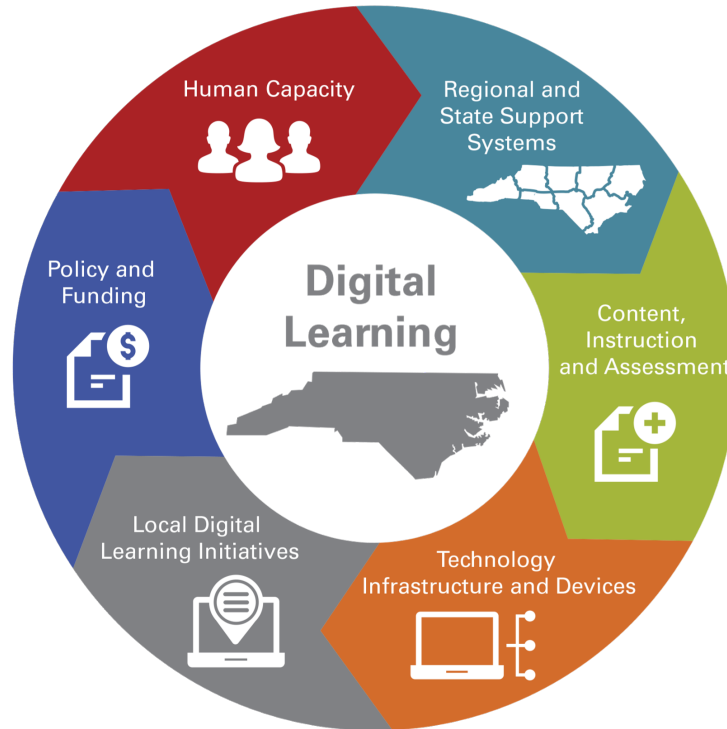




Friday Institute Education Brief

The North Carolina Digital Learning Plan: Policy Recommendations and Action Steps

Background

The Digital Learning Plan was published in 2015 and prepared by the Friday Institute for Educational Innovation for the North Carolina State Board of Education and the Department of Public Instruction (DPI). The plan outlined a set of goals and recommendations for the state-level leadership, action steps for carrying out those recommendations and metrics that would indicate those actions have been successful.

Process

The Friday Institute Program Evaluation and Education Research Group conducted interviews and focus groups in fall 2020 with over 50 school and district leaders including superintendents, chief technology officers, principals, instructional technology facilitators and many other roles. This brief will focus primarily on action steps that received funding for implementation within the six key areas of the Digital Learning Plan.

Among the six key areas, there are explicit recommendations and distinct action steps, most of which are still relevant today. Since 2015, the Digital Learning Initiative has addressed roughly half of these, so there is quite a bit of work left to be done.

Recommendations

Technology Infrastructure and Devices



- **Provide guidance and support for sustaining and leveraging technology purchases.** The pandemic has underscored home and community internet access and equity issues. Educators noted that the pandemic accelerated their efforts to ensure each child has a device, but they could use some guidance and support for how to sustain or leverage these purchases post-pandemic.
- **Support PSUs in device sustainability and a replacement strategy.** The state could use data on the devices that have actually been purchased by PSUs. This data would also help assess the extent to which contract pricing has actually resulted in cost savings, which was one of the main goals for technology and infrastructure recommendations in the Digital Learning Plan.
- **Supply data needed on device purchases and cost savings.**

Human Capacity



- **Provide continued support for the digital learning teacher competencies and student standards.** Specifically, educators are looking for DPI to provide additional models, resources and best practices to help with integration of these teacher competencies and student standards into classroom practice.
- **Explore statewide platforms for micro-credentialing.**
- **Promote professional learning opportunities and systemic systems to support highly qualified teachers and administrators.**

Content, Instruction and Assessment



- **Support collaborative procurement to sustain content purchases made during pandemics.** For example, at the start of the pandemic last spring, vendors were making content and services freely available to teachers, but when fall came around and schools were still remote, vendors started charging again. However, teachers were still depending on those resources for remote learning and schools were trying to figure out how to pay for them.
- **Develop a 5-year roadmap and continuous improvement plan for Home Base.**

Local Digital Learning Initiatives



- **Provide guidance for PSUs to extend and expand Virtual Academies post-pandemic.** One key finding from our interviews with school and district leaders was that the majority are likely to extend or expand their current virtual academy offerings next year. Several leaders noted guidance and support would be needed from DPI to help districts operate and sustain these virtual academies effectively.
- **Develop a toolkit of resources to support district and charter school digital learning initiatives.** Another key theme that emerged from our discussions was the continued need for models, resources and examples of best practice that can be used and adapted by schools and districts as part of their local professional development efforts.

- **Establish evaluation supports for PSU grantees.** One final priority for the Local Digital Learning Initiative grants moving forward is establishing evaluation supports for grantees, especially for those with limited capacity to evaluate their programs. This will help to provide feedback for improving their programs before and during implementation and also to help gather evidence for promising models and best practices that could be adopted across the state.

Policy and Funding



- **Fund instructional technology support staff.** When we spoke with school and district leaders about state-level supports for digital learning, the need for sufficient and predictable funding sources was a dominant theme. When asked about priorities for funding, the need for additional instructional technology facilitators to support teachers and students was frequently cited.
- **Advocate for the continuation of PRC 015 school technology funds.** School and district leaders expressed serious concerns about their ability to plan for and support digital learning without these funds.
- **Provide evaluation tools for NC Digital Learning Competencies and NC Digital Learning Standards for Students.**

Regional and State Support Systems



- **Develop a comprehensive continuous improvement plan to monitor, adjust and assess regional and state digital learning efforts.** The Digital Learning Plan laid out a realistic set of measures and methods for monitoring the progress of the work. Some of these were put in place, but some of them were not. Moving forward, the Digital Learning Initiative should prioritize the development of a continuous improvement plan to better monitor implementation of related programs and assess overall progress.
- **Reestablish the NC Digital Learning Collaborative to oversee efforts to address state priorities.** Since 2015 there has been a major turnover in leadership on the digital learning work. As a result, a current priority is to reestablish the Digital Learning Collaborative that was recommended in the Digital Learning Plan. Specifically, the plan recommended a management structure including an executive committee with representation from DPI; the Friday Institute; the Golden LEAF Foundation; the principals, superintendents and school boards associations; and advisory board representation from all stakeholder groups.

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