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Business

Mandate computing classes, tech giants say

By [Michael B. Farrell](#) | GLOBE STAFF JUNE 13, 2013

Google Inc., Microsoft Corp., Intel Corp., and Oracle Corp. all sent representatives to Beacon Hill Wednesday to press Massachusetts lawmakers for more computer science classes in the state's public schools.

The companies have thrown their support behind the newly formed Massachusetts Computing Attainment Network, or [MassCAN](#), to advocate for Massachusetts to require computer science classes as early as eighth grade and introduce new computing standards and course work for high school students.

The initiative calls for revising existing statewide curriculum, training teachers, and adding computer science to standardized tests in order to boost the numbers of students headed into technology fields and fill jobs at the companies that drive Massachusetts' innovation economy.

The effort is also backed by about a half-dozen statewide technology industry groups, such as the Massachusetts Technology Leadership Council and the Massachusetts Business Roundtable.

The State House meeting drew a standing-room-only crowd of tech industry insiders, legislators, and policy makers. Company executives said they cannot find enough qualified people to fill jobs and are increasingly looking overseas for more software engineers and developers.

Microsoft, which employs about 1,000 people in Cambridge, could not fill 6,000 jobs across the United States last year, said Annmarie Levins, the company's associate general counsel.

"It's a crisis in many ways," Levins said at Wednesday's meeting. "We've got to do something systemic if we are going to address that problem."

But the group stressed that the proposal is not just about serving technology industry needs; it is also about ensuring that skills taught in the schools today match the jobs of the future.

“This isn’t about the high-tech industry, this is about a high-tech future,” said Steve Vinter, head of Google’s office in Kendall Square, who said that 71 percent of the new jobs within the broader technology and science sector are within computing fields.

But while many people who attended the meeting support MassCAN goals, some were concerned about the cost of implementing such a broad-based program in all of the state’s public schools.

Valerie Gilman of the Gloucester School Committee said that even the most basic computer courses can be a challenge for schools because of the lack of equipment and teacher training.

The MassCAN group says the effort would be partially funded by industry and many of the companies that are backing the plan. It is beginning a public awareness campaign to support the effort.

The Patrick administration has not backed the MassCAN proposal and instead favors letting school districts make their own choices about computer science instruction.

“Our goal is to support schools and find ways that work for them to integrate technology into their curriculum,” said Matthew Wilder, spokesman for Secretary of Education Matthew Malone.

At the meeting, some legislators heard details about the MassCAN proposal for the first time, and while generally supportive, they said they wanted to learn more about how it would be implemented.

“All I know is that we need to have some solutions and some results that make us better” in science and technology fields, said Representative Gailanne Cariddi, a Democrat from North Adams.

“I’d especially like to be sure that local students are ready to go into those fields.”

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