



Digital Learning Council offers pathway to innovation

The Digital Learning Council offered Dec. 1 a road map for states to revolutionize learning using virtual tools, but some stakeholders insist their recommendations are light on details for ensuring that innovation actually leads to more high-quality K-12 educational options.

Consisting of more than 100 leaders in education and other sectors, the Digital Learning Council defined actions that lawmakers must take so that educators can harness the benefits of digital tools in the classroom in its new report. It also outlined what they identified as the 10 elements of a high-quality digital learning opportunity.

The report touts digital learning as the "great equalizer" -- extending rigorous instruction to all students at a time when soaring budget deficits and shrinking tax revenues require more creative uses of existing school funding.

"Spending more money without changing the system or adding a layer of digital learning over the current system is not the answer," the authors wrote. "Instead, education needs to transition into the digital age, which means adopting a new way of operating."

Over the past decade, digital learning at the K-12 level has quickly expanded -- from a national enrollment of 40,000-50,000 in 2000 to an estimated 3 million students enrolled this year, according to findings from the Thomas B. Fordham Institute.

Recommendations

The Ten Elements of High Quality Digital Learning kicks off a year-long effort to turn proposals into action with the goal of broadening technology-enhanced learning in traditional schools while demonstrating the importance of online and virtual education, along with blended learning options, the group's leaders said.

States will play an integral role in transforming the way students learn, and the report offers a number of suggestions for moving forward, said former governors Jeb Bush of Florida and Bob Wise of West Virginia, who are overseeing the initiative.

The governors convened more than 100 stakeholders, and as a result of their feedback, are offering a number of recommendations to states in their final report, including:

- Hold a digital learning summit to discuss potential benefits and cost savings of K-12 online learning.
- Revise statewide technology plans to incentivize and advance digital learning within the state, then measure and report on state progress annually.
- Build a three-year budget that outlines estimated costs and savings from the shift to digital learning.

Stakeholders not involved in the report said they support the overall recommendations, but some said the paper falls short in acknowledging and troubleshooting the weaknesses of digital learning. For example, they said the council's advice offers little guidance on ensuring the quality of digital learning products and services.

Indeed, the recommendations accurately identify the barriers that constrain virtual education, but more guidance is needed, [Education Sector](#) Managing Director Bill Tucker wrote in a blog post.

"Without proper planning, without strong accountability structures in place from the get-go, digital learning could also lead to an educational marketplace flooded by low-quality products," said Daniela Fairchild, a policy analyst at the [Fordham Institute](#).

Tucker said the council provides few details on the recommendation to evaluate the quality of content and coursework using student learning data.

Similarly, he said, states are left guessing how to carry out a recommendation to ensure "a strong system of oversight and quality control."

Erin Dillon, a policy analyst at the Education Sector, said states must play an active role in ensuring program quality and develop high entry requirements for new providers, rigorous monitoring, and the ability to shut down providers if they are performing poorly.

"Too often, the recommendations assume that quality will naturally result from regulatory relief," said Tucker. "Without rigorous oversight, a thousand flowers blooming will also yield a lot of weeds."

-- [*Emily Ann Brown*](#) covers competitiveness issues for LRP Publications.

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