



Essential Supports

for Blended Learning



Table of Contents

[The Essential Supports for Blended Learning](#)

[But what is Blended Learning?](#)

[Leadership](#)

[Instruction](#)

[Assessments for Learning](#)

[Managing Change](#)

[Professional Development](#)

[Conclusion](#)

The Essential Supports for Blended Learning

The goal of every school district is for students to be successful. Implied within that focus is that the educational community must do whatever it takes to ensure students are having meaningful learning experiences today that prepare them to be productive and successful citizens tomorrow. Blended learning is a meaningful learning experience that is essential for student success.

But what is Blended Learning?

Put simply, blended learning is an instructional model that uses both face-to-face and online instructional techniques. In fact, it has been used successfully for many years. “Blended learning, also referred to as hybrid learning, combines the best features of traditional schooling with the advantages of online learning to deliver personalized, differentiated instruction across a group of learners. Students in formal blended learning educational programs learn online part of the time, yet have the benefit of face-to-face instruction and supervision to maximize their learning and to best fit their own needs.”¹

When designing district curriculum, schools will look first at what students need to know and be able to do as a result of any learning. The same holds especially true when designing blended learning opportunities that are meant to give students access to learning opportunities otherwise not available. Rather than starting with a particular canned online program, or even a particular model of computer, a clear plan has to be established. “Create a vision for what your students will get out of your class and ensure that every decision you make feeds into that vision.”² It’s not about technology, it’s about quality learning and instruction leading to student success.

For several years schools have been exploring using technology to support learning. Many have turned to various models of blended learning. Some of those include³:

- Rotation Model: rotating students through computer labs or classroom workstations to work on specific learning activities

¹ Watson, J. (2015). PROMISING PRACTICES IN BLENDED AND ONLINE LEARNING Blending Learning: The Evolution of Online and Face-to-Face Education from 2008–2015. Retrieved November 6, 2015, from http://www.inacol.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/iNACOL_Blended-Learning-The-Evolution-of-Online-And-Face-to-Face-Education-from-2008-2015.pdf

² "A Teacher's Tale of Technology, Trust and the Struggle for Freedom (EdSurge News)." *EdSurge*. 22 Oct. 2015. Web. 16 Nov. 2015. https://www.edsurge.com/news/2015-10-22-a-teacher-s-tale-of-technology-trust-and-the-struggle-for-freedom?utm_content=bufferfa4a2&utm_medium=social&utm_source=facebook.com&utm_campaign=buffer

³ Christensen Institute. (n.d.). Retrieved November 6, 2015, from <http://www.christenseninstitute.org/blended-learning-definitions-and-models/>

- Flipped Classroom Model: freeing up class time for student collaboration and individual teacher instruction by offering initial learning online, outside of the school day
- Flex Model: completing most work online at the student's pace, with teacher involvement as needed face-to-face to help and lead discussions
- Individual Online Courses: taking the entire course online with an online instructor, completed either at home or at school where the student completes other classes face-to-face
- Enriched Virtual Model: completing a course or particular unit through students pursuing online activities after teacher interaction initially

Each of these models has merit. Regardless of the model, the vast array of articles, case studies and scholarly research share the positives of student outcomes of blended learning and the importance of students learning and demonstrating collaboration, communication and critical thinking. In addition, "blending technology with face-to-face teacher time generally produces better outcomes than face-to-face or online learning alone."⁴ For blended learning to have that type of positive impact on students, the school districts need to first establish the supports necessary for blended learning to be implemented successfully. Those essential supports are leadership, instruction, assessments for learning, managing change and professional development.

Leadership

Leadership matters. "Everything rises and falls on leadership" (Maxwell). For something as fundamentally important as student success, leadership must be present and engaged in the processes involved in implementing blended learning. Leaders should communicate the vision for using blended learning, set expectations for its implementation and hold stakeholders accountable to the same. "Even with all the resources out there, far too many schools are either neglecting the opportunity that technology holds to help personalize learning at scale or are leading with the technology rather than their education goals, which generally results in spending a lot of money and missing the promise. What's lacking still for educators has been a strategic design guide--informed by robust theory--to help them with the 'hows' of putting blended learning into action to boost achievement for their students."⁵

Additionally, even in tight economic times, leadership should ensure that supporting blended learning is a priority budgetarily. By supporting blended learning, leaders are supporting student success and their readiness for the future. "State, district, school and classroom leaders recognize

⁴ Technology Integration Research Review. (2013, February 5). Retrieved November 6, 2015, from <http://www.edutopia.org/technology-integration-research-learning-outcomes>

⁵ "BLENDED: A Conversation with Michael Horn & Heather Staker." *Education Week*. Web. 16 Nov. 2015. http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/on_innovation/2014/09/blended_a_conversation_with_michael_horn_heather_staker.html

that the ultimate potential for blended and online learning lies in the opportunity to transform the education system and enable higher levels of learning through competency-based approaches.”⁶ For this to be realized, leadership must...lead.

Instruction

When implementing blended learning, it is more than just adding technology activities to instruction. “True blended learning requires that teachers approach their roles differently—as coaches, concierges, guides and mentors, instead of purveyors of information. Classrooms will be structured differently as flexible learning environments, in which students learn in a variety of ways while communicating and collaborating with others who are outside their school—and perhaps outside their country.”⁷

With this fundamental shift in the role of the teacher, it is important that not only students collaborate, but teachers work together as well. When they do, not only are they modeling for their students, they are also supporting each other as they adjust instructional practices to include many 21st century learning skills. “Learning and innovation skills increasingly are being recognized as the skills that separate students who are prepared for increasingly complex life and work environments in the 21st century, and those who are not. A focus on creativity, critical thinking, communication and collaboration is essential to prepare students for the future.”⁸

21st century learning has long been a focus of many instructional activities. Blended learning provides a means to ensure students are prepared through instruction that focuses on those essential skills. Additionally, students will thrive not just intellectually, but emotionally as well. In fact, further research indicates that “connection and collaboration with others is essential not only to their learning, but their mental and emotional health.”⁹ Adjusting instruction to include these aspects is critical.

⁶ Watson, J. (2015). PROMISING PRACTICES IN BLENDED AND ONLINE LEARNING Blending Learning: The Evolution of Online and Face-to-Face Education from 2008–2015. Retrieved November 6, 2015, from http://www.inacol.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/iNACOL_Blended-Learning-The-Evolution-of-Online-And-Face-to-Face-Education-from-2008-2015.pdf

⁷ Watson, J. (2015). PROMISING PRACTICES IN BLENDED AND ONLINE LEARNING Blending Learning: The Evolution of Online and Face-to-Face Education from 2008–2015. Retrieved November 6, 2015, from http://www.inacol.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/iNACOL_Blended-Learning-The-Evolution-of-Online-And-Face-to-Face-Education-from-2008-2015.pdf

⁸ Framework for 21st Century Learning - P21. (2009). Retrieved November 6, 2015, from <http://www.p21.org/our-work/p21-framework>

⁹ The Critical 21st Century Skills Every Student Needs and Why. (2015, January 9). Retrieved November 6, 2015, from <https://globaldigitalcitizen.org/critical-21st-century-skills-every-student-needs>

Assessments for Learning

Assessment is an essential support for any learning, especially blended learning. Because students will be progressing through their learning objectives by demonstrating mastery, they will be assessed along the way not only to inform their own learning, but for teachers to understand where they may need to provide additional support.

“One key to the adoption of personalized learning is the utilization of data, formative assessments and performance-based assessments to guide mastery-based learning by producing student evidence on every learning objective. . . . Now, with established blended learning models to serve as examples, and the improvements in technology to make it possible, we are beginning to see students receive differentiated instruction tailored specifically to their needs. Teachers are able to obtain instant data and feedback based on the progress of their students. As that data comes in, teachers can determine whether the student needs targeted instruction and support, additional work or an alternative path to navigate further into the curriculum.”¹⁰

By providing assessments online and embedded in the learning activities, students will have a positive experience by knowing exactly where they have achieved mastery, and where they need additional practice. Through teachers working together to analyze the assessment data of their students, they can target their instructional supports effectively and efficiently.

Managing Change

It is important to remember that when something as significant, and important, as blended learning is adopted and embraced, it is a change. As such, remembering key components to managing change is important. Those include:

- Communicate the vision early and often. Without the vision, people will naturally get confused as to why the focus is on blended learning.
- Provide resources. Because blended learning involves the use of technology and online resources, make sure they are readily available and reliable. Without that, frustration will begin to take over.
- Promote collaboration. It is important not only for students to work together but for staff to do so as well. This provides not only a modeling for blended learning, but also creates communities of support for staff.

¹⁰ Watson, J. (2015). PROMISING PRACTICES IN BLENDED AND ONLINE LEARNING Blending Learning: The Evolution of Online and Face-to-Face Education from 2008–2015. Retrieved November 6, 2015, from http://www.inacol.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/iNACOL_Blended-Learning-The-Evolution-of-Online-And-Face-to-Face-Education-from-2008-2015.pdf

- Devote time. Ensure that there is ample time dedicated to planning, ongoing professional development and sustained dialogue at staff meetings.

Professional Development

Consider this view: “The use of computers and online learning in education requires a much larger shift in thinking than simply adding a few computers or other devices to classrooms.”¹¹ Most teachers and staff will agree that the addition of technology to any system will require some level of professional development. Now consider fundamentally changing learning so that it is truly a blend of face-to-face and online learning with assessment of learning along the way. Sustained professional development for all is a key in order for teachers and administrators to learn and model the shift from teacher-focused to student-focused, and learning environments that expand beyond traditional walls.

The focus can't be on a just a few educators who might pilot blended learning. Since blended learning involves changing curriculum, modes of instruction and increasing personalized learning opportunities, professional development must be provided from the board room to the classroom.

Additionally, professional development should model the same type of environment that the students experience. It should be delivered as a blended learning model. Provide professional learning both during school and outside of the school day, online, where virtual collaboration within a professional learning team is encouraged. This will naturally include online and face-to-face reflection as staff begins to embrace and plan for the new model of learning.

Conclusion

In order for blended learning to be successfully embraced by a school district, it is important that it is supported. Through intentional planning and attention to the essential supporting elements, blended learning will be successful. More important, by monitoring student progress and assessing for learning along the way, the blended learning environment will be rich in opportunity for promoting student success and ensuring that students will be prepared for their future.

See for yourself! Take some time to check out these four school districts that are using blended learning models successfully:

¹¹Watson, J. (2015). PROMISING PRACTICES IN BLENDED AND ONLINE LEARNING Blending Learning: The Evolution of Online and Face-to-Face Education from 2008–2015. Retrieved November 6, 2015, from http://www.inacol.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/iNACOL_Blended-Learning-The-Evolution-of-Online-And-Face-to-Face-Education-from-2008-2015.pdf

- Rocketship Education:
<http://www.erstrategies.org/cms/files/1504-rocketship-case-study.pdf>
- Aspire Public Schools:
<https://www.edsurge.com/news/2015-09-28-how-to-kick-off-blended-learning-hint-it-s-not-just-about-tech>
- Milpitas Unified School District (Milpitas, CA)
<http://www.musd.org/personalized-learning.html>
- Albemarle County Public Schools (Charlottesville, Virginia)
<http://www.k12albemarle.org/>

Want to learn more? Here are two great resources that provide professional development for educators:

- The Alvo Institute's Blended Learning Exploration Workshops offer focused support for teachers, administrators and districts leaders who are implementing a blended learning program for the first time. <http://thealvoinstitute.com/>
- Blended Learning in the Classroom courses are led by trained instructors and prepare participants to effectively implement their own blended environment. Michigan School Districts should contact the REMC Association of Michigan for more information. <http://www.remc.org/projects/blendedlearning/>