CENTER FOR SECONDARY SCHOOL DIGITAL LEARNING AND POLICY

The Alliance for Excellent Education (Alliance) created the **Center for Secondary School Digital Learning and Policy** (Center) to focus specifically on how technology and digital learning can offer bold and innovative ways to accelerate secondary education transformation to ensure that all students—especially those most at risk and disadvantaged—graduate from high school prepared for college and a career.

The Alliance is the national leader in developing and advocating for policies to improve secondary schools and the graduation rate in America. The Center will allow the Alliance to identify and share broadly how innovation, technology, and online/blended learning accelerate and support transforming secondary schools. The Alliance is in the unique position to connect practice to policy by demonstrating how digital learning and technology are absolutely inter-related to other areas of education reform, such as accountability, alignment and rigor, student supports and options, highly effective educators, supportive communities, college access, and investments. By considering a wide range of examples of how technology can accelerate change, engage students, and personalize learning to meet the needs of all students, the Center will share models, promising practices, and policy recommendations that address the needs and challenges of districts and states across the country, including rural, urban, and suburban schools with a high proportion of high-need and high-poverty students.

The Center will have an expanded impact because its work will draw upon and be integrated with other substantive educational reform policy work of the Alliance. In addition, through its digital outreach infrastructure, national networks, and diverse audiences, the Alliance will actively share its findings and promote implementation with federal, state, and local policymakers. This is particularly important as many states and districts strive to implement the common core state standards and the related next-generation assessments that are currently being developed.

> **CENTER GOAL:** To identify promising practices, develop policy recommendations, and create advocacy tools to inform policymakers on how digital learning and technology for middle and high school students can help make it possible for every child, especially students at risk and in low socioeconomic households, to graduate prepared for postsecondary learning and success in life.

EDUCATING STUDENTS FOR A GLOBAL ECONOMY

In this era of rapid globalization, technology and innovation increasingly impact almost every facet of life in communities throughout the world; because of this, the American education system needs to move quickly away from the model that was designed to prepare students for the middle of the last century. Nearly every other industry (e.g., medicine, sales, manufacturing, energy and natural resource extraction, and agriculture) has been transformed and improved in recent years by the use of data and technology. The nation's education system, particularly its middle and high schools, must be fundamentally and comprehensively redesigned to respond to the needs of the twenty-first century. The consequences of not reforming and innovating the education system are frightening for the students, as well as the nation, which must be able to rely on today's students becoming tomorrow's productive workers, thinkers, and leaders.

Currently, the high school dropout rate persists at more than 30 percent nationally, and almost 50 percent of the students who do graduate leave unprepared for college and a career. While 77 percent of white students graduate from high school on time with a regular diploma, only about 54 percent of African Americans, 56 percent of Hispanics, and 51 percent of Native Americans students do so. Research on why students drop out of school frequently points to poor preparation and a lack of interest and relevance, issues that technology can address by increasing opportunities to engage students deeply through a wider variety of courses, instructional strategies, as well as curriculum and content pertinent to their lives. Demographic and geographic variables should no longer play a significant role in the equity and access of students to a quality education. Technology and digital learning can help mitigate these disadvantages and provide much-enhanced opportunities for students and teachers.

The time for merely rethinking and upgrading the role of technology in education has passed; today's policy decisions must embrace a dramatic transformation of teaching and learning. Technology can no longer be thought of simply as an "add-on" tool in education; instead, it should be considered an integral part of the total education environment with the potential to address longstanding challenges in secondary education. Technology and digital learning can address the dropout rate and the achievement gap by dramatically increasing access for high-need students by providing

- **a wider variety of courses**, including Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, higher-level math and science, foreign languages, and remediation classes taught in different ways and offered by qualified providers;
- **a more personalized learning experience** that builds upon learning styles, interests, and abilities and allows students to work at their own pace;
- **credit recovery options** to assist struggling students who need additional credits to graduate or students who have dropped out and want to earn a diploma;
- **dual enrollment in college courses** that allow students to begin college and experience success in college courses while in high school;
- **enhanced contact for students and teachers with experts** from around the world to increase knowledge and understanding of different careers; provide interactive and engaging discussion, career mentoring, and hands-on experiences; and ensure students have a sense of high school and college requirements needed to enter a career; and
- **digital content**, such as that provided by Junior Achievement, to expand understanding and knowledge of standards and real-world applications of what is learned in school.

Similarly, technology can help to streamline activities and provide additional opportunities for teachers and administrators to

- **use data and assessment** more effectively to identify student and school needs and potential interventions to help students achieve, especially those at risk for dropping out of school;
- **participate in online and hybrid professional development**—including courses, communities of practice, and digital resources and content—in an effective, self-paced, comprehensive, and cost-effective manner;
- **utilize digital content and communication tools** to personalize learning for students, develop learning communities among students, embed assessments within lessons, and help students create and publish knowledge and content;
- **communicate more effectively with parents and students** by utilizing digital communication tools to post homework, tests, and projects; address issues immediately and directly with parents; and share opportunities for students to expand learning beyond the school day; and
- **collaborate with other districts and schools** to build upon economies of scale for course offerings, professional development, and infrastructure.

BUILDING UPON EXCELLENCE

The Alliance is the national policy and advocacy leader in developing and making the case for a focus on improving secondary schools and the graduation rate in America with an emphasis on addressing the needs of the most at-risk and disadvantaged students. In recent years, the Alliance has argued for significantly increasing technology and digital learning in the nation's education system to improve student outcomes while addressing the growing crises of inadequate postsecondary achievement, declining education budgets, and failure to provide high-quality education for every student. In August 2010, Gov. Jeb Bush asked Gov. Wise to cochair the Digital Learning Council (DLC), which is composed of more than 100 leading education stakeholders whose goal was to develop a number of recommendations to assist states in implementing digital learning. The Alliance collaborated in the work of the DLC that culminated in December 2010 with the release of the "10 Elements of High-Quality Digital Learning."

The DLC has transformed into Digital Learning Now! (DLN), a coalition focused on efforts to (1) get the ten elements adopted by states and (2) grade states on how they are progressing on implementing digital learning. Gov. Wise is continuing as a cochair of DLN and the Alliance remains an important partner in the effort. DLN's state focus complements the Alliance's national agenda that includes federa policy level work and focuses specifically on high schools.

In 2010, the Alliance released or collaborated on the following publications:

- "Online Learning: Addressing Challenges and Seizing Opportunities" (state profiles, May 2010)
- "The Online Learning Imperative: A Solution to Three Looming Crises in Education" (June 2010)
- "10 Elements of High-Quality Digital Learning" (with DLC, December 2010)

Using its wide network in Washington, DC and across the country, the Alliance held many briefings, forums, and webinars with a focus on digital learning and technology, including the following:

- "[Online Learning: Addressing Challenges, Seizing Opportunities](#)" (webinar and live chat, July 2010)

- "[Future of the Profession: A New Learning Ecology for Teachers and Students](#)" (briefing, September 2010)

- "[Digital Learning Now!: 10 Elements of High-Quality Digital Learning](#)" (webinar, December 2010)

- Conducted a call for presenters for "Digital Learning and Technology Innovation" (event series, 2011)

- "[Digital Learning and Technology: Improving Education in Rural America](#)" (briefing cohosted with the State Educational Technology Directors Association, April 2011)

- "[How Blended Learning Can Help Turn Around Struggling Schools](#)" (briefing, May 2011)

Building upon the Alliance's recent work to connect the importance of digital learning and technology to the Alliance's mission, the Center will identify and share broadly how innovation, technology, online learning, and blended learning can and do accelerate and support transforming secondary schools to ensure that every child, especially those most at risk, graduates from high school prepared for postsecondary learning and success in life. It will examine the important intersection between technology, instruction, assessment, and professional learning in designing high school experiences. The Center will seek examples of innovative high schools and district systems that promote deep engagement in mastering high-level content and in demonstrating twenty-first-century competencies across academic disciplines. The Alliance will create case studies, disseminate promising practices, track policy and implementation trends, focus on implementation of the common core state standards, and make national policy recommendations.

Equally important, the Alliance can serve as an honest broker to help appraise the design and system elements that produce positive effects on student learning and advance important education goals. The Alliance will connect practice to policy by demonstrating how digital learning and technology are interrelated to other areas of education reform and can be integrated with the other substantive education reform policy work of the Alliance. Key areas will include the following:

- **Access**—to enrich and remediate, to provide effective teachers.

- **Equity**—through personalized learning and multiple pathways to graduation/success.

- **Engagement**—keeping students in schools, offering career options and time with experts, and providing exposure to science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM).

- **Instruction/learning**—professional development for teachers, multiple "instructors," professional learning communities/communities of practice.

FUNCTIONS OF THE CENTER

The Center will focus initial and future activities on key functions, which will allow the Alliance to take full advantage of its experience and expertise by sharing and disseminating promising practices, policy recommendations, and national information. Specifically, the Center will function through the following activities:

- **Policy development.** The Alliance is a recognized leader in developing effective national education policies that address secondary education reform. It will develop and integrate recommendations related to digital learning and technology into the many education policy areas it currently supports. The Alliance will also share examples and rationale specifically for digital learning and technology. Connecting practice to policy will be a priority for the Center.

- **Trend tracking.** With economic data, graduation rates, and online learning, the Alliance has historically provided national data on trends related to education. Similarly, the Center will allow the Alliance to build upon existing data and reports to provide a snapshot of how states and/or districts are performing on various education reform efforts that incorporate digital learning and the effective use of technology as an integral part of the reform process. This function will be responsive to the needs of education stakeholders and policymakers to ensure that useful data for digital learning and technology is provided.

- **Convenings.** The Alliance consistently convenes a variety of education experts, stakeholders, and policymakers to discuss, share, and develop solutions regarding education and the challenge to ensure that all students graduate from high school prepared for college and a career. The Center will continue this tradition through forums, briefings, online webinars, and interactive discussion boards and blogs. Opportunities to collaborate on digital learning and technology initiatives will be pursued as well.

- **Dissemination.** With its active online presence, in-house digital studio, and large database of education stakeholders, the Alliance is well positioned to widely disseminate information gathered and policy recommendations created through the Center. The Alliance sees dissemination as ongoing, persistent, and meeting the needs and preferences of stakeholders by sharing and "pushing out" information through a wide variety of media, including the Alliance's website, social networking sites, webinars, blogs, in-person events, and the news media. The Center will utilize these existing channels and create new ones as needed.

- **Advocacy.** As an influential partner in many areas of education policy and legislative development, the Alliance is uniquely positioned to provide recommendations to policymakers in Congress, the Obama administration, and education organizations in Washington, DC and across the nation, as well as with state and local policymakers and organizations. Already, the Alliance has been asked to help construct legislation focusing on digital learning. The Center will be able to maximize the Alliance's networks, collaborative working relationships, and recognized leadership by advocating for numerous policy areas that include integrated digital learning and technology.

POTENTIAL ISSUE TOPICS

The Center will focus on the critical need to maximize the potential of digital learning and technology to help transform secondary schools into twenty-first-century institutions that provide an excellent education to all students. Potential issue areas include:

1. **Personalized education.** Students enter high school with different goals, interests, learning styles, and levels of preparation, as well as a range of academic and social strengths and weaknesses. The one-size-fits-all approach is obsolete. Students should be able to access a personalized, engaging, rigorous, option-based course of study that addresses their interests and allows them to work at their own pace. Technology can play an important role in providing access to high-level cognitive and social learning, as well as addressing different learning styles, paces, and student needs and supports necessary for success.

2. **College and career readiness.** While a high school diploma was once sufficient to secure a stable job with benefits, almost two-thirds of new jobs created in the fastest-growing sectors of the economy will require some postsecondary education. If the nation is to reach President Obama's goal of raising the college graduation rate to 60 percent by 2020, once again becoming the leading country in college degree and certificate holders by young adults, high schools need to graduate more students who are college and career ready. Data and technology will help identify students who are struggling and provide interventions designed to help them master skills and content based on their individual needs. Digital learning can help pave multiple pathways to graduation and advance next-generation learning.

3. **Cost effectiveness and return on investment.** In a time of local, state, and federal deficits and an economic downturn, new education investments must be smart and focused. The current budget shortfalls mean that education systems have to do better with fewer resources. Technology/online learning is one way to increase effectiveness and help make education reform scalable and cost effective.

4. **Teacher effectiveness.** Teacher effectiveness is recognized as the most important school-related factor in student achievement. However, there are not enough highly skilled teachers in the schools and challenged classrooms that need them the most. Unfortunately, low-income and minority students are much more likely than their more affluent and white peers to have teachers with less experience and fewer skills. In order for the United States to compete in a global knowledge economy, the concentration and distribution of effective teachers in secondary schools must be dramatically improved. The inequitable distribution of effective teachers combined with the looming teacher shortage—due to the current aging workforce and high attrition rates for novice teachers—makes it difficult to bring quality content and effective teaching to every classroom. Digital learning has a role to play in helping students personalize their learning, increasing access to effective teachers, and providing teachers with online professional development in areas where there are fewer resources.

5. **Turning around low-performing schools.** Approximately one-half of all dropouts attend approximately 2,000 high schools, which is about 12 percent of all U.S. public high schools. These "dropout factories"—high schools where the freshman class shrinks by 40 percent or more by the time those same students reach their senior year—often serve the most challenged populations.

Improving the lowest-performing high schools is imperative for the nation. Only through systemic reform that addresses the academic, technological, civil rights, economic, and social changes that have occurred over the past decades can successful outcomes for all students be possible.

6. **Rural education.** Rural schools and students often face different challenges than their urban and suburban counterparts—small enrollments, geographic isolation, difficulty in recruiting and retaining highly effective teachers and leaders, and limited access to advanced courses. New technologies can help expand distance- and professional learning opportunities for students and teachers, monitor student performance, expand communication with community stakeholders, help students develop key workforce skills, and improve access to advanced coursework.

The Alliance will conduct its work in all of these areas by looking at what is working in this country and using those examples as proof points for policymakers, studying and adapting lessons from other nations that are effectively applying technology, and analyzing the intersections that common core state standards and high-quality assessments have with technology and digital learning. Activities may include the following:

- Identify high schools that are "beating the odds" and highlight them in various publications and presentations.

- Expand the Alliance's current innovation and excellence series of online forums focused on how digital learning, technology, and online/blended learning can accelerate change for students in the nation's secondary schools, especially for low-income, disadvantaged, and high-risk students.

- Develop and promote publications and forums that translate research and practice into advocacy and policy with a particular focus on at-risk students and high-quality teaching, learning with tangible outcomes, and increased efficiency and productivity.

- Partner with other education organizations to disseminate and build a shared understanding of the potential of digital learning, technology, and online/blended learning to ensure that students graduate from high school ready for college and a career.

- Develop policy recommendations that ensure access to digital learning and technology and are incorporated across all education policy areas as appropriate.

- Work with members of Congress, the Obama administration, and state government officials to promote the Alliance's policy recommendations on digital learning and technology.

With input from advisors and experts in the field, the Center will prioritize tasks and deliverables to roll out during the grant period. These activities will be selected depending on needs identified by education leaders, legislative and policy opportunities and timetables, and areas where digital learning and technology can support general education issues.

CONCLUSION

If the nation's preeminent position in the world is to be maintained, every level of government and all segments of society must actively work to transform the country's lackluster and dysfunctional secondary schools into vibrant and exciting institutions that challenge students and teachers alike to achieve at the highest levels.

In recent years, the Alliance has significantly increased its emphasis and focus on digital learning because, as Gov. Wise aptly explains, "We can't get there from here without technology." Building upon the Alliance's recognized expertise on improving secondary education policies and its mission to ensure that all students receive an excellent education so that they can graduate from high school prepared for college and a career, the Center will provide a home for the promotion of promising practices, research, and policy recommendations related to high-quality digital learning and effective use of technology.

The Center will become a hub for providing recommendations and models to states and districts across the country as they work to transform their secondary schools into twenty-first century institutions that provide an excellent education to all students.