

SIIA Comments to the U.S. Department of Education
On the Proposed Race to the Top District (RTT-D) Program

SIIA Comments Submitted May 30, 2012:

Nearly two years ago, the Software & Information Industry Association (www.siiia.net/education), in collaboration with ASCD and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), released Innovate to Educate: System [Re]Design for Personalized Learning, based upon the insights and recommendations of some 150 visionary education leaders convened at a 2010 Summit (<http://www.siiia.net/pli/>). I hope this report and related resources and insights will be helpful for those interested in this RTTT-District program's focus on personalized learning.

The report provides a roadmap (and examples) to accelerate the redesign of the current, mass production education model based on fixed time, place, curriculum and pace to a student-centered, customized learning model that will better engage, motivate, and prepare our students to be career and college ready. It is available at <http://siiia.net/pli/presentations/PerLearnPaper.pdf>

The Summit attendees identified the following top essential elements and policy enablers of personalized learning:

Essential Elements

1. Flexible, Anytime, Everywhere Learning
2. Redefine Teacher Role and Expand “Teacher”
3. Project-Based, Authentic Learning
4. Student-Driven Learning Path
5. Mastery/Competency-Based Progression/Pace

Policy Enablers

1. Redefine Use of Time (Carnegie Unit/Calendar)
2. Performance-Based, Time-Flexible Assessment
3. Equity in Access to Technology Infrastructure
4. Funding Models that Incentivize Completion
5. P-20 Continuum & Non-Age/Grade Band System

Ninety-six percent of Summit attendees identified access to technology and e-learning as a critical or significant cross-cutting platform to implement personalized learning and bring it to scale.

SIIA Comments Submitted on June 8, 2012:

The Software & Information Industry Association (SIIA) strongly supports the proposed Race to the Top District (RTT-D) competition for its focus on personalized learning as noted in other posted comments.

SIIA appreciates the U.S. Department of Education's consideration of the following SIIA comments on several proposed definitions and program requirements

DEFINITIONS:

Digital Learning Content:

SIIA strongly supports the proposed highlighting of digital learning content and other technologies as critical to the personalization of learning. SIIA notes the opportunities available through digital content and technology to better meet the needs of students with disabilities. SIIA does suggest a clarification to the proposed definition of Digital Learning Content.

The current definition includes a requirement that: "In order to comply with the requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, any digital learning content used by grantees must be accessible to individuals with disabilities, including individuals who use screen readers." However, SIIA views that interpretation as incomplete. The referenced Office of Civil Rights Letter from May 26, 2011 (www.ed.gov/ocr/letters/colleague-201105-ese.pdf) allows for the exception in cases where "those individuals are provided accommodations or modifications that permit them to receive all the educational benefits provided by the technology in an equally effective and equally integrated manner." The related FAQ #1 (www.ed.gov/ocr/docs/dcl-ebook-faq-201105.pdf) allows that "this might not result in identical ease of use compared to that of students without disabilities" and FAQ #12 allows that "Yes. Traditional alternative media can still be used as an accommodation under appropriate circumstances."

SIIA therefore recommends that the definition be updated to include this clarification. One option is a revised definition that reads, in part (addition in brackets): "In order to comply with the requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, any digital learning content used by grantees must be accessible to individuals with disabilities, including individuals who use screen readers [including through the use of accommodations or modifications that permit them to receive all the educational benefits provided by the technology in an equally effective and equally integrated manner such as through the use of traditional alternative media.]"

Personalized Learning Plan:

SIIA strongly supports the focus on personalized learning, and supports the notion of a personalized learning plan (PLP). However, SIIA is concerned that the PLP term itself, as well as the proposed definition, may create the unintended impression that it is similar to an Individualized Education Program (IEP) as required by the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). While such an interpretation is one model and may be workable for some RTT-D grant winners, SIIA is concerned such a precedent – real or perceived – may be a deterrent to educational agencies exploring this model but who might be concerned about committing to a process for all students that is often very resource-intensive, time-consuming and contentious within the IDEA setting. The unintended consequences may extend beyond the RTT-D grant to impact interest and support for the overall movement to personalize learning.

SIIA does not have a specific alternative recommendation. Perhaps removing "formal document" will be sufficient. Or perhaps a personalized learning plan should be optional for grantees, provided they can outline a parallel, less formal means to enable personalized learning for each included student. SIIA believes personalized learning can be provided without a personalized learning plan for each student, provided there is opportunity for each student's curriculum pathway to be customized and dynamically adapted based on their unique goals, interests, learning styles, performance, schedule, etc.

Open-Standard Registry:

SIIA supports efforts to enhance the exchange of educational data across applications, systems and agencies, and recently released a Primer intended to inform the field and advocate for further adoption of interoperability standards (see <http://bit.ly/NXx70k>). SIIA recognizes the opportunity for federal leadership, including through the RTT-D program. However, SIIA is concerned that the Open-Standard Registry definition (and reference in Program Requirements #2) is both too specific and too vague, and may have unintended consequences. SIIA encourages the Department to further clarify the intent and definitions, and then to further engage with the stakeholder community to finalize these provisions.

SIIA is concerned the definition is too specific in referencing, even as an example, a specific initiative such as The Learning Registry (LR). SIIA has helped inform the SIIA membership about the LR and many SIIA members are involved in the work. However, the LR is limited, adopted to date in a very limited way, and ultimately unproven in practice at this time. More broadly, SIIA is concerned whenever a specific standard or initiative is referenced in this manner. First, other alternatives do exist and may exist in the future. Second, many stakeholders may not be well enough informed to understand the broader issues or alternatives, and so are likely to take the path of least resistance and look to the named standard as the sure way to meet the requirement. Third, technology and technology standards are rapidly evolving, SIIA is concerned reference of specific initiatives may not allow the flexibility needed to keep pace with changes in the field. More appropriate would be to outline the goals and allow for local determination of how to achieve those goals.

SIIA is simultaneously concerned that the definition is too broad. These are very complex issues and this is an emerging field in education. A one sentence definition with many broad, ambiguous terms does not provide the level of specificity needed to understand the intent or what is required. SIIA encourages clarification. SIIA is concerned that a broad requirement for open sharing of “information (metadata) about content alignment and use” may be too vague and so does not allow for some appropriate, practical exceptions such as those related to intellectual property of an alignment engine. It would be appropriate to share information that a given content object is aligned to a given standard, but it may not be appropriate to openly share data related to a proprietary process used by a vendor to determine such alignment. Similarly, there may be interpretations of use and alignment that a vendor considers proprietary. And there is also the difference between authoritative alignments (such as those from the vendor) and socially mediated data produced by users such as to refine instructional practice.

PROGRAM REQUIREMENTS:

SIIA supports efforts to enhance the exchange of educational data across applications, systems and agencies, and recently released a Primer intended to inform the field and advocate for further adoption of interoperability standards (see <http://bit.ly/NXx70k>). SIIA recognizes the opportunity for federal leadership, including through the RTT-D program. However, SIIA has questions and potential concerns about two particular requirements.

With regard to Requirement #2, SIIA is unclear of exactly what is meant by “implementation data,” and suggests this broad term should be better defined with examples of what is, and what is not, included. There may be situations where privacy protections, intellectual property rights or other factors would appropriately restrict the vendor sharing of data. For example, there may be interpretations of use patterns that a vendor employs to drive, or refine, the internal algorithms used in a learning application. Or there may be cases where the vendor provides value added representation or analysis of certain types of implementation data that are considered proprietary, and perhaps available to the customer at an additional cost. In either case, SIIA suggests that exceptions be allowed where necessary and appropriate as determined locally. SIIA also suggests that exceptions be allowed for existing contracts, or at least that it

be made clear that the district may need to modify a contract with a vendor where a product license or service agreement is already in place.

With regard to Requirement #3, SIIA is concerned that a broad requirement for open sharing of “information (metadata) about content alignment and use” may be too vague and may not allow for some appropriate, practical exceptions such as those related to intellectual property of an alignment engine. For example, it would be appropriate to share information that a given content object is aligned to a given standard, but it may not be appropriate to openly share data related to a proprietary process used by a vendor to determine such alignment. Similarly, there may be interpretations of use and alignment that a vendor considers proprietary. In either case, SIIA suggests that exceptions be allowed where necessary and appropriate as determined locally. SIIA suggests the requirement be modified to read (addition in brackets): “3. Information (metadata) about content alignment and use is shared through open-standard registries (as defined in this document) [where appropriate, including that licensing agreements with a vendor allow such open information sharing].”

SIIA encourages the Department to further clarify the intent and definitions, and then to further engage with the stakeholder community to finalize these provisions.

SIIA Contact: Mark Schneiderman, SIIA Senior Director of Education Policy