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A new door to the classroom

A D2L Policy Brief

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The classroom door has been a universal symbol of access to education since the one-room schoolhouse. When a child walks through the classroom door, they have access to the multitude of learning opportunities, social interactions, and services available to them in a classroom setting. When that physical door is locked due to a pandemic, underwater after a flood, or unreachable during a snow event, students too often are cut off from learning opportunities and school services. Until the last decade or so, the reality of school closures and delayed or discontinued education was widely accepted as there was no real parallel for the classroom door. However, developments in learning technology have opened a new door.

Advancements in learning management system (LMS) technologies over the last two decades have laid the groundwork for a digital learning infrastructure. These digital classroom doors sit in parallel to the physical door, to complement and enhance face-to-face learning and to provide a quality virtual experience when the situation requires an alternative. LMS technologies provide access to the classroom and teacher-led learning beyond the physical school building.

A **Learning Management System** (LMS) is your classroom in the cloud. An all-in-one platform extending teacher-led learning anywhere, anytime—allowing for lesson and assignment creation, grading, assessment, content authoring and sharing, parent communication, virtual classrooms, and all the tools and services a student can expect in their physical classroom.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the transition to a remote learning experience largely left districts on their own in deciding how to provide learning to their students and serve their community with many state education agencies providing only minimal guidance. Disparities in internet access, preparedness of districts and teachers, and the inconsistency in available learning technology, resulted too often in a lack of any kind of door through which students could access learning or too many point solutions that confused and overwhelmed students, parents, teachers, and administrators alike.

Point solutions are purpose specific tools, such as video conferencing, document sharing, word processing, and other individual apps used for single tasks.

The pandemic has exposed a major gap in plans for education continuity during a time of crisis. To address this gap, a digital learning infrastructure must be established to provide a single, parallel door to the classroom in every district that is universal and understood by students, parents, and teachers. A single digital door in parallel to the physical classroom door would create resiliency in our school systems, guarantee continuity of learning, instruction, and services, and ensure equitable learning expectations for students across the state.

TO SUPPLEMENT, NOT SUPPLANT
Access to a physical classroom in local communities is a critical component of equitable learning systems. This brief does not advocate for the elimination or reduction in capacity of our physical learning infrastructure, including schools and classrooms. Rather, D2L recognizes that advancements in technology and teaching practices have converged to allow our systems of learning to evolve into a seamless and flexible learning experience for students.

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Overreliance on physical infrastructure

The rapid transition from face-to-face learning to remote learning left our education systems in a state of disarray though not for lack of effort by educators. Under normal conditions, the physical school building offers a predictable and understood experience for students, parents, and teachers. Under today's remote learning, because of the disparities between classrooms, schools, and districts, the type of experience for all those involved can run the gamut.

The rapid shift to remote learning exposed the lack of preparedness of our systems and a heavy reliance on the physical infrastructure for continued learning. There is no longer a guarantee of the continuity of learning for students—and the risk differs for students who may even be in the same district.

The delivery of online learning differs from district to district due to a lack of consistent strategy or method. In some districts, access to learning is made available through printed learning materials that are mailed by post or picked up on location. In other districts, where internet and device access at home is addressed, a multitude of point solutions have been cobbled together by schools and even individual teachers to stand in for the delivery of lessons, such as video conferencing and document sharing. Consequently, what we have seen are attempts to replicate the in-person experience in an online learning environment.

To return to learning next year—fully, partially, or even the possibility of continued closure—and to prevent a learning shutdown in the future requires exploring how technology can provide an alternative classroom door to complement the physical one

in all scenarios. Reimagining and redesigning our learning systems for resiliency is long overdue. The school districts that have recognized the limitations of depending solely on the physical classroom door for learning access, and have taken steps to establish their parallel door, are the ones that have been most successful in providing learning continuity during COVID-19.[i]

Emergency remote learning plans have left districts to contend with significant challenges that need to be addressed in plans for the next school year, including:

INABILITY TO MAINTAIN PROGRESSION AND INDIVIDUALIZE LEARNING
In the shift to remote learning, the ability to assess and evaluate student learning and progression was a huge setback for many teachers. Many of the point solutions adopted by districts were unable to produce the data necessary to ascertain student learning and engagement or connect back to student information systems (SIS). Without sufficient grading capabilities or guaranteed student access to assignments, schools have largely been forced to make assignments ungraded or optional and use grade evaluations prior to building closures as final grades.

LACK OF A SINGLE LOCATION FOR SERVICES
When the physical classroom door is available, everything required for learning is right behind it. The loss of a physical location revealed that digital tools, resources, and services have no single location outside of the classroom. Point solutions varied between classes, schools, and districts, making it unclear for students or parents to know where to go, when to log in, or even what login to use for which service.

UNSCALABLE REPLICATION OF THE IN-CLASS EXPERIENCE

Teachers were asked to adapt their instruction for remote learning in a short period of time and without professional development. Consequently, teachers attempted to replicate traditional instructional strategies in the online or distance environment with methods such as group video chats, conference calls, and other synchronous tactics. In addition to being generally ineffective instructional techniques for distance learning, these methods are not viable at scale due to time and bandwidth requirements.

INSUFFICIENT PRIVACY AND SECURITY

Because schools and, at times, teachers were largely expected to select their own digital learning materials and tools for connecting with students, and were doing so at such a rapid pace, privacy standards and security of student data were not always at the forefront of decision making. Video conferencing services suffered from unauthorized infiltrations and takeovers[ii] and the use of non-FERPA compliant social media apps placed student data in the hands of inappropriate vendors.

PARENTAL DISCONNECT

As parents stepped in to fulfill the "classroom" management role during this remote learning period while many times managing their own work from home schedule, they have reported feeling overwhelmed by remote learning and disconnected from teachers and the expectations of learning. The time commitment, lack of resources, and, in some cases, inability to understand what learning is taking place have left many parents frustrated with the experience and seeking alternatives.

A new parallel door

Addressing the challenges schools are facing during the COVID-19 pandemic and building resilient systems of learning requires a learning infrastructure that is not solely reliant on physical attendance. School buildings are necessary but should be supplemented with a digital infrastructure that provides a guarantee of learning continuity and opportunities for new and enhanced in-person learning.

The physical classroom represents the promise of the education system. We trust that when a child walks through the classroom door, they will find a teacher who is trained to teach in that classroom, textbooks and resources, classmates and friends. The child's parents or guardians will know where the classroom is and what they can expect their child to learn during the course of the day.

A digital infrastructure must deliver on the same promise. When the physical classroom door is locked during a pandemic, underwater after a flood, or unreachable during a snow event, we cannot accept that learning opportunities and school services will be closed off for many students or unequal between districts.

Advancements in learning management system (LMS) technologies over the last two decades have laid the groundwork for digital learning infrastructure. Nearly every institution of higher education has had an LMS in place for years[iii] and were able to adapt much more seamlessly to a distance learning format during COVID-19. In recent years, some school districts have started to implement an LMS and continue to benefit from the same flexibility and agility of the higher education sector.

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The implementation of an LMS will provide a parallel digital door to the physical classroom—a single location to find all the services one would expect behind the physical door.

An LMS will have the tools necessary for teacher-led learning and district management built into the platform, including:

- Tools for assessing and tracking progress of student learning and recognizing mastery of state academic standards

- Classroom, school, and district level data insights and analytics

- Individualized learning pathways built by teachers for their students

- A learning object repository to create, share, and manage content and Open Education Resources (OER)

- Accessibility checkers to help ensure conformance with international standards

- Tools for innovative learning pedagogies, including video, social learning and assessment, game-based learning, and micro-credentialing and awards

- A parent portal to provide a window into their child's classroom and a direct line to their teacher

- An additional library of third-party tools verified for student data privacy and security compliance

Traditionally, an LMS has been an elective technology for K12 districts. However, the current pandemic has uncovered that a high-quality school system, in 2020 and beyond, will be one where learning never stops—no matter snow, rain, heat, nor disease.

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Recommendations

1. Provide a statewide, coordinated learning platform for districts
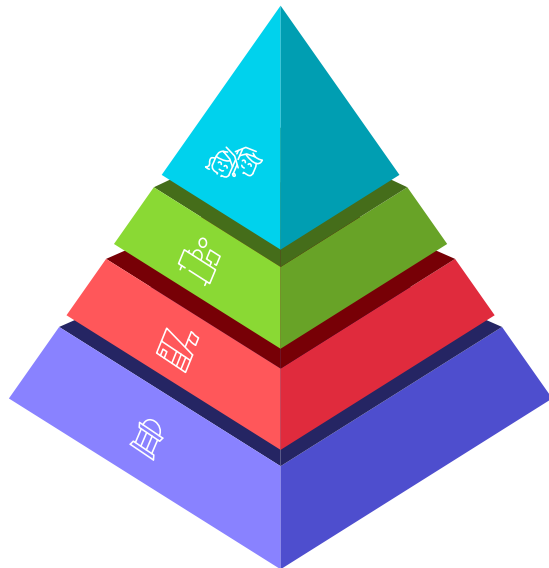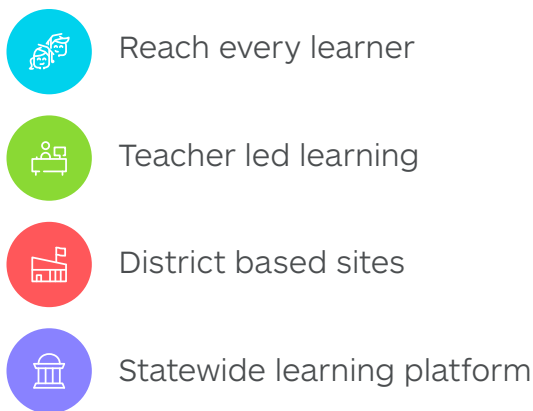
State leadership is required to build an equitable digital learning infrastructure in every district. While larger districts have the time and resources to procure and manage an LMS on their own, most districts do not have the funding, student population, or staff to independently source, support, and manage this critical infrastructure.

A statewide platform would create a unified understanding for the expectations of learning when the physical infrastructure is not available. Every district and student would have access to the same learning tools, allowing for assessment, grading, content sharing, and teacher-led engagement.

Having a statewide platform does not require mandating districts use the statewide platform. Having a state platform should create an expectation of what learning should entail at all times—teacher-led student growth, mastery, grading, assessment—regardless of physical infrastructure and provide an accessible option to achieving that expectation for districts of all sizes. The benefits for districts signing onto a statewide platform would persuade many to join voluntarily. Those benefits including data insights and analytics, shared content and OER, privacy and security verification, accessibility, and the economies of scale of a state-level procurement.

A statewide platform should further enable districts to maintain control over their local platform site, including administrative control over features used, the ability to integrate additional tools, and curriculum included in a learning object repository, based on local needs.

EQUITABLE STATEWIDE DIGITAL LEARNING INFRASTRUCTURE

Reach every learner

Teacher led learning

District based sites

Statewide learning platform

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2. Increase professional development in new pedagogies leveraging the parallel door

Just as placing a device in every child's hand is not equivalent to providing access to quality distance or online learning, simply providing a platform to a teacher does not automatically enable teachers to conquer any instructional need. There must be a concerted and sustained effort to provide professional development for teachers in hybrid, blended, and online pedagogies.

Learning outside of the classroom can be effective, but the pedagogy is the secret sauce.[iv,v,vi]

In addition to providing professional development, teachers should be engaged when selecting the state learning platform and in the development of emergency learning plans. Technology in the learning process should be used to maintain and enhance teacher-led learning, not replace it.

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About D2L

D2L develops software that makes the learning experience better. Our cloud-based platform — Brightspace — is the leading learning management system (LMS) for blended and fully virtual learning. It's easy to use, flexible, and smart. With Brightspace, schools can personalize the learning experience for every learner to deliver real results. Brightspace is used by learners in K-12, higher education, and the corporate sector, including the Fortune 1000.

Learn more about D2L for schools, higher education, and businesses at **D2L.com**.

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