ED gives preview of new ed-tech plan

By Cara Branigan, Associate Editor, eSchool News
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Student data management, online assessment, and eLearning will be key issues in the next national educational technology plan presented to Congress by the U.S. Department of Education (ED), according to Susan Patrick, director of the department's Office of Educational Technology.

The new plan, expected to be released at the end of September, will continue the shift from counting the number of computers in each classroom to improving student achievement with technology, Patrick said.

"It formalizes the vision of what's possible," she said. "The previous two plans had good goals, and we want to highlight those accomplishments, but we really want to move to how you use technology to transform learning."

The first national ed-tech plan, issued in 1996, focused squarely on infrastructure. Its "four pillars" of hardware, software, connectivity, and training set goals such as reducing the computer-to-student ratio in schools to 5 to 1 and connecting all schools to the internet. As a result, policy makers established laws and funding programs, such as the eRate, that emphasized installing hardware and networks in schools nationwide.

The second plan, issued in 2000 near the end of the Clinton administration, began the shift in focus from infrastructure to achievement. It urged policy makers and schools to evaluate their use of technology to determine what works, and it emphasized ongoing professional development for practicing teachers and an overhaul of pre-service teacher education to integrate technology effectively into instruction. It also set the goal that "all students will be technologically literate and responsible cybertemizens."

Yet "despite a decade of investment [in educational technology], most achievement indicators are flat," Patrick said.

With the passage in 2001 of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), the Bush administration has changed the way technology is funded by the federal government, Patrick said, by pairing ed-tech funding with specific educational goals, such as improving assessment, increasing literacy, and providing professional development to under-trained teachers.

The new ed-tech plan—consisting of a 20-page document, case studies, and an array of web resources—will examine where educational technology stands today, who today's students are, and what they expect from their education. It also will provide a roadmap
with approximately seven steps that educators and policy makers should take to use technology to improve leadership and student learning.

At the plan's final destination, educators and policy makers "would have realized the golden age of education, where every student has an opportunity for personalized instruction and the ability to reach [his or her] full potential," Patrick said.

Although student data management, online assessment, and eLearning are not new concepts, Patrick said, the new ed-tech plan focuses on them because they are known to improve education--even though their use is still not widespread.

"We have a lot of pilots and stuff happening in isolation. "People are aware of what's working in their area, but they are not aware of what's going on nationally," Patrick said. "We are trying to pull out some exceptional examples so people can see what's possible."

Management systems that contain data from transportation, cafeteria, library, and other software programs enable school leaders to make more informed decisions and better allocate resources--and they enable teachers to individualize learning for each student.

"We haven't harnessed the power of technology to inform daily decisions," Patrick said. "There are places doing this, but we have to move forward" as a nation.

While speaking during a keynote event at the National Educational Computing Conference in New Orleans in June, Patrick explained how online assessments could expedite how quickly teachers and administrators receive standardized test results.

With the current paper-based testing, students are tested in the spring and the results are returned in the fall, after the students already have moved to the next grade. "The percent that this informs instruction: zero," Patrick said. "[Yet with] the cost of transportation, of paper, of cutting down trees, it's extremely expensive."

With online assessments, teachers can get results back within 24 hours.

"That instructor can use those results to personalize instruction and make a difference in the classroom. This saves time; this helps each individual student learn," Patrick said. "These tests can also be used for the annual snapshot for [NCLB]... and over time, transportation, security, and paper costs are relatively inexpensive when you compare them with the annual cost of paper-based testing."

eLearning, another prominent element in the new ed-tech plan, can provide students with access to advanced placement courses or other learning opportunities not offered in their area. It's also an attractive way of offering adult education, reaching students who don't succeed in traditional classrooms, and providing professional development for teachers.
Patrick said only 14 states have state-sponsored virtual schools, but all 50 states have rural areas in which students could benefit from eLearning.

"How do you offer choice in those rural areas? Virtual education is one way of doing it. How do you offer tutoring and supplemental services in those areas? Again, eLearning is an opportunity to do that," Patrick said.

In an unprecedented move, ED invited students to contribute to the making of the new ed-tech plan. More than 200,000 students participated in its creation, as well as thousands of educators, researchers, and public citizens since the process began in the spring of 2003.

Finding out how students already use technology and what they are capable of has challenged ED officials to ask if schools are ready for today's students. "These are a different generation of students," Patrick said.

None of the new plan's areas of focus are surprising, given the Bush administration's priorities to date and its continued emphasis on assessment, achievement, and school choice, said Don Knezek chief executive officer of the International Society for Technology in Education.

Though it's hard to argue with these priorities, Knezek said, he hopes the plan also will include directives on professional development, new teacher development, and leadership.

"To see technology making a difference across the system, you have to have those pieces in place," he said.

Equally important, he added, is the role technology can play in engaging students and teaching them the skills they'll need for the 21st-century world.

Links:

U.S. Department of Education
http://www.ed.gov

National Education Technology Plan
http://www.nationaledtechplan.org

NECC Keynote Session: Are Schools Ready for Today's Students? A Sneak Preview of the National Educational Technology Plan (NETP)
http://necc2004.minds.tv

International Society for Technology in Education
http://www.iste.org