Group aims to bolster computer science

Legislature antes up for program supported by tech consortium

By **Dan Adams** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT AUGUST 10, 2015

An effort by the local technology community to have computer science taught in more Massachusetts public schools will move forward this year after the Legislature provided $1.5 million in matching funds.

An advocacy group representing technology interests, the Massachusetts Computing Attainment Network, or MassCAN, will use the funds to train teachers in computer science instruction and to lobby more school districts to introduce the lessons.

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MassCAN has also drafted a proposal for a a curriculum school districts can adopt that will be reviewed by the Massachusetts Board of Education this fall.

The curriculum proposal will include lesson plans schools could adopt for elementary and high school classes. Schools would not be required to teach computer science. On its own the industry group said it has already trained 300 public school teachers to

teach computer science.

The program got a boost in late July when the Legislature restored its full funding. Governor Charlie Baker this year had recommended the state's contribution be reduced to $800,000. MassCAN has to raise $1.5 million to match the state contribution.

The advocacy group, comprised of Boston-area executives from Google Inc., Microsoft Corp., and other large technology companies, had spent more than two years lobbying for the so-called digital literacy program, which aims to put more students on the path toward lucrative careers in the technology sector. A similar plan was axed last fall as part of mid-year state budget cuts.

"These are the jobs of today and tomorrow, and we're investing in them," said House Speaker Robert A. DeLeo . "When the top leaders in industry say they're willing to put money aside for this if you are, and try to make a dent in terms of what's lacking right now, that to me is the road to success."

Even though the Massachusetts economy is dominated by information-based industries, tech executives argue that local public schools are failing to teach students valuable computer skills.

"Computing isn't introduced in certain schools at all, or it's introduced very late in the educational experience — and computer science is a very difficult thing to learn later in life," said Steve Vinter, a Google engineering director and the head of MassCAN. "Hopefully now, you're going to see the schools you send your kids to offer more computer science classes that are in sequence, so they provide a real pathway. Why can't every senior in high school write a smartphone app?"

Vinter acknowledged that MassCAN's campaign is driven in part by self-interest: Google and other companies are worried about a lack of programmers and developers, specialists that are highly in demand in the booming Massachusetts tech industry.

He also argued for computer science training for its own sake, saying it teaches students analytical skills that are invaluable in an age when information can be accessed on demand.

"Computer science introduces a new way of teaching and learning in the class," Vinter said. "It's much more project-based. You're able to build things and solve real problems, which makes students much more motivated."

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