



THE FUTURE OF COLORADO DIGITAL LEARNING: CRAFTING A POLICY ROADMAP FOR REFORM

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OVERVIEW

In 2010 the Digital Learning Council, convened and co-chaired by former governors Jeb Bush (R – Florida) and Bob Wise (D – West Virginia), released the 10 Elements of High-Quality Digital Learning. The following year the national Digital Learning Now campaign unveiled a more detailed “Roadmap for Reform,” with nuts-and-bolts policies recommended for states to adopt. Digital learning is defined as “any instructional practice that is effectively using technology to strengthen the student learning experience,” including full-time online learning and blended learning models that provide instruction “at least in part, through online delivery with some element of student control over time, place, path, and/or pace.”

Nearly 50 Colorado online education leaders (including school district and charter school staff) and policy experts gathered Monday, January 23, 2012, to help craft a roadmap of digital learning policy priorities for the state. Co-sponsored by the Independence Institute and the Donnell-Kay Foundation, the event featured International Association of K-12 Online Learning (iNACOL) president and CEO Susan Patrick as keynote speaker and facilitator. Colorado Department of Education Assistant Commissioner Amy Anderson and former State Board of Education member Randy DeHoff served as co-facilitators.

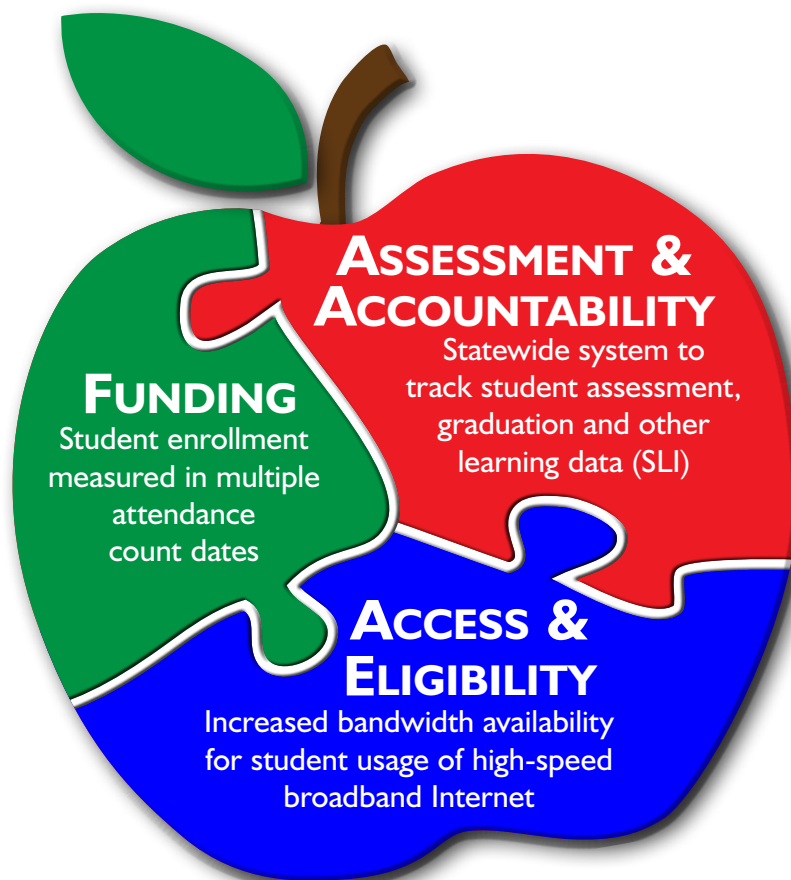
Participants worked together to help identify Colorado’s leading digital learning policy priorities in three major categories: Access and Eligibility, Funding, and Assessment and Accountability. Given a list of policy options that included Digital Learning Now’s recommendations, participants selected those they saw as the most important for Colorado to pursue in the near term and to offer additional ideas or suggestions. Six small groups collaborated separately, two for each of the three major categories, before reporting to the large group and sparking discussion. A considerable number of insightful comments were shared, and a remarkable degree of consensus was achieved on many priorities.

Nearly all of the priority changes outlined below are selected directly from Digital Learning Now’s Roadmap for Reform. Participants at the January 23 meeting embraced the process of deciding which policies best suit our state’s students and educators. According to many of the state’s online leaders, the following policy changes would enhance opportunities for Colorado’s children to achieve educational success.

DIGITAL LEARNING POLICY IMPLEMENTATION

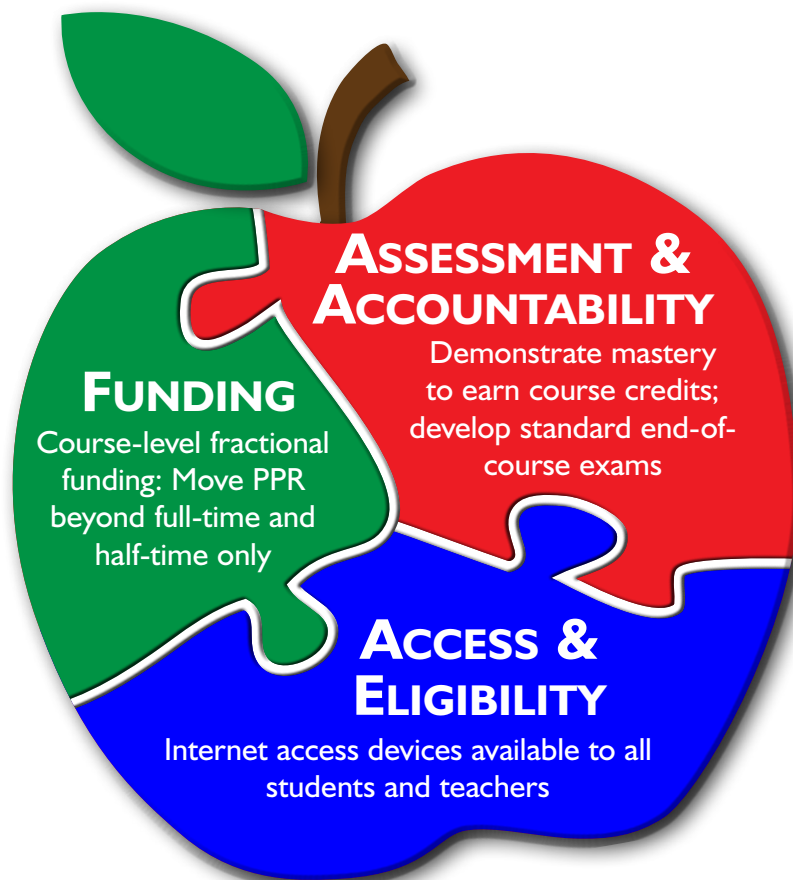
STAGE I

- 1) THE PUBLIC SCHOOL STUDENT ENROLLMENT COUNT SYSTEM SHOULD ALLOT FUNDING BASED ON MULTIPLE ATTENDANCE COUNT DATES.** Broad consensus exists in the online education community for an urgent change from the current October 1 single count date. Such a change addresses funding equity concerns in cases where students transfer between online and brick-and-mortar programs, and provides greater incentive for schools to serve students at risk of dropping out.
- 2) SCHOOLS SHOULD HAVE READY ACCESS TO A STATEWIDE SYSTEM THAT TRACKS ASSESSMENT, GRADUATION AND OTHER LEARNING DATA FOR STUDENT COHORTS, GIVING PROPER CLARIFICATION AND DIRECTION TO THE POLICY THAT RECORDS BELONG TO THE STUDENT.** Online providers often have difficulty accessing records of students who have transferred from a brick-and-mortar school or other program. The Colorado Department of Education (CDE) is preparing to pilot a new Student Learning Infrastructure (SLI) in conjunction with an update of the State Level Data System (SLDS). The changes will enable both the school of record and other course providers to access and share relevant student data. The State Board of Education can seek additional means of enforcing the 10-day rule for an outgoing student's school to honor a records transfer request.
- 3) ALL SCHOOLS SHOULD HAVE HIGH-SPEED BROADBAND INTERNET ACCESS.** The greatest limiting factor for some rural districts is adequate bandwidth to serve large numbers of students accessing digital content at the same time. Accountable to federal granting agencies and partner school districts, the intergovernmental entity EAGLE-Net is scheduled to complete broadband infrastructure enhancements to serve all 178 school districts by August 2013. EAGLE-Net currently defines 20 Mbps as the baseline "high speed" data transfer rate for all districts as a result of its enhancement project.



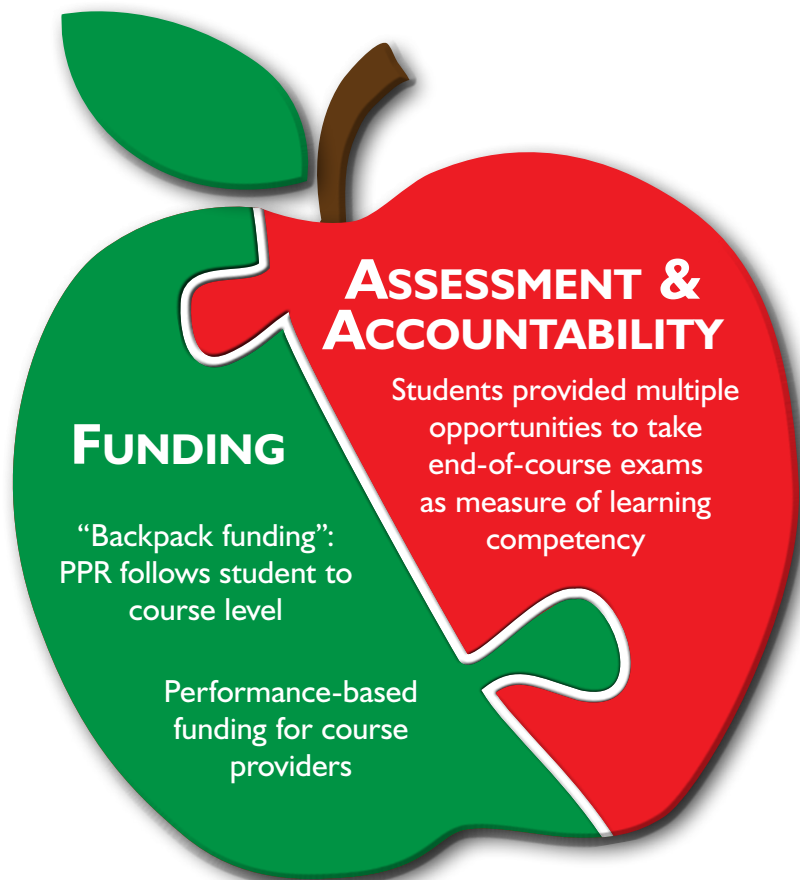
STAGE 2

- 1) **THE SCHOOL FINANCE SYSTEM SHOULD ENABLE FRACTIONAL FUNDING TO BE ALLOTTED IN SMALLER INCREMENTS THAN FULL-TIME OR HALF-TIME ONLY, BREAKING UP PER-PUPIL REVENUES (PPR) BY STUDENT AND TIME TO REACH THE COURSE LEVEL.** Such a change would allow per-pupil revenue state dollars to be divided to the individual course level, better enabling students access to diverse outside providers in order to supplement their learning.
- 2) **INSTRUCTIONAL SEAT TIME SHOULD BE ELIMINATED AS DEFINED CRITERIA FOR DETERMINING WHETHER A STUDENT EARNS ACADEMIC COURSE CREDIT.** Credit should be redefined based on attaining competencies through demonstrating mastery. While standard end-of-course exams are developed and adopted for various secondary courses, students' learning proficiency can be measured by meeting benchmarks as they move through the course.
- 3) **INTERNET ACCESS DEVICES SHOULD BE AVAILABLE TO ALL STUDENTS AND TEACHERS.** Portable Internet devices should be available in sufficient quantities to enable students to access digital course content. Beginning with secondary teachers, all professionals providing digital course instruction must have both the devices and the proper training to use them effectively.



Stage 3

- 1) **SCHOOL FINANCE DOLLARS SHOULD BE DELIVERED THROUGH “BACKPACK FUNDING” (ALSO KNOWN AS WEIGHTED STUDENT FUNDING), IN WHICH PER-PUPIL REVENUES (PPR) DIRECTLY FOLLOW A STUDENT TO THE SCHOOL AND COURSES OF HIS/HER CHOICE.** Assigned PPR funds can be delivered directly to the school and other course providers a student has chosen, rather than filtered first through a district central office. Dollars not only can be divided among various courses but also can travel across district lines concurrently to multiple providers, based on the student’s choice and direction.
- 2) **INDIVIDUAL ONLINE COURSE PROVIDERS SHOULD BE REWARDED BASED ON A SYSTEM OF PERFORMANCE-BASED (OR COMPETENCY-BASED) FUNDING, PROVIDING THE FINAL INSTALLMENT OF STATE DOLLARS WHEN A STUDENT SUCCESSFULLY COMPLETES A COURSE.** As course-level measures of student learning are installed, incentives should follow that ensure a significant share of student funds (as much as 50 percent) are withheld from the provider until the student has completed course requirements successfully.
- 3) **SECONDARY STUDENTS SHOULD BE REQUIRED TO DEMONSTRATE COMPETENCY, PRIMARILY ON STANDARD END-OF-COURSE EXAMS, TO EARN COURSE CREDIT. AND STUDENTS SHOULD BE PROVIDED MULTIPLE OPPORTUNITIES THROUGHOUT THE YEAR TO TAKE END-OF-COURSE EXAMS.** Such a change is needed to enable students to demonstrate mastery of material and advance at either an accelerated or extended pace, rather than being bound by restrictive seat-time rules. End-of-course exams should be used as the primary means to demonstrate competency. Alternative means such as a portfolio, project presentation, or major paper should be available on a limited basis.



RESOURCES

More information on digital learning and supporting policies can be found in the following:

Digital Learning Now!, *Roadmap for Reform* (national),
<http://digitallearningnow.com/roadmap-to-reform/>

Digital Learning Now!, *Nation's Digital Learning Report Card*,
<http://digitallearningnow.com/nations-report-card/>

Donnell-Kay Foundation, *Blended Learning: The Best of Both Worlds*,
<http://www.dkfoundation.org/PDF/BlendedLearning-BestOfBothWorlds-Feb2011.pdf>

Evergreen Education Group, *Keeping Pace with K-12 Online Learning*, <http://kpk12.com/>

Independence Institute, *Choosing a Colorado Online School for Your Child*,
<http://education.i2i.org/2011/12/choosing-a-colorado-online-school-for-your-child/>

Innosight Institute, *The Rise of K-12 Blended Learning: Profiles of Emerging Models*,
<http://www.innosightinstitute.org/media-room/publications/blended-learning/>

International Association of K-12 Online Learning, *Fast Facts about Online Learning*,
http://www.inacol.org/press/docs/nacol_fast_facts.pdf

Thomas B. Fordham Institute, *School Finance in the Digital-Learning Era*,
<http://www.edexcellence.net/publications/school-finance-in-the-digital-learning-era.html>

Thomas B. Fordham Institute, *Quality Control in K-12 Digital Learning: Three (Imperfect) Approaches*, <http://www.edexcellence.net/publications/quality-control-in-k-12-digital-learning.html>

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES on this subject can be found at: <http://education.i2i.org/>.

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