efficiencies;
- Expand access to online literacy curriculum.

Special Education

- Identify needed research related to special education and online learning;
- Assess success of online programs for special education based on graduation rates and state assessment data;
- Create systems of support for online students in special education;
- Consult with special education organizations to articulate needs.

Oversight

- Increase state oversight and accountability for online curriculum vendors (and educational management organizations - EMOs) and ensure that these vendors understand and comply with federal guidelines for special education;
- Connect with General Equivalency Diploma (GED), credit recovery and other educational options for students at risk of not graduating on time;
- Support the Independent Study Virtual Contact Proposal by Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) Alternative Learning Center (ALC-OLL Task Force;
- Improve the funding model for online learning by making it consistent with other public schools programs;
- Establish a means of recording, reporting, and accepting partial credit so that students can focus on competency development, and not have to start over when they move from one school to another if they have completed part of a credit.

Funding

- Advance students in digital education based on competency rather than time;
- Fund online learning based on performance rather than completion;
- Provide pro-rated funding for achievement of competencies.

Data Collection

- Develop systems to capture complete data on student participation and district involvement;
- Document how online learning is working, how progress is tracked and the successes that students are experiencing.

Open Educational Resources

- Support the work of the MN Learning Commons (MNLC) with time and funding from MDE to promote and extend collaborative development of open online learning resources and opportunities statewide;
- Publicize the availability of open educational resources on the MNLC;
- Establish a section of the MNLC for an Online Support Center for schools and districts to pursue the development of online resources and instruction;
- Establish a section of the MNLC to publicize the Advisory Council recommendations and findings on supporting open educational resources;
- Promote the MNLC as a platform for all online providers to collaborate on the development of shared open resources;
- Encourage mechanisms for expanding the pool of openly shared curriculum resources statewide, including statewide licensing and central hosting.

Statute

- Maintain the provision that unless the commissioner grants a waiver, a teacher providing online learning instruction must not instruct more than 40 students in any one online learning course or program;
- Define "course" and "program" as they relate to online instruction subdivision 4 b.

Advisory Council Purpose and Structure

Purpose: The advisory council shall bring to the attention of the commissioner any matters related to online learning and provide input to the department.

The MN K-12 Online Learning Advisory Council was established in 2009 by the Minnesota Legislature in statute 124D.095 Subdivision 10 (https://www.revisor.mn.gov/statutes/?id=124D.095):

> **Subdivision 10. Online Learning Advisory Council.**
> (a) An Online Learning Advisory Council is established. The term for each council member shall be three years. The advisory council is composed of 12 members from throughout the state who have demonstrated experience with or interest in online learning. The members of the council shall be appointed by the commissioner. The advisory council shall bring to the attention of the commissioner any matters related to online learning and provide input to the department in matters related, but not restricted, to:
> > (1) quality assurance;
> > (2) teacher qualifications;
> > (3) program approval;
> > (4) special education;
> > (5) attendance;
> > (6) program design and requirements; and
> > (7) fair and equal access to programs.
> (b) The Online Learning Advisory Council under this subdivision expires June 30, 2013.

The Council represents education stakeholders interested and/or experienced in online learning from across the state. Members include directors and teachers in supplemental and full time Charter online learning programs, a K-12 school superintendent, directors of teaching and learning and technology departments, and higher education faculty. Metro, suburban, and greater Minnesota are also represented.

The 2009–2012 State K-12 Online Learning Advisory Council is building on work completed by the 2006-2008 State K-12 Online Learning Council, the Digital Learning Plan adopted in 2004, and the continuing work of the MN Learning Commons, a K-12 statewide online initiative.

See Appendix for Council records.

See Appendix for historical documentation and reports.

Council Actions, Findings, and Recommendations

Adopted Guiding Principles and Definitions

The Council recognized the need to have a common language and guiding principles established to study and make recommendations about online learning.

- Guiding Principles for Online Learning and Policy and
- [Online Learning Definitions](#) were adopted and are available at https://sites.google.com/site/mnolac/documents.

Determined Priorities

Council members responded to a survey to determine a list of priorities for 2010-11. Among the top priorities included program design, expectations of staff and students, standards, curriculum, quality assurance, program marketing, and uniqueness. Additionally there was strong interest in sharing materials developed with state funds as open educational resources. Meeting agendas were organized to include discussion and recommendations to address the list of topic priorities.

Examined Key Reports

Several key reports released in the state and nationally provided a framework to discuss developments in online learning, including the Minnesota Legislative Auditors Report on Online Learning and the national Digital Learning Now Report released by the Center for Excellence in Education. The council was compelled to review and respond to these significant studies and publications in the process of considering priority topics.

1. Minnesota Office of Legislative Auditor: Evaluation Report K-12 Online Learning (2011)

On September 19, 2011, the Office of the Legislative Auditor released a report on online learning to the Legislative Audit Committee. The initial response from the committee and the media focused on the negative aspects of the report: high dropout rates of comprehensive online students and the delays in the Minnesota Department of Education's approval process for new programs. While these topics deserve scrutiny, compelling insights need to be highlighted.

First, the release of program descriptions and data about these programs is a step towards identifying the scope of online learning in Minnesota.

Key Data about Approved Statewide Programs

- 24 programs currently approved as online providers (10 single-district, 7 consortia, 7 charters)
- Growth from 15 approved providers in 2003 to 24 in 2010; 29 projected by the end of 2011.
- Eight initially approved providers chose to discontinue and are no longer certified, 17 new programs approved
- Significant changes within programs; leadership, curriculum, instruction; organizational structure, geographic reach, grade levels served
- 3800 students participating in supplemental/part-time online classes
- Doubled in 4 years.

- 8300 students enrolled in comprehensive/full-time online schools
- Tripled in 4 years.

Key Findings about District Level Online Learning

- 8000 students take online courses within their district
- 87 districts enroll students in their own online courses
- 92 districts plan to start offering courses in the next 3 years

Data from approved online providers has been collected for many years. It is now documented that another 8,000 plus students are involved in online courses in their local district. This provides a new perspective on the rapid growth underway. With another 92 districts indicating that they will implement online coursework in the next few years, that growth will surely accelerate.

Development of hybrid/blended learning, the combination of site-based and online learning, is growing rapidly. The Legislative Auditor's Evaluation Report found:

> "Among respondents to our survey, more than 70 percent of the school districts and charter schools offering online courses solely to their own students used hybrid approaches in at least some of their courses during the 2010-11 school year." (18)

Council Recommendations

- Encourage innovation in hybrid and online programs through regional partnerships, conferences and the MN Learning Commons (MNLC);
- Provide support for new and developing programs by promoting the MNLC;
- Articulate system changes to support expansion of online learning for all students at all levels;
- Identify and support quality training for all teachers and publicize through MNLC;
- Develop systems to capture complete data on student participation and district involvement.

Council Actions

The Advisory Council continues to review and provide consultation to the MDE and state policymakers regarding concerns articulated in the Auditors' Report. A letter to the editor was submitted to the Star Tribune newspaper in response to an editorial about the state of online learning in Minnesota.

2. Digital Learning Now Report 2010, The Center for Excellence in Education

The Foundation for Excellence in Education, chaired by former Governor Jeb Bush of Florida, published a report cosigned by Bob Wise, former Governor of West Virginia (and president of the Alliance for Excellent Education, a different organization), describing ten elements of quality digital learning:

1. Student Eligibility: All students are digital learners.
2. Student Access: All students have access to high quality digital content and online courses.

3. Personalized Learning: All students can customize their education using digital content through an approved provider.

4. Advancement: Student progress based on demonstrated competency.

5. Content: Digital Content, instructional materials, and online and blended learning courses are high quality.

6. Instruction: Digital instruction and teachers are high quality.

7. Providers: All students have access to multiple high quality providers.

8. Assessment and Accountability: Student learning is the metric for evaluating the quality of content and instruction.

9. Funding: Funding creates incentives for performance, options and innovation.

10. Delivery: Infrastructure supports digital learning.

Minnesota is highly ranked in comparison with other states

Subsequent to publishing the Digital Learning Now Report in 2010, the Foundation for Excellence in Education evaluated each state based on their current alignment with the ten elements of quality digital education. Using the 10 elements and 72 data points to come up with a total score, Minnesota tied for third in the country for meeting these digital learning targets for K-12 education. Florida, often heralded as a national leader in online learning, ranked seventh in meeting these criteria (The Foundation for Excellence in Education, 2010). Minnesota continues to be an innovation leader in online learning.

Council Recommendations

The areas where the state can make further advances in meeting elements of quality online learning include:

- advancing students in digital education based on competency;

- funding online learning based on performance not completion;

- assuring that digital instruction is of high quality;

- providing access for all students and schools to high-speed internet;

- encouraging the use of digital resources and textbooks to improve student outcomes, allow teachers to individualize content and realize cost efficiencies;

- documenting how online learning is working, progress is tracked and the success students are experiencing.

Council Actions

The Advisory Council provides input and responds to requests by MDE and the legislature for policy recommendations that would impact further advancing quality digital education. Further exploration into the specific elements is necessary to determine which are compatible with the guiding principles.

Invited Presentations on Special Topics

1. Special Education

To better understand state and federal systems in place to serve students with special needs and how requirements will be met in online learning settings, the Council invited representatives to the August 2011 meeting from Innovative Special Education Services (ISES: http://www.isesmn.org), which provides special education director services for charter schools, including a number of online charter schools. ISES members present: Karen Kennedy, Erin Wanat, and Brittany Thomforde.

Key issues identified

- Need for stronger relationship between special education and online education vendors;
- Need for student access to services from resident districts;
- Restrictions in law that some services cannot be provided in an online or virtual setting;
- Conflicts occurring based on the setting of the school and Individual Education Plan (IEP) team decisions.

Council Recommendations

- Identify needed research related to special education and online learning;
- Assess success of online programs for special education based on graduation rates and state assessment data;
- Create systems of support for online students in special education;
- Consult with special education organizations to articulate needs;
- Increase state oversight and accountability for online curriculum vendors (and educational management organizations - EMOs) and ensure that these vendors understand and comply with federal guidelines for special education.

Council Actions

Continue conversations with state special education staff and invite a state special education director to attend the Advisory Council meetings.

2. Teacher Licensure

Board of Teaching Executive Director Karen Balmer attended a council meeting and discussed the importance of well-prepared teachers in effective delivery of online learning. Discussion focused on training programs that are available through Minnesota colleges and universities as well as professional development publicized by the Minnesota Learning Commons. The Council supports the belief that all teachers should be trained in digital content delivery and online instruction. Supporting and promoting a wide range of professional development opportunities is necessary to ensure integration with the local school environment and existing teacher qualifications.

Council Recommendations

- Promote opportunities for online teacher training through the Minnesota Learning Commons;

- Identify and promote standards for online teachers;
- Identify criteria for evaluating online teaching;
- Do not require an endorsement or specific training to deliver online instruction.

3. Work Force and Literacy Goals – The Chamber of Commerce

Ceclia Retelle from the MN Chamber of Commerce presented the Chamber's goals for education: Teacher quality, workforce preparation and literacy.

Council Recommendations

- Promote online delivery of teacher training and mentoring to expand the reach of effective solutions;
- Connect with General Equivalency Diploma (GED), credit recovery and other educational options for students at risk of not graduating on time;
- Expand access to online literacy curriculum.

Council Action

A Minnesota Learning Commons page for online professional development in digital teaching has been established. Continued review of national standards, including the iNACOL standards for Quality Online Teachers and Courses and Quality Matters, a peer review process to certify the quality of online and blended courses, is taking place.

4. Credit Recovery

The Council discussed the Minnesota Department of Education's (MDE) Alternative Learning Center—Online Learning (ALC-OLL) Task Force's proposal for Alternative Learning Centers in conjunction with approved online programs to offer online Independent Study (IS) courses. This proposal requires that teachers and students communicate through documented virtual formats thus replacing a prior seat-based requirement set forth by MDE.

Council Recommendations

- Support the IS Virtual Contact Proposal by MDE ALC-OLL Task Force;
- Virtual contact is an acceptable form of contact;
- Type of contact should be determined by student and teacher as part of the continuous learning plan;
- Programs are expected to have methods in place to track progress and develop intervention plans to be implemented.

Examined Key State Issues

1. Online Learning Funding

In Minnesota, funding continues to follow students based on their enrollment level. Comprehensive full time enrollment is based on ADM-MARSS reporting. Supplemental enrollment is based on course completion. Few other states allow funding to follow students to the credit level for supplemental enrollment, and even fewer provide no funding for courses that are not completed.

When students do not complete courses in a supplemental enrollment, neither the online provider nor the enrolling district receive compensation for the time and effort expended on supporting the student through their course. This provides an incentive to withdraw students quickly if they fall behind. Interventions and other supports are not sustainable without some reimbursement for the progress that a student makes. The absence of funding for non-completion also provides a disincentive for making courses significantly rigorous or for allowing students to truly master content--a minimum demonstration of achievement required to pass on time is optimal.

A discrepancy exists when education in a site-based model pays for teaching, while the online education model pays for learning. Each approach has its value, and in order to achieve balance in models, the benefits of both models should be leveraged to support optimal student success.

Council Recommendations

- Improve the funding model for online learning by making it consistent with other public schools programs;
- Provide partial funding for partially completed courses;
- Establish a means of recording, reporting, and accepting partial credit so that students can focus on competency development, and not have to start over when they move from one school to another if they have completed part of a credit.

2. Open Educational Resources

The work of the state K-12 Online Learning Advisory Council and the Minnesota Learning Commons (MNLC) share many common interests and purposes in assuring and promoting quality digital public education. As more digital resources become available, efforts to review, promote and share open educational resources will be critical to financial efficiency, quality assurance and equality of opportunity.

Council Recommendations

- Support the work of the MN Learning Commons (MNLC) with time and funding from MDE to promote and extend collaborative development of open online learning resources and opportunities statewide;
- Publicize the availability of open educational resources on the MNLC;
- Establish a section of the MNLC for an Online Support Center for schools and districts to pursue the development of online resources and instruction;
- Establish a section of the MNLC to publicize the Advisory Council recommendations and findings on supporting open educational resources;

- Promote the MNLC as a platform for all online providers to collaborate on the development of shared open resources;

- Encourage mechanisms for expanding the pool of openly shared curriculum resources statewide, including statewide licensing and central hosting.

3. Minnesota Online Learning Statute

Minnesota Statute 124D.095 establishes guidelines and parameters for public K-12 online education. The council discussed this statute as to how it is administered by the MDE and implemented by the programs approved through law.

Council Recommendations

- Maintain provision that unless the commissioner grants a waiver, a teacher providing online learning instruction must not instruct more than 40 students in any one online learning course or program;

- Define "course" and "program" as they relate to online instruction subdivision 4 b.

Council Actions

The Chair of the Council is working with state policymakers to improve and clarify language in the online learning option act. The Council is available for consultation to state policymakers regarding changes to the law that will impact students, schools and families. The past and current Chairs of the Council met with the Commissioner of Education in October 2011 to update status and clarify priorities in online learning issues.

1. Recognition and support: make online leaning activity more visible

2. Maintain quality assurance

3. Ensure access and equity

Examined National Trends

National trends were discussed. Two significant national summits in 2011 included iNACOL's Virtual School Symposium and the School Technology CIO Summit. Additionally, council members attended state and national conferences.

1. The International Organization for K-12 Online Learning (iNACOL) Virtual School Symposium

The annual conference of the International Organization of K-12 Online Learning, The Virtual School Symposium, in November 2011 pointed to a number trends and current developments:

- Rapid growth in individual district programs with new blended models

- Connection of student data with content for just-in-time interventions

- Use data coming from course management and data systems to assess whether a lesson was successful and make adjustments in real time

- Adoption of Common Core State Standards

- Standards

- Assessments

- Materials for Professional Development

- Movement to share publicly all content created with taxpayer funds

- Competency-based learning (CBL): iNACOL report on competency-based learning: http://www.inacol.org/research/competency/index.php

- Advance on mastery

- Include explicit measurable transferable learning objectives

- Assessment is meaningful and a positive experience for students

- Receive timely differentiated support based on individual needs

- Outcomes emphasize competencies that include application and creation of knowledge, along with the development of important skills and dispositions

- Collaboration among schools to join online learning consortia to share resources (content and instruction), realize efficiencies of scale and aggregate enrollments.

2. School Technology CIO Summit

[Four essential mandates for 21st-century schools](#) were identified by leading school technology leaders at their annual national summit in 2011: http://www.nxtbook.com/nxtbooks/newbay/ciosummit2011/index.php#/2.

1. The Assessment – Instruction and assessment should be one and the same. To drive instruction, all members of a district, not just administrators, must compile and understand data.

2. The Student – The school day no longer starts at eight and ends at three. Today's students are around-the-clock learners, requiring individualized lessons, opportunities to create instead of consume, and the freedom to work at their own pace, in their own setting, with 24/7 access to their instructors. Districts should oblige and support this new reality.

3. The Infrastructure – Forget about the acronyms (BYOT) and the catchphrases (one-to-one). Today's school CIO has to manage every devise and platform, whether student or school owned, while ensuring online access both on campus and off.

4. The Content – The printed textbook is a dying breed. Not much will be gained by replacing it with a digital clone. Online resources offer enormous opportunities for districts that now need to transition from a static single source of knowledge to dynamic repositories of powerful learning objects created and selected by the teachers and students who will use them.

Council Actions

The Council will continue to track important national trends and provide consultation to the Department of Education and state policymakers as needed.

Appendix

For a list of members, please see the [Advisory Council website directory](): https://sites.google.com/site/mnolac/directory

[Minutes from meetings and support documents]() are available at https://sites.google.com/site/mnolac/documents. All meetings are open to the public and dates are posted on the MN Department of Education website.

The Council has adopted a set of [Guiding Principles]() for the upcoming term: http://bit.ly/mnolacprinciples.

Key definitions were reviewed and accepted in order to productively discuss, recommend and take action on topics related to online learning. These [definitions]() are available at: https://sites.google.com/site/mnolac/documents.

This report includes findings and recommendations from the first year of the Advisory Council's operations. Additional updates will be provided on the Council's website.

Reports

[MN K-12 Online Advisory Council 2008 report](): http://bit.ly/2008olladvisoryreport

[MN Office of the Legislative Auditor's Report](): http://www.auditor.leg.state.mn.us/ped/2011/k12oll.htm

[Keeping Pace](): http://digitallearningnow.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/Keeping-Pace-2011.pdf

[Digital Learning Now](): http://digitallearningnow.com/

[The Rise of K-12 Blended Online Learning]()
http://www.innosightinstitute.org/media-room/publications/education-publications/the-rise-of-k-12-blended-learning/

[2009 US DOE Report]() http://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/tech/evidence-based-practices/finalreport.pdf

Resources

[MDE OLL web page]():
http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/Academic_Excellence/School_Choice/Public_School_Choice/Online_Learning/index.html

[MDE FAQs about OLL]():
http://education.state.mn.us/mdeprod/groups/Choice/documents/FAQ/034938.pdf

[MN Learning Commons](): http://mnlearningcommons.org/

[2008 Disrupting Class]() http://www.claytonchristensen.com/#book_disrupting

[iNACOL standards]() for courses and for teachers http://www.inacol.org/research/nationalstandards/