Executive Summary

Blended Learning: Where Online and Face-to-Face Instruction Intersect for 21st Century Teaching and Learning

Blended learning, the teaching practice that combines teaching methods from both face-to-face and online learning, is an established, rapidly growing instructional model that is proving highly effective in helping schools and districts address the challenges of student achievement, limited resources, and the expectations of 21st century learners. Whether it is extending classroom instruction beyond the school day, supporting credit recovery programs, enhancing teacher professional development or delivering enriched learning opportunities for accelerated students, blended learning models are increasingly common practice across the curriculum for students and teachers alike.

Blended learning is implemented in a variety of ways, ranging from models in which curriculum is fully online with face-to-face interaction to models in which face-to-face classroom instruction is integrated with online components that extend learning beyond the classroom or school day. The rapid growth of blended learning has been a catalyst for additional instructional transformation, including:

- Evolving pedagogy in which teachers’ roles include facilitation, student mentoring and differentiating instruction for individual learners,
- Increased flexibility and personalization of students’ learning experiences, and
- Strategic uses of technology as districts tap the capabilities of the learning management systems to support a wider range of instructional programs.

Educators support online learning because of its unique abilities to provide students with enriched learning experiences, to extend learning beyond the school day, and to support more successful differentiated learning strategies that personalize students’ educational experiences. Additionally, as educators gain more experience with the approaches to and benefits of blended learning, they have discovered that this instructional model helps them increase capacity without commensurate increases in budget or staff.

This report reviews the working definitions of blended learning, explores efficacy and prevalence data, recaps innovative and practical implementation models and provides profiles of several schools and districts that are experiencing success with their blended learning programs. The intent is to showcase this instructional model’s growth and potential to spark new conversations about how blended learning can address a range of instructional needs in new and highly productive ways.
District Profile

District: Henrico County Public Schools, Henrico, Virginia  
Interviewee: Jean Murray, Assistant Superintendent

Progress and achievement are cornerstones of the mission of Henrico County Public Schools. According to the district’s web site, Henrico was first in the state two years in a row for the number of schools passing the Standards of Learning tests (SOLs), and the county has received ten National Association of Counties awards. Henrico County Public Schools’ mission is to provide a nationally recognized educational program and staff to help 21st century students reach their full potential. They strive to develop critical thinkers and lifelong learners who are committed to their community and nation, and who have the personal integrity to meet life's challenges.

In Henrico County, Virginia, blended learning has a very “active” role in curriculum. Jean Murray, the district’s Assistant Superintendent explains, “One of our most successful blended learning examples, among many including Shakespeare and algebra, is our online Physical Education program. We’re doing this in summer school. Our students use heart rate monitors that plug into computers. We offer online help and textbook-based instruction online, with digital drop boxes for assignments. The students work out in a local gym with their heart rate monitors, and then plug into computers to report their workout.” Murray also noted that this helps students fulfill their physical education credit requirements and the program has been useful for students who were on long-term suspension or expulsion, because it allows them to earn credits they need in order to graduate.

District Profile

District: Albuquerque Public Schools, New Mexico  
Interviewee: Tom Ryan, Chief Information Officer  
Funding Source: Available New Mexico Technology Funds, EETT, E-Rate Funding

Albuquerque Public Schools use several blended learning approaches encompassing instruction for students as well as professional development. Tom Ryan, Chief Information Officer of Albuquerque Public Schools, offers an interesting perspective: “We focus a great deal on our blended learning environment, implementing this model first on the ‘fringe’ and then finding that it evolves to mainstream applications. For us, blended learning is a process by which we are using online and face-to-face methods to improve teaching and learning. Allocation of time between the two instructional strategies is not the question. It is a question of which methodology will best serve student needs. We want to provide the right and the best opportunities for learning. A great example is our ESL (English as a Second Language) students. Blended models give these learners the opportunity to practice as often and as long as they need. It’s about meeting the student’s academic needs and using instructional strategies that increase the time and resources available to help students excel academically.”

Ryan notes that blended learning is the future because it helps address students’ diverse needs and learning styles, supports effective response to intervention and gives learners direct experience with technology-supported skills essential for 21st century success.