



1932 First Avenue, Suite 507
SEATTLE, Washington 98101
Tel 206.374.7788 Fax 206.374.7798

239 NW 13th Avenue, Suite 205
PORTLAND, Oregon 97209
Tel 503.241.2341 Fax 503.238.5788

www.PyramidCommunications.com

MEMORANDUM

To: Judy Margrath-Huge, president and CEO, Digital Learning Commons
From: Marissa Jade Kaiser and Jen Leahy, Pyramid Communications
Date: December 10, 2007
Re: **Updated topline findings from online focus groups**

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Educators are very aware of the value of technology in education. Most districts already use a wide range of technology-based learning resources and realize they will be using more in the future.

However, participants' use of these tools varies 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. And all face significant barriers due to limited budgets, outdated or insufficient hardware and teacher resistance to change. Most participants note that their districts do not have single decision makers; rather, decisions about technology and learning resources are generally made collaboratively.

Participants are not very aware of the Digital Learning Commons and are somewhat confused by the DLC's relationship with the Legislature. They appreciate the fact that DLC materials are aligned to Washington state standards. However, many express 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.

METHODOLOGY

Pyramid Communications conducted two online, bulletin board-style focus groups for Digital Learning Commons between Nov. 13 and 15, 2007. Participants included “influencers” and “decision makers” from 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.

In order to maintain anonymity, individual schools have not been listed, however representative districts included:

Anacortes	Blaine	Cheney
Colfax	Darrington	Deer Park
Edmonds	Everett	Fife
Hoquiam	Kennewick	La Center
Lacey	Mercer Island	Monroe
Mukilteo	Renton	South Kitsap
Stanwood/Camano	Tacoma	Tahoma
Touchet	Washougal	White Salmon
Winlock	Yakima	Yelm

In addition, one Seattle private school was included.

Before the groups convened, participants were asked whether they considered themselves influencers or decision makers so that they could be assigned to the appropriate group. Most participants indicated that they could be assigned to either group: Interestingly, even superintendents note that they consider themselves influencers as much as decision makers.

This fluidity in educators’ understanding of their influence is indicative that most districts have adopted collaborative processes to review and consider purchases of technology and technology-based learning resources. These processes do not always work perfectly—as many participants were quick to point out—but they show that, in most cases, no single person in a school or district has full decision-making power. This move toward more collaborative decision making means that findings from the influencers group are nearly identical to those from the decision makers group, and it means there are not single, easily identifiable decision makers within a district but rather a range of people who have more or less influence over decisions.

Influencers

The first group was comprised of 15 self-defined “**influencers.**” Influencers define themselves as having significant influence—but not final authority—over school or district purchases of curriculum or technology-based learning resources.

The positions of these participants are varied, depending on the size and structure of the school or district and on decision-making processes. Accounting for similarities between job titles, these participants included:

Alternative school director
Middle school principal
School technology coordinator
K-12 librarian

High school principal
High school librarian
District technology coordinator
Middle school instruction
& technology coach

Decision makers

The second group was made up of 17 self-defined “**decision makers.**” Decision makers describe themselves as having authority over purchases of curriculum and technology-based learning resources for their school or district, though many offer the caveat that they consult with or defer to others. These participants included:

Middle school principal
Assistant superintendent
Director of curriculum/assessment
Associate director of teaching & learning
Facilitating teacher for home school
students

High school principal
Superintendent
Director of instructional technology
Middle school librarian
Teacher on special assignment

Focus groups are structured—but open-ended—discussions that permit the exploration of how people think at a deeper level than quantitative research. This kind of qualitative research provides a rich, textured appraisal of people’s attitudes. Despite how insightful these discussions can be, it is important to remember that they have their limitations. Because the number of respondents participating in this process is limited, this research must be considered in a qualitative frame of reference and should not be generalized to educators or administrators more broadly.

The bulletin board-style focus group allows participants to read questions and then respond in writing, with a different set of questions posted each day. Participants cannot see others’ responses until after they answer each question to limit “group think.” Once they have responded to the moderator’s post, participants are encouraged to comment on the responses of other participants. The result is a lively and in-depth discussion.

Note: All focus group quotes are verbatim and have not been edited for content, grammar or punctuation.

KEY FINDINGS

Perceptions of technology-based learning resources

1. Educators are very aware of the value of technology in education and they see technology-based learning resources as the way of the future.

- Participants uniformly express the desire to do their best by their students and to prepare their students for life after high school. Educators realize they must help students become technologically literate.

"Technology is a great equalizer. It is said that anyone with a high-speed internet connection and a computer is a competitor in the global economy. We need to be sure all of our kids understand that using technology is, and always will be, a part of their lives." —Superintendent, rural school district, decision maker

- Participants in both groups say that high-quality technology-based learning resources can help differentiate and personalize education. Specifically, they say these resources can appeal to the way young people learn and keep students interested and motivated.

"Once the students 'get it,' let them learn the new tools and have them teach you. You honor them and you reap the rewards. They are the digital natives." —K-12 librarian, urban school district, influencer

- Educators say technology can help students learn at their own pace and with their own style. However, they caution that students (and teachers) need guidance and instruction in using technology wisely. The issue of educators feeling overwhelmed—both by the wide array of resources available and also by those they have already purchased—came up many times during both focus group discussions. Most participants are using a number of technology resources, but many feel they are not using them wisely or well.

"Our teachers do need to be trained. Many just let students go straight to Google without a map. Others will look up quick fix sites that are 'wiki' sites. That is why I work at trying to get teachers to use the tried and true databases we have invested in. That is a difficult task." —Middle school librarian, mid-sized school district, decision maker

2. Participants' use of technology-based learning resources varies widely from district to district.

- There is not an appreciable difference in the way educators in large and small districts use technology. Rather the differences stem from districts' resources and from the presence of "champions" within a district who will find funding and then test and introduce services and products.

- Technology champions can be IT professionals or teachers, librarians or administrators who have received training or are simply interested in technology. They are likely to be willing early adopters and can often have a significant influence on their peers.

"For a small district we have always been on the cutting edge of technology. This has been made possible by admin and teachers that are willing to seek out grant opportunities and also from some community support groups. Some of our staff have been recognized for their innovations and use of technology for instruction and learning." —Technology coordinator, small district, decision maker

- Some participants note that their districts use very little technology. Other participants are much more sophisticated in their approach. In the focus groups, this ranged from one rural district that was using Skyward but nothing else to other districts—both rural and urban—with fully developed technology plans. District size and socioeconomic status seem to play a role but do not fully account for the difference in districts' level of sophistication. Rather, the presence of technology champions—who have been able to get technology seen as a core part of the learning process rather than as an extra—seems to make the biggest difference.

"We have a three-year technology plan that dove tails with our building plan around student learning. From the technology plan we identify programs or resources that might meet the goals of the tech plan and ultimately the goals of the building SLIP. We look to neighboring successful districts for proven programs as well as what we might encounter at state conferences." —High school principal, mid-sized district, decision maker

- Most participants are somewhere in between. They describe using a range of technology-based resources but do not express a real sense of where they are going next with technology or even how they got where they are. Concerns about not being strategic about technology and about not using existing technological resources to their full capacity came up many times.

"I don't really believe that the tech standards [ISTE/NETS] are widely understood and/or used. We have been so heavily focused on Math AYP, that last year our Instructional Tech dept was told we weren't going to do anything about Instr. Tech since we weren't 'failing.' One feels like all we do in this district is run around trying to put out AYP fires." —K-12 librarian, urban school district, influencer

Barriers to using technology-based resources

1. Funding is the biggest barrier and was cited by nearly every participant.

- Participants cite an overall lack of resources, as well as a lack of funding for technology in particular. Many express frustration at what they are expected to accomplish with limited—and sometimes declining—resources. Responding to state and federal assessment requirements and to a changing socioeconomic student body are frequently cited as barriers to being more innovative with technology.

"Lack of resources—our enrollment is dropping. As you all know the feds and the state continue to increase the accountability/expectations of public education without comparable resource support." —Director of curriculum and assessment, small district, decision maker

"Yes, it was easier to track when we just had credits to track. Now, we have the WASL with lots of options, the Culminating Project, and the High School and Beyond Plan. Oh, boy!" —Assistant superintendent, mid-sized district, decision maker

- The librarians in the groups express particular concern about a lack of resources for books, research databases and other information resources.

2. Lack of time and money for teacher training—along with teachers' perceived or real unwillingness to try new teaching methods—is also cited as a key barrier.

- Participants note that many teachers are too busy, or too intimidated, to incorporate new, technology-based resources into their classes.

"Most teachers seem to teach the same lesson the same way they did 10 years ago. They will use tech to suit their own purposes (email, test writing, etc) but will not actively seek out web resources to incorporate into the lesson." —Technology coordinator, private school, influencer

- Participants say that without teacher commitment to new resources, investments in technology will not be used or will not be used to their full potential. As noted above, this is a continuing theme—the notion that many schools and districts already have resources that are not being used to their full potential. Helping educators feel comfortable with existing resources may help lower barriers to new resources.

"The digital age has arrived, but the teachers are still at the copy machines. We don't have the bandwidth to join this digital revolution." —Teacher, large suburban school district, decision maker

3. Having adequate hardware to manage Internet- or software-based resources is another barrier.

- Participants note that many schools don't have enough computers or have hardware that is out of date or even obsolete. Some note that Internet-based resources are preferable to software because of difficulties running new software on old machines.
- Others note that, even with adequate hardware, teachers may not know how to use technology-based learning resources or may be prohibited from adding or accessing new resources due to district regulations.

"Every computer has a standard suite of software, but due to support issues, teachers are not allowed to put any other learning software on their computers. We are VERY network driven, with less and less emphasis on what the students might need. I think that is an issue with every district as the number of computers out paces what a district can spend on support." —Librarian, urban school district, influencer

- Several participants suggest that a local technology levy may be necessary to provide funding for needed hardware. Several participants may pursue a technology levy soon. One participant notes that having a strong strategic plan was important to the passage of a recent local technology levy.

"The technology we currently have is mostly outdated and we need to make serious upgrades over the next two years. This will require the passing of a technology levy." —Technology coordinator, small school district, decision maker

"Our technological infrastructure is not what it needs to be. Our computers are on average 5 years old. We are going to run a tech levy this school year." —Middle school principal, small school district, decision maker

Current use of technology-based learning resources

1. Despite the barriers mentioned, most of the participants' schools or districts are already using a wide range of technology-based learning resources.

- Technology-based learning resources identified by participants include:
 - Research databases/online encyclopedias (and services to help students with research papers and bibliographies)
 - Public library databases
 - Library catalog and management services
 - Career exploration/aptitude surveys
 - Postsecondary preparation services
 - Electronic portfolios
 - Senior project tools
 - Grade books (some simply on teachers' computers but most online with features to share grades with parents and students)
 - Lesson plans (both prepackaged lesson plans created by others and web-based tools to allow teachers to create their own)
 - Diagnostic tools and assessments
 - Online courses
 - Online professional development for educators

- Even participants who say they do not have access to enough technology-based learning resources cite a varied list of services and tools they use. Participants uniformly want more technology, but they are by no means doing without it at the moment. This may be a key difference from their situation even a few years ago. For the most part, participants are not new to the digital world; rather, they need help using technological resources more effectively.

2. Use of technology-based resources is uneven and many districts have cobbled together services from multiple vendors. Participants do not identify clear leaders or "gold standards" for technology-based learning resources.

- Participants list a wide array of vendors (a complete list of the resources cited by participants is included in the Appendix). However, participants do not identify a clear leader for technology-based learning resources. Some identify their local ESD as a resource in both packaging and identifying resources, while others cite the Digital Learning Commons as a similar resource.

3. Participants are overwhelmed with the volume of educational resources that are available.

- The value placed on a specific technology-based learning resource depends on participants' job functions: Teachers tend to favor online grade books

through which they can share student information with parents, while librarians tend to favor research tools; several say counselors favor career exploration and postsecondary preparation tools.

- Participants are concerned about keeping up with new technology-based resources. Several participants say they could use help identifying the best resources.

"We are starting to explore technology based resources but often are overwhelmed by the array of possibilities. If anyone has found effective efficient ways to sift through all the resources and find those nuggets of gold that are really promising, please let us know. We are a relatively small/medium sized district and don't have a lot of man power and resources." —Associate director of learning and teaching, mid-sized school district, decision maker

"We spent a huge amount of money on some poor choices because a few folk were really excited—it didn't pay off, and will likely cost us in cynicism in the future." —High school principal, small district, decision maker

Purchases of technology-based learning resources

1. Districts' research and purchasing processes vary widely.

- In most districts, there is no such thing as a single decision maker when it comes to purchases of technology or technology-based resources. This finding came through first as participants identified themselves as decision makers or influencers for the focus groups: Interestingly, even those who clearly have decision making authority (such as superintendents) noted that they tend to confer with or even defer to others on purchases.
- In most districts, information is gleaned from the state (and sometimes from the local ESD), then forwarded to the district and passed along to schools. Decisions are a collaborative effort involving district and school staff. Rather than having one person who influences or decides to purchase technology-based learning resources, teams of administrators, technology directors, curriculum directors and library-media specialists evaluate resources together. These processes are often informed by early adopters or technology "champions."
- In some districts, technology departments make purchasing decisions based on recommendations from staff.

"Our technology department asks staff to identify needs and suggest ideas for tools, then the department does a great deal of research before purchasing tools. If the tool represents a significant expenditure, it must be part of the budgeting process, and compete with other needs in the district. Needs and finances influence the decisions." —Librarian, suburban school district, influencer

- In other districts, technology committees (some involving students) have been convened to review and approve technology decisions. As noted earlier, some districts are very sophisticated and deliberate in their review; most, however, are less so.

"We have a K-12 represented district technology committee. We refer to the state's Tier model, discuss and brainstorm needs. Our purchases are based on Tier I classrooms first, and then if there are funds we look at Tier II and Tier III purchases as well. Our purchases are also prioritized to support libraries, math and science." —Curriculum/assessment director, small school district, decision maker

- Participants express varying degrees of satisfaction with these processes. In many cases, dissatisfaction stems from a lack of understanding of technology-based resources throughout a district. Often, technology champions can influence purchases of technology; but sometimes they are simply too far ahead of their colleagues and may need help gathering information to demonstrate how the product or service they wish to purchase will be beneficial.

2. Participants prefer to learn about technology-based learning resources from people or organizations they already know or trust: colleagues, conferences or their local ESD.

- Participants indicate great willingness to learn more about technology-based resources.
- Most say that they are most interested in learning about resources from colleagues or at conferences, not from emails, direct mail or phone calls. A number cite their local ESD both as a vendor of products and services and as a referral source.

"I usually attend several state or national conferences a year where vendors have displays, and I sometimes see things that intrigue me there. More often, I hear from colleagues who have tried a new product and are excited about what it is doing for students and teachers. I try to get over and see it demonstrated with teachers and students and if it still intrigues me, I get contact information for the vendor." —Assistant superintendent, mid-sized district, decision maker

CONCLUSION

Participants agree that technology is the way of the future. Many of them are struggling to integrate technology-based learning resources into their schools, and indicate that they would like help. A number of the participants are aware that their districts are not keeping up with new technologies and express a need to do more. The DLC's ability to "make sense" of the vast array of technology-based resources available to educators is an appealing point.

"The world is making this grand leap into the information and computer age and schools don't see this paradigm shift as a 'core change'. I still can hear my mother talk about my grandfather not wanting a tractor when horses were just fine for the farm labor ... What do we really need? Horses or tractors?" —Teacher, large suburban district, decision maker

"I truly believe that technology accommodates all learning abilities and paces the learner in and through their learning interest. Since the 'world' is their textbook / slate, they can have the fulfillment of learning and improving their skills along the way." —Director of instructional technology and operations, small district, decision maker

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 well and, in the process, bring along lagging colleagues by helping them make the leap to the digital age.

APPENDIX

Technology-based learning resources identified by participants

1st Class GradeBook
A+ Math (American Education Corporation)
AAAmath.com
ABC-CLIO
Academy of MATH
Academy of READING
Acellus Labs – Fundamental Mathematics
Accelerated Reader
Account-Ability
ActivBoard
AIMSweb
ALEKS
Alexandria Library Management
American Memory (Library of Congress)
AP Multimedia Archive
APEX Web Media
Atomic Learning – Movies
Benchmark Tracker
Big Chalk eLibrary
Blackboard Learning System
Brainbashers.com
BrainPOP
Bridges
Career Choices
Career Cruising
Citrix (Skyward) Educator Access
Class.com
Cognitive Tutor (Carnegie Learning)
Connected Mathematics
Coolmath.com
Corel Paint Shop Pro
CultureGrams Online Database
CyberEd Dissection
CyberEd PLATO Science
Descartes' Cove Math Software
Developmental Reading Assessment (Pearson)
DIBELS
DISCOVER Career Planning Program (ACT)
Duxbury Data Management System (local teacher developed)
Easy Grade Pro
eBooks.com
EBSCO
Edline
EduPortal (WASA)
Edusoft

eFolio
elibrary
ERIC (Education Resources Information Center)
eSIS
Everyday Mathematics (UCSMP)
FASTT Math and Reading (Scholastic)
Follett's Destiny Library Manager
FOSS Science (Lawrence Hall of Science)
Gale Opposing Viewpoints
Gateway (gradebook)
Geometer's Sketchpad
Gizmos & Gadgets! (Learning Company)
Grolier Online
HighPoints Math
Horizon Sunrise (library automation)
Inspiration Software
InteGrade Pro (Pearson School Systems)
Interactive School Mathematics
Kid Pix
Kidspiration (Inspiration Software)
Librarians' Internet Index (lii.org)
Macromedia Flash (Adobe)
MAP (Measures of Academic Progress) Tests
Math Magician (Oswego, NY School District)
Math Trailblazers
Mathematics Navigator
Moodle
Movie Maker (Microsoft)
Multiplication.com
National Library of Virtual Manipulatives
NCS Mentor
netTrekker
Noodle Tools
NovaNET
Occupational Outlook Handbook (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics)
OdysseyWare
Office (Microsoft)
Photo Story (Microsoft)
Photoshop (Adobe)
PowerSchool
ProQuest
Read 180 (Scholastic)
Reading Counts! (Scholastic)
Redcomet
Renaissance Learning
Schoolmaster Student Information Systems
Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS)
Skyward

STAR Education
Stationery Studio
Study Island
SuccessMaker (Pearson)
SWIFT (Simple Web Interface for Teachers)
TAD (locally-developed assessment records program)
Tetra Data Systems
Thinkfinity (formerly Marcopolo)
Type to Learn
United Streaming (Discovery Education)
Vantage Reading
Webrary.org (Morton Grove, IL public library)
WebTrekker
WESPAC (WSIPC Enhanced Skyward Point and Click)
WJR Technologies
WOIS
World Book Online
Zangle Parent Connection
Zap-A-Graph Software