

DIGITAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS COMMITTEE

DRAFT RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Instructional Leadership

Effective educators must be classroom teachers, instructional technology facilitators, media specialists, teaching assistants, principals, and superintendents committed to creating an environment that uses multiple digital learning resources. These resources are critical to successful digital learning that provides an education that will equip students with 21st Century skills to be prepared for success in both career and college. The Committee finds that high-quality, ongoing professional development and support is a key factor in developing successful digital learning environments.

The Committee commends local school administrative units (LEAs) that have taken the initiative in providing support, resources, and professional development that enables teachers to successfully integrate digital learning into the classroom, and encourages all LEAs to continue to share ideas and resources to expand digital learning Statewide in all classrooms.

The Committee recommends that the General Assembly enact legislation directing the State Board of Education to develop digital competency standards to provide a framework for schools of education, school administrators, and classroom teachers on the needed skills to provide high-quality, integrated digital learning. The Committee also recommends that the General Assembly enact legislation to include digital competencies as an integral component of licensure requirements for all new and current teachers and school administrators by 2017.

2. School Connectivity

Digital learning is increasingly becoming an integral component of a 21st century education for all students in all schools across North Carolina. Effective digital learning requires a variety of resources, including infrastructure requirements, digital devices, educational software, high-quality teachers, and perhaps most essentially, reliable internet connectivity. The Committee finds that while all LEAs currently have internet access, wireless access on a school building level may be either unavailable or unreliable due to funding or infrastructure limitations.

The Committee also finds that effective digital learning continues after the school day ends, and that access to digital devices and connectivity outside of the school environment are also critical for 21st Century learning. The Committee finds, however, that many LEAs report limited connectivity in their students' homes and community.

Currently, there is no Statewide estimate on the costs for wireless access and sufficient bandwidth to support robust digital learning on a school building level, nor a detailed inventory of the current bandwidth and wireless capabilities of each LEA at the school building level. The Committee recommends that the General Assembly direct the Department of Public Instruction to conduct an inventory of the wireless access and bandwidth capacity of each public school in the State, and report to the Joint Legislative Education Oversight Committee by December 1, 2013. The Committee also recommends that the General Assembly establish a survey of community connectivity and identify ways to assist in expansion of readily accessible internet in all North Carolina counties.

3. Professional Development and Funding Flexibility

The Committee finds that LEAs are seeking creative approaches to financing digital learning within their school system, and that several LEAs have requested more flexibility with use of lottery funds for school construction.

The North Carolina Education Lottery legislation requires the distribution of lottery net proceeds for specific education purposes, including forty percent (40%) of the net proceeds to the Public School Building Capital Fund for school construction. Lottery funds may not currently be used for school connectivity, digital textbooks, digital devices, or professional development for teachers to learn how to most effectively use digital learning for teaching.

The Committee finds that since the lottery's enactment in 2005, the innovation of digital learning and its growing use throughout schools in North Carolina has significantly altered the landscape of public education in the State. While the lottery money is currently designated for other necessary education causes, the Committee finds the expansion of digital learning is also a crucial component to ensure North Carolina's students graduate from high school globally competitive for work and postsecondary education and prepared for life in the 21st century.

Option 1

The Committee recommends the General Assembly provide LEAs and counties the flexibility to use the percentage of lottery funds allocated for school construction for digital learning needs such as school connectivity, digital textbooks and instructional resources, and digital devices. The Committee further recommends that LEAs electing to use this funding flexibility be required to use a portion of this funding to ensure high-quality, ongoing professional development for teachers, such as the use of instructional technology facilitators at the school building level.

Option 2

The Committee recommends the General Assembly provide LEAs and counties flexibility for three years to use the percentage of lottery funds allocated for school construction for digital learning needs such as school connectivity, digital textbooks and instructional resources, or digital devices. LEAs that choose to exercise this flexibility would be required to use a portion of this funding to ensure high-quality, ongoing professional development for teachers, such as the use of instructional technology facilitators at the school building level.

The Committee further recommends that after the initial three years, the General Assembly require LEAs to earn continued flexibility in use of school construction lottery funds for digital learning needs. The Committee recommends that LEAs earn such continued flexibility by demonstrating consistent growth in student outcomes.

For Committee Discussion for Option 2 – What should be the standard for growth and who should establish it – the General Assembly or the State Board of Education? The General Assembly could require the State Board of Education to develop a formula, but within certain parameters. Factors that would need consideration include how long should growth be demonstrated for (2 years, 3 years, etc.), whether this would be overall LEA growth, or whether some subjects areas such as reading and math would be weighted more heavily, and how much growth is needed – an objective standard or in comparison to other LEAs.

4. Digital Textbooks and Instructional Resources and Virtual Learning

The Committee finds there are a number of approaches that LEAs have used to provide or access digital learning devices. These include diverting and restructuring current funding, use of private grants, parental contributions, local funding or local tax revenue, and "bring-your-own-device" policies. Educational materials in the form of digital textbooks and instructional resources have also become increasingly available and can benefit North Carolina students in elementary, middle, and high school grades by providing high-quality, up-to-date information that can be customized for individualized students throughout their

educational experience. Digital textbooks and instructional resources have proven to be tools that, when used effectively, can raise the level of academic performance of the State's students.

The Committee also finds that the use of online and blended courses can provide greater access to courses for students in subject areas that might otherwise be unavailable in many regions of the State. Online courses and blended instruction may also provide students with opportunities for credit recovery, earning college credit, and coursework in career and technical education.

The Committee encourages LEAs to explore the competitive environment for innovative practices, including virtual learning, that blend technology, digital devices, online learning, and traditional resources in classroom instruction. The Committee strongly urges LEAs to implement available and appropriate high-quality virtual, digital, and instructional resources that align with the curriculum.

Option 1

The Committee also recommends that the General Assembly establish its intent to transition funding for textbooks to funding for digital textbooks and instructional resources to provide educational resources that remain current, aligned with curriculum, and effective for all learners.

Option 2

The Committee also recommends that the General Assembly establish its intent to transition funding for textbooks to funding for digital textbooks and instructional resources to provide educational resources that remain current, aligned with curriculum, and effective for all learners by 2017.