



Executive Summary of the Digital Learning Commons' Research for Strategic Planning July 2008

The Digital Learning Commons (DLC) conducted and commissioned several different types of research as part of a comprehensive strategic planning effort undertaken by our board and staff in 2007-2008. The research fell into three basic categories:

- 1. Challenges in K-12 Education**
- 2. Schools' needs and attitudes about technology-based educational tools and resources; market research**
- 3. Membership data and demographics; DLC resources and usage**

This Executive Summary shares top findings from interviews and focus groups, formal studies, and market research.

1. K-12 Education in Washington – Near Future Challenges

Two types of data were gathered for insight into what K-12 Education is facing now and in the near future. The DLC Strategic Planning Consultant interviewed, surveyed, and conducted focus groups with education leaders, educators, Board members, and DLC staff. The second source was reported by the BERC Group, an education research firm which provided a research review of education issues in Washington.

a. Top 10 challenges mentioned by education leaders and Board members in order of frequency:

1. Lack of adequate, consistent funding for education and the funding system isn't clear and transparent.
2. Need to meet the needs of students with diverse backgrounds (different levels of preparation, urban and rural/remote), and provide tools and resources to help those who are struggling. It used to be that the education system was required to provide universal access; now the current expectation is that the system is expected to provide for universal excellence.
3. Need to improve math and science academic performance and address socio-economic inequities in math and science achievement.
4. Teachers aren't being trained appropriately in research-based methods of Powerful Teaching and Learning which focuses on coaching/guiding students as opposed to "stand and deliver" teaching; to use "constructivist" teaching methodology incorporating project- and inquiry-based learning.
5. Not enough time for teachers to keep up and to integrate new knowledge; not enough support for teachers delivered within the school's context.

6. Articulation between K-12 and higher education as evidenced by a lack of coordination of standards (e.g., remediation needed in college). Current system is not meeting students' needs for preparing for life after high school.
7. Lack of student data and robust collection and access system to enable data-driven decision making; inability to share best practices across schools and districts which isolates teachers, schools, and districts.
8. High drop-out rate which demonstrates that the current system is not meeting students' needs nor stressing the relevancy of a high school diploma.
9. Early learning needs; students need to be prepared for kindergarten and if not, implement all-day kindergarten.
10. Development, recruitment and retention of high-quality teachers, especially in English as a Second Language (ESL), special education, math and science. Additionally, some of the best teachers are leaving the field as reported by the BERC Group's analysis of issues and trends in K-12 education nationally and in Washington:
 - Preparing students for a global economy and ensuring that they are college and career ready. Washington State high school students are poorly prepared for post-secondary education, which is increasingly necessary to compete in the global economy:
 - Some estimate that 66 percent of jobs will require some post-secondary education or a bachelor's degree by 2010.
 - Graduation requirements at most Washington high schools are not aligned with college admission requirements. Approximately 37 percent of high school graduates (class of 2004) required some form of remediation prior to entering college level courses.
 - The majority of students are not meeting standards on the math and science sections of the WASL. In 2007, less than 40 percent of 10th graders met the science standard, and only half met the math standard.
 - Teaching so students can meet the state's subject area standards. Most teachers (51 percent) aren't using powerful teaching techniques or brain-based research in their instructional models:
 - The typical professional development models don't assist teachers in improving their instructional practice.
 - Most districts in the state don't have systems to gather and present student data to administrators and teachers so they can use this information to make program changes and to inform instruction, a key element of powerful teaching.
 - The achievement gap still exists.
 - Preventing dropouts:
 - Eight percent of Washington State high schools graduate 60 percent or less of their students; the state's graduate rate is 70 percent and this has improved only slightly since 2002.
 - As of 2002, 31,067 students attended 242 alternative schools, and only 7 percent of those classrooms were using powerful teaching and learning strategies.
 - Strengthen school district systems:
 - Staff need collaboration time to work together on school improvement efforts.
 - Lack of shared focus/vision makes it hard for schools to improve and they resort to many programs and initiatives that are not connected.
 - Professional development for teachers needs to be varied to the grade/subject of the educator.
 - Implement strategies to improve parent involvement since that impacts student achievement.
 - Tackle the teacher shortage and retention challenge using research-based interventions.

In summary, based on the educator surveys, focus groups and interviews, and the BERC Group report, the following alignments emerge as top issues:

- Funding
- Meeting the needs of diverse student populations
- Teacher recruitment, training, and professional development

2. Market Research: Schools' needs and attitudes about technology

There are two main sources of information that fall under this category: a survey of DLC members and two online focus groups of non-DLC members conducted by Pyramid Communications.

a. Survey of DLC Members

DLC members were asked twelve questions about their experiences as educators and their use of and opinions about DLC resources. (N = 235)

Top five answers to the question: To your knowledge, why did your school decide to join the DLC?

Response	Percent responding
Good resource, lots to offer	32%
Access to online courses	22%
Expand offerings to students	15%
Cost effective resource	12%
Credit retrieval	8%

Top five answers to the question: What in your opinion are your school's greatest challenges?

Response	Percent responding
Lack of sufficient financial resources	15%
Helping every student succeed academically, regardless of aptitude and achievement	10%
Meeting needs of a diverse student body	10%
Motivating students	10%
Offering courses appropriate for students at ALL levels of achievement	8%

When asked how they thought access to the DLC resources has changed or enhanced their teaching, these were the five most common responses:

Response	Percent responding
Help with research for students	14%
Curriculum assistance	6%
Convenience and speed	5%
Individualize learning for students	5%
Made me a better teacher	5%

When asked "which DLC resource benefits their students the most," respondents ranked the library databases and online courses highest.

b. Online Focus Groups

The DLC hired Pyramid Communications to conduct two online, bulletin board-style focus groups in November 2007. Participants included "influencers" and "decision makers" from non-DLC schools and at the district level around Washington State. Both groups included participants from a mix of

small and large schools and districts; rural, suburban and urban districts; and higher- and lower income schools and districts from across the state.

Through the focus groups, Pyramid found that educators are very aware of the value of technology in education. Many of the districts surveyed already use a wide range of technology-based learning resources and realized they will be using more in the future. However, participants' use of these tools varied widely:

- Many have cobbled together resources from multiple vendors with no clear strategy.
- Many have invested in resources that are not fully used or understood.
- Many are overwhelmed with the available choices and are hesitant to make new investments for fear of choosing the wrong products.
- All face significant barriers due to limited budgets, outdated or insufficient hardware, and teacher resistance to change.
- Most participants noted that their districts do not have individual decision makers; rather, decisions about technology and learning resources are generally made collaboratively.
- Participants were not very aware of the DLC and are somewhat confused by the DLC's relationship with the Legislature.
- They appreciated the fact that DLC materials are aligned to Washington state standards.
- Many expressed concern about the cost of a DLC subscription and about the fact that DLC's "bundled" package of services would, in many cases, overlap with resources they have already purchased.

Pyramid summarized that the DLC no longer needs to convince educators of the importance of technology-based resources. Instead, it needs to help them use technology wisely and, in the process, bring along lagging colleagues by helping them make the leap to the digital age.

3. About the DLC: Membership data and demographics; DLC resources and usage

a. Membership:

- The DLC has shown robust growth each year. Since the "proof of concept" phase, DLC student membership has grown 34-71 percent per year, and DLC school membership has grown 20-35 percent.
- Once a school joins the DLC, they tend to continue with membership. The year-to-year retention rate has grown from 73 percent in 2005-2006 to 91 percent in 2007-2008 (funding is cited as the main reason for schools to not continue with the DLC).

b. Demographics

- DLC tends to serve small schools. Approximately 75 percent of DLC member schools have a student population of less than 400 students.
- 51 percent of the DLC member schools serve high school students.
- DLC serves a high proportion of alternative schools and home school resource centers. Approximately one-third of the 2007-2008 DLC member schools fell into those two categories.
- Most DLC member schools are located in small or mid-sized cities and towns, and are located in rural or suburban areas.
- In many ways, the DLC member schools mirror the state as a whole. One notable exception is that DLC member schools tend to have lower math WASL scores.

- DLC seems to work in a few more schools with very high (over 80 percent) non-White populations, as compared to the state. DLC also works with more very low (less than 10 percent) non-White populations than the state comparison.

c. DLC Resource Use

- Schools enroll students in online courses primarily because the course was not available at the school.
- Students dropping online courses do so primarily because of changes in the school schedule or schedule conflicts.
- Math and Foreign Language courses are the most popular, corresponding closely to the high need subjects related to college readiness.
- Approximately one-third of the high schools spent beyond their Course Credit Fund allocations. Course Credit Funds are allocations given to member schools by the DLC to be used for online courses.
- Schools indicate that they use either building funds or DLC Course Credit Funds to pay for the vast majority (85 percent) of course enrollments.
- The library databases are the most popular resources on the website, followed by the college and career planning tools, the teaching resources, and the digital tools.
- According to post-training surveys, 95 percent of respondents said that the training sessions were good/excellent and 78 percent said that they feel equipped to use the resources on their own at the "yes" or "very much so" level.
- 69 percent of 2006-2007 schools had at least one ClassTools teacher account.
- 37 percent of 2006-2007 schools had at least one student assigned to DLC Tutors.