

Educators respond to national ed-tech plan

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Stakeholders say the NETP has much potential, although putting its recommendations into practice could prove challenging.

While many school stakeholders say there's a lot to like in the new National Education Technology Plan (NETP), such as its emphasis on Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and using open educational resources to improve instruction, others are concerned about what they see as a fundamental conflict between the plan's call for innovation on the one hand and the Obama administration's continued focus on testing and accountability on the other.

In their blueprint for reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), President Obama and Education Secretary Arne Duncan [have called for](#) ^[1] higher standards, particularly in the core academic subjects of reading and math, and better use of data to make sure students are meeting these more rigorous standards.

The new NETP, [released last month](#) ^[2], refers to these broader administration goals—but it also calls on school leaders to [reinvent teaching](#) and learning, with a focus on personalizing instruction and infusing 21st-century skills into the curriculum.

Now, some educators are wondering whether it's possible to achieve the goals outlined in the NETP while simultaneously meeting the tougher ESEA requirements the administration is proposing—and all at a time when school budgets [continue to decline](#) ^[3].

"In many places, the report discusses critical thinking, complex problem solving, collaboration, and multimedia communication (a.k.a. 21st-century competencies)," wrote Bill MacKenty, an instructional designer at the Hunter College Campus Schools in New York City. "We read about goals of creating inquisitive, creative, resourceful thinkers, informed citizens, effective problem [solvers], groundbreaking pioneers, and visionary leaders. But the report also clearly articulates the importance of data-based instruction and data-based decisions. How does this report imagine education in the context of quantitative data and qualitative experience?"

He continued: "The report says data, data, data. I get it. But the report also says schools can't be 'information factories.' Where do those ends meet?"

MacKenty is one of dozens of educators who've left comments for the U.S. Department of Education (ED) on the [NETP web site](#) ^[4]. He's not alone in seeing a potential conflict between the plan's call for innovation and the administration's overall school-reform blueprint.

A commenter identified only as "Shane" noted that "using technology and integrating it into instructional practices will not prepare students for the 21st century without other major changes to the system of education."

He added: "The focus of the federal and state governments on high-stakes testing is in direct contradiction to creating an environment where humans learn best. Furthermore, it perpetuates the idea that all students should be the same. Students are not the same. People are not the same. ... Stop attaching funding to only

standardized test scores. Then, perhaps schools could begin moving towards creating an environment where 21st-century skills can develop.”

ED is seeking feedback on the plan as officials look to implement its recommendations. But the comments of MacKenty and others illustrate the many challenges the department will face in bringing its ed-tech plan to fruition.

Another is funding.

“The initiatives and ideas proposed in this draft are valid, timely, and logical for the world we live in,” wrote a commenter who identified himself as “Russ.” “However, ... I fear that broadband/wireless and 1-1 programs are an impossibly high mark to attain in the near term. Has anyone from the federal government looked at the flawed and inefficient way that our K-12 schools spend money on technology? We’re locked into the same nonsensical FY cycle as everyone else. Technology, at the K-12 level, is still viewed as a luxury, not a utility, and as such is subject to discretionary spending cuts like any other thing. As long as our public schools do not see technology expenses as the ‘cost of doing business,’ then we’ll continue to be a day late and a dollar short.”

Wrote another commenter, “Tom”: “Where is the money coming from? Many more dollars are needed to enact this plan, even if we are careful how we spend it.”

A commenter named Vic thinks the plan focuses too much on technology’s role as an educational tool, and not enough on its role as a subject that students should be learning about.

“I am concerned that the plan will not help raise the bar,” Vic wrote. “In 112 pages, there is but one mention of computer science. ... We have a crisis in America, with students not having the opportunity to learn [in] any depth about technology. There is no call for [collaboration] between K-12 and higher ed to develop programs that help provide our children with the best technology education in the world. ... We force students to learn foreign languages when everyone in the world is learning English, but ignore the most important language for their future—the language of computers.”

Much of the online discussion about the plan focuses on research and development, and how federal officials can spur the kind of innovation the plan calls for.

A commenter named David suggested replicating the X Prize for public education. The X Prize Foundation is a nonprofit organization that seeks to create radical breakthroughs for the benefit of society by fostering innovation through financial competition.

“The success of the X Prize is rather fascinating—both in the drive and enthusiasm it creates in all types of developers, ... the concept has been shown to be such a powerful motivator for jump-starting progress in a variety of areas,” David wrote. “Why not find ways to create certain ‘outcome-based prizes,’ much like the X Prize for education. The government has not typically been involved in such fashion, but why not—if it can be a better way to spend tax dollars and produce an effective outcome for education?”

Despite a number of concerns about the plan, many stakeholders expressed strong support for some of its components.

“As a physician who takes care of children with Down syndrome and other disabilities, I am pleased to see that the draft National Educational Technology Plan recognizes UDL as an important educational framework for ensuring that ALL students receive high quality instruction and accurate assessments,” wrote a commenter named Brian. He was one of many stakeholders who said they were pleased to see the plan include this strategy for teaching and learning.

Jim Fruchterman, president of Benetech, wrote that he “strongly support[s] the NETP’s recommendations on open educational resources (OERs).”

“I think that wider use of OERs has the opportunity to address many of the NETP’s goals,” Fruchterman wrote: “Make textbooks more affordable; make it easier to make the textbook content accessible; make it easier to adapt textbooks to students with special needs...”

He continued; “We invest a great deal in educational materials. A robust OER offering will create a baseline to ensure that nobody gets left out of the educational opportunities we believe are the birthright of Americans. Economically depressed school systems will have access to the latest materials, even if they don’t have the budget. Home-schoolers will [have] a complete set of textbooks for whatever subjects they need. Parents will be able to independently access the learning content that meets the relevant standards, and be better able to assist their children.”

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URLs in this post:

[1] have called for: **<http://www.eschoolnews.com/2010/03/15/obama-offers-blueprint-for-rewriting-nclb/>**

[2] released last month: **<http://www.eschoolnews.com/2010/03/08/feds-release-new-national-ed-tech-plan/>**

[3] continue to decline: **<http://www.eschoolnews.com/2010/04/09/survey-school-budget-cuts-even-worse-next-year/>**

[4] NETP web site: **<http://www.ed.gov/technology/netp-2010>**

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