



Educational Technology Software Hub



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Connecticut Commission for Educational Technology

Executive Summary

The Connecticut Educational Software Hub (Connecticut.LearnPlatform.com) provides much-needed support to a diverse set of stakeholders in the area of educational technology best practices and legal compliance. The Connecticut Commission for Educational Technology, the State's chief educational technology policy advisor, developed the interactive Web site to support the needs of thousands of public K – 12 educators and school leaders. The Hub provides a means of identifying technology solutions that comply with Connecticut's student data privacy law, a requirement for adoption in the state, and that have proven to help students learn. Software providers, in turn, use the site to create company profiles, register their products, learn about data privacy compliance, and leverage a set of State resources to help them meet new statutory requirements.

The concept behind the Hub came following the passage of Connecticut's first student data privacy law in June 2016. Legislators and advocates designed the law — informed by language from similar legislation in other states — to protect the data, records, and information of public K – 12 students. While well intentioned, the law placed a heavy burden of review and compliance on districts and educational technology (“ed tech”) companies developing innovative learning solutions to support those schools. Significant indirect costs and inefficiencies ensued, with leaders of more than 1,000 schools statewide tasked with independently auditing and negotiating hundreds of software titles against the new privacy requirements.

The Commission engaged with district leaders, teacher unions, members of the State Legislature, parent advocates, professional groups representing superintendents and boards of education, specialists in school law, and ed tech firms to identify requirements and design a cost-effective solution that serves the needs of these diverse stakeholders in the short term and as the statute changes over time. The choice of a proven, commercial solution — LearnPlatform — with strong ties to the educational community helped minimize costs, allowed for rapid design and rollout, delivered significant return on investment, and offered a free toolset to schools and providers to reduce their compliance efforts.

The self-service approach to the portal reduces operational costs, educating ed tech companies about the student data privacy law, providing standard terms of service that align with statute, and enabling them to register their products as compliant. Districts then use the Hub to search for software by grade level, subject, and peer review scores to find products that not only comply with statute but — more importantly — have proven their ability to help students learn. The resulting solution, emerging as a K – 12 community of practice and sharing, has significantly reduced districts' and companies' administrative burdens, allowing them to concentrate on their core missions of educating students and supporting schools.

Project Narrative

Concept

Challenge

In June 2016, the Connecticut General Assembly passed, and Governor Dannel P. Malloy signed into law, the State's first student data privacy statute, Public Act 16-189. That law requires public K – 12 boards of education to enter into written contracts with any contractor or operator of an educational software service to provide assurances of data protections and ownership. Those contracts must address more than 20 requirements, from destruction of and access to data to breach notifications and the prohibition of targeted advertising. The statute reflects general best practices and leverages the language and ideas from other states that have passed similar laws.

As context for the passage of PA 16-189, Connecticut has seen a significant investment in school technology over the past five years. By adopting online testing as a Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) state, Connecticut committed to supporting online learning and testing starting in the 2015 school year. The State already provided high-speed broadband to every district through the Connecticut Education Network (CEN), and many schools had already adopted 1:1 computer programs, whereby each student has a dedicated device to use for classroom learning, homework, and testing. Following the adoption of the SBAC test, Governor Malloy provided districts with more than \$30M in funding to support digital learning. Those funds helped pay for additional data circuits, network hardware, and tens of thousands of student computers.

In tandem with this accelerated investment in school technology, Connecticut schools benefitted from an explosion of free and low-cost educational software that, because of robust networks and the availability of student computers, districts could use to engage students and deepen their learning. By the summer of 2016, most districts leveraged hundreds if not thousands of software titles, from enterprise-level student information systems that manage enrollment, scheduling, gradebooks, and assignments to specialized apps designed for students with special needs and learning disabilities. At that point, most districts were already vetting the use of student data in deploying educational software but not according to strict, uniform requirements.

In light of Connecticut's school computing environment, described above, the passage of PA 16-189 resulted in significant burdens on districts and ed tech companies alike, in terms of the law's scope and timing. The law meant that school districts each needed to review independently the privacy terms associated with hundreds of instructional software titles against the statute's requirements. For titles that they identified as noncompliant, school officials had to negotiate updated terms or finding alternative solutions for their students. The law required that this review take place over the course of just four months, during the summer — when schools are on recess — and early fall of 2016. During that time, leaders from 169 school districts worked mostly in redundant isolation, reviewing in many cases the same software packages for compliance.

Challenges existed for the vendors supporting these schools as well, especially for smaller providers with limited legal resources. In conversations with school leaders, many ed tech companies received feedback that differed from district to district regarding the compliance of their products' privacy terms. With a lack of clarity around the statute and no centralized resources to support their compliance efforts, many companies struggled with the uncertainties of knowing whether they could continue serving Connecticut schools.

Solution

While PA 16-189 afforded no allocations — human or budgetary — from State entities to support compliance, leaders of the State's Commission for Educational Technology identified the need to provide a cost-effective and sustainable solution to assist both schools and the innovative ed tech companies that support them. While the Commission enlisted the assistance of State attorneys to review for compliance the terms of Connecticut's largest ed tech providers (Apple, Google, Microsoft, etc.), this work was not funded and would not scale to include the tens of thousands of software titles that schools were using. Manual review of terms would also not support these activities over time, as new products emerge on the market, existing terms change, and statutory language may add or remove specific requirements. The Commission sought to design a solution that would account for these changes.

Connecticut's approach to supporting these compliance efforts included input from a wide variety of stakeholders. Members of the Commission and its Data & Privacy Advisory Council, local school law experts, members of the Legislature's Education Committee, as well as State attorneys, application developers, and procurement specialists collaborated to identify an effective, sustainable means of reducing compliance review and assurance. These conversations led to a short list of requirements. The solution needed to put the onus of compliance on providers, not districts, and remain easy for these companies to understand and take action on adopting terms in alignment with state privacy requirements. All users should have access to the platform free of charge to maximize adoption. And the chosen solution must require little or no customization, given the immediacy of the law's compliance deadline.

After considering the costs and timing of a custom, in-house solution as well as existing products and services, the Commission selected the LearnPlatform technology to serve as the Connecticut Educational Software Hub ("Hub"). With design starting in May 2017 and the site launching in mid-August, the project exceeded schedule expectations. The Commission's Executive Director worked closely with LearnPlatform's product team to define requirements for customizing the instance to support the unique demands of districts and ed tech providers. Year-1 direct costs remained minimal, just under \$10,000, with these license fees offset by the alliance of six Regional Education Service Centers (RESCs), another key partner in the effort.

Through the design of custom workflows and leveraging the library of 5,000+ products already registered through the LearnPlatform, the project delivered on one of the fundamental requirements of the initiative: self service. Companies with interest in learning about and complying with Connecticut’s law visit the FAQ page, which educates them on the statute, provides model language for their use in drafting contract addenda, and an instructional video on how to use the online registry. Authorized representatives of these companies then create or log into existing LearnPlatform accounts, review the Connecticut Student Data Privacy Pledge — a reflection of the State’s statutory requirements — and register their product terms as compliant.

Districts, families, and members of the broader educational community in turn use the Hub to find software that not only complies with state statute, based on the above company registrations, but also against a set of advanced search features that include grade band, subject, and academic standard (e.g., Common Core State Standard). Schools also refer companies to the aforementioned information resources on the Hub so those firms can understand the State’s requirements and take steps to comply.

This elegant, self-service approach to compliance equips companies with a clear understanding and toolset to align their terms and best practices with Connecticut’s requirements. Districts benefit from having a single point of reference for compliant products, which reduces significantly their investment of staff time to negotiate with educational software companies and allows their teachers and students to benefit from a broad array of innovative — and compliant — digital learning tools.

Significance

The Hub has provided significant efficiencies and cost savings to Connecticut public schools and the technology providers that support them. Furthermore, the platform’s self-service design serves as a model for the 40+ states nationwide with student data privacy laws that require district and vendor compliance.

Ensuring compliance with state and federal laws remains a tedious, inefficient, and often duplicative process in any environment, which only highlights the Hub’s value in light of most school districts’ lack of staff and expertise to address these concerns at scale. With an explosive use of technology in schools, expansion of networks, and influx of devices for educators and students, district technology staff have an acute need for the type of efficiencies the Hub provides. As Connecticut State Representative Cristin McCarthy-Vahey, one of the authors of Connecticut’s student data privacy law remarked, the Hub “fulfills our goal of protecting students’ privacy without restricting the creative use of technology in education.” For that reason, the Connecticut associations representing the state’s boards of education, superintendents, and principals jointly released a letter commending and endorsing the use of the Hub (www.bit.ly/CT-

[Hub Endorsement](#)). Indeed, the Hub provides a transparent educational platform that meets the needs of its diverse stakeholders, providing educators, parents, legislators, State officials, and software providers with a single point of reference and interactive tools to support not only compliance but also innovation in teaching and learning.

The initiative also remains significant in its minimal initial and ongoing costs, rapid implementation, and relevance over time. Leveraging an existing platform and functionalities cut development time and contained expenses. Districts and vendors were able to start using the Hub less than three months after platform selection, at no cost to these stakeholders. And as product terms of service and statutory language change over time, the Hub allows administrators to update all stakeholders rapidly of changes in data privacy requirements and provides the tools to help them comply.

Perhaps most significantly, the Hub represents a new model to support compliance on a statewide scale. The highly collaborative design process among all stakeholders has resulted in a solution that reduces indirect (staff) and direct (attorney review) costs to schools. Leaders of other states have expressed strong interest in replicating the model for their own districts and the vendors that support them. Alternative approaches require full-time staff to vet privacy and terms of service statements, which remains a costly and subjective process for all stakeholders. The Hub's self-service, collaborative model, in contrast, has garnered recognition as a model of efficiency among national education privacy experts (e.g., [House Education and Workforce Hearing Testimony](#), May 2018, and [SXSW EDU Coverage](#), March 2018).

In addition to the current benefits that the Hub provides, the platform remains significant in its promise and potential. For example, a free Google Chrome browser plugin provides the ability for districts to monitor software usage across student devices. These measures allow for compliance audits as well as the identification of unused software licenses. Given that only an estimated 9 percent of all educational software products fully meet the learning goals for which they are purchased, monitoring and adjusting ed tech spend remain critical to resource-strapped schools.

Furthermore, the LearnPlatform serves as a virtual community connecting educators to software providers, with tools such as district RFP management and review. Schools can provide feedback to their peers nationwide and to providers by completing product "Report Cards" and through the use of rapid cycle evaluation tools to conduct cohort-based software trials. This burgeoning community of practice has garnered the interest of the U.S. Department of Education as well Connecticut-based learning scientists, investors, ed tech companies, and educators around the Hub's potential to support an educational innovation cluster within the state. What began as a compliance toolset holds the promise to support ongoing innovation in K – 12 learning as well as economic development for the region.

Impact

Communicating the impact of the Hub to districts and ed tech providers requires an understanding of the cost of compliance prior to the initiative. Having 169 districts and hundreds of ed tech companies separately interpret and act on the State's law prior to launching the Hub remained hugely time-intensive, duplicative, and inefficient. The results of a statewide survey of district leaders by the Commission indicates that schools spent an additional 80,000+ staff hours in 2016 alone in the review and negotiation of vendor terms to comply with the law. Districts also shared that they incurred significant direct costs in the form of legal fees to pay for contract reviews and negotiations. They also expressed "opportunity costs," with staff too busy with terms review and negotiations to undertake projects more closely tied to student learning.

A follow-up survey of state leaders eight (8) months after the Hub's launch points to significant reductions in staff time to conduct compliance activities. More than 80 percent of districts saw a decrease by at least 10 percent in staff time to review and negotiate terms based on their use of the Hub, or approximately 10,000 hours statewide. Nearly a third of districts see the Hub as either "Vital" or "Extremely Valuable" to their compliance work. Even a conservative estimate of loaded, indirect staff costs of \$70 per hour equates to a \$700,000 savings to districts. In light of the Hub's Year-1 cost of \$10,000, the project has seen a 7,000% return on investment at no cost to its core stakeholders.

Direct measures from the LearnPlatform's backend analytics dashboards reflects significant impact in terms of constituents served:

- **Educators Served:** A total of 2,432 educators, school leaders, parents, and members of boards of education use the Hub.
- **Districts Served:** Nearly all 205 public school districts use the Hub, with a total of 218 educational institutions using the service, including private and charter schools.
- **Companies Served:** The Hub's FAQ section has served more than 4,000 visitors, ed tech companies looking for guidance on state statute and how to comply with the law. Content served through this page directly relieves the burden on districts to guide ed tech companies through Connecticut's student data privacy law and requirements.
- **Volume of Usage:** The Hub sees an average of 784 visits per month, a rate that has increased by about 25% per quarter since its launch.
- **Products Tracked for Compliance:** Among the 5,000+ products contained in the LearnPlatform library, Connecticut users track 1,337 for compliance.
- **Transparency of Ed Tech Usage:** Districts statewide track actual student usage of 332 products in real time using the LearnPlatform Google Chrome extension. These metrics allow for proactive monitoring of compliant (and non-compliant) software and actual usage of purchased software licenses. This data allows schools to adjust their ed tech spend to eliminate the cost of unused software.