HOW TO GUIDE INNOVATION WITH BLENDED LEARNING

Here's how to expand or get started with blended learning in modern classrooms

Education has long needed a digital overhaul, but the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted this fact vividly. Progressing from valuable to vital, the pandemic has cemented the necessity of a digital transformation in education.

The global health crisis has forced schools to engage in a complete digital reformation, with the need for digital solutions growing exponentially.

As the traditional classroom experience expands caused by the ripple effects of pandemic-induced change, educators, students and parents continue to look for inventive solutions.

According to June 2021 research conducted by Morning Consult for EdChoice, 70% of K-12 parents said schools should provide multiple learning options for students. Virtual learning platforms have answered the call with both educators and parents searching for alternative learning opportunities amid new and changing circumstances.

THE DIGITAL APPROACH

A TechNavio report from January estimates that the online education market is expected to increase by $121.85 billion between 2020 to 2025.

It's not surprising: Technology is being utilized more than ever before in all facets of society. To prepare students for this type of global, digital economy, parents and educators are looking for more online learning experiences for K-12 students.

"All children are different, and all students learn differently — that's why we need various options for students and families. The inclusion of digital education models broadens a district's ability to meet the needs of all students and families," said Niyoka Mccoy, Chief Learning Officer for Stride Learning Solutions, a comprehensive online learning provider for K-12 students.

While some families are ready to leap to a fully digital experience, others prefer a hybrid option. In addition, brick-and-mortar schools increasingly see the value of blended-learning approaches that combine the in-person classroom experience with a collaborative online platform.

Blended learning provides teachers with increased one-on-one time with students on the most important tasks, improving productivity and learning outcomes. The blended model is also a strategic way of addressing district challenges, such as expanding the range of courses offered, increasing learning personalization, reducing in-person class size and maximizing facility space usage.

There are different models of blended learning, but researchers suggest that 50% to 70% of instruction should still be delivered face-to-face, with 30% to 50% being offered online. Some potential ways schools and families can implement blended learning include:

- **THE ROTATION MODEL**, where students rotate between several ways of learning. Those are online learning, group projects, individual tutoring and full-class instruction.

- **THE FLEX MODEL**, where students follow the content online and at their own schedule. Teachers and other adults support and conduct small group activities, projects and individual exercises.

- **THE SELF-BLEND MODEL**, where a student chooses to take one or several courses online in addition to other traditional courses they attend.

- **THE ENRICHED-VIRTUAL MODEL**, where a combination of online learning and attending the campus in person takes place.

So what is the best way to begin, or continue to implement, blended learning that meets your needs?

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Stride Learning Solutions in Action

When Wendy Skibinski, Chief Academic Officer at GEO Foundation in Indianapolis, needed to incorporate high-quality, licensed educators into her hybrid classrooms, she turned to Stride Learning Solutions.

"To effectively implement Stride, we created a position of learning coaches in our schools to assist in the delivery of the online curriculum," Skibinski said.

"Our learning coaches work side by side with the Stride instructors to ensure students maintain progress and identify potential issues."

Skibinski says this collaboration of checks and balances creates the optimal learning environment for her students who have grown up in digital environments.

"Immersing them in virtual programming is the way of their world," Skibinski said.

Stride Learning Solutions offers access to engaging, interactive online curriculum that allows schools to provide differentiated instruction to meet the diverse needs of every type of student. Stride offers an expansive K-12 curriculum, offering more than 350 courses delivered by cutting-edge technology.

Contact Stride Learning Solutions to design a custom online or blended-learning program for your district. " ■

INITIATING A BLENDED-LEARNING TRANSITION

No matter where your schools or districts are when it comes to blended-learning options, there are some best practices that can inform the initiative moving forward. These include to:

DEVELOP A TRANSPARENT DIGITAL LEARNING PLAN.

The development and communication of a step-by-step digital learning plan helps gain support from administrators, teachers and families. Effectively communicating the vision and framework of the impending digital transition will help win support for the conversion. Lines of communication should remain open throughout the process, allowing concerns to be addressed as they arise.

PRIORITIZE QUALITY INSTRUCTION.

Some digital providers offer the choice of utilizing a district's teachers, or providing certified personnel, in the short or long term. Regardless of the instructor, it is vital that a social presence be established, as it is highly beneficial for students to observe an educator who is actively leading the group. In the case of certified teachers being utilized via a digital learning platform, additional support from district-local instructors can be incorporated, if desired. Promoting a partnership of local and virtual instructors is an effective curriculum delivery tactic.

IDENTIFY STAFF EVANGELISTS.

Find educators who already possess knowledge and interest in digital learning to help guide the process. These individuals should be part of the process from initial discussions through implementation.

RUN AN INITIAL PILOT PROGRAM.

It makes sense to begin the transition with the school, grade level or classroom in which the need for digital solutions is the greatest. If feasible, pilot the program with volunteer instructors who opt in. This slower transition allows for challenges to be addressed before the program is utilized on a larger scale. The "early adopters" can serve in mentorship roles once the program becomes widespread, offering their expertise and support, as a resource for their colleagues.

BE ON HAND FOR TROUBLESHOOTING. All students and most teachers and parents will have familiarity with the basic technology needed to facilitate effective virtual learning spaces — but making sure everyone is comfortable is vital to sustained use and success with any blended-learning approach.

PRIORITIZE STREAMLINED TASKS AND COMMUNICATION. Districts should consider ease of use and navigability for both teachers and students. Selecting a provider that grasps the significance of accessibility for students will aid in the digital transition.

MAINTAIN STRONG COMMUNICATION AND ENGAGEMENT. Instructors should continuously ensure students' online content is accessible and easy to navigate. Explicit directions and instructions relating to assignments and due dates are key. Timely feedback is also essential in blended learning — whether it be oral, video or written, to ensure all students understand how to communicate with one another, the instructor and the group as a whole. Educators should also respond to student posts, comments and questions in the virtual environment. Students will retain knowledge and understand concepts more thoroughly when they are actively participating and engaged. Providing multiple options for connection and feedback are encouraged.

Leveraging technology is the solution for supporting various teaching styles, small group partnerships and diverse student needs, while providing customized courses and real-time data for monitoring learning outcomes.

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ABOUT STRIDE LEARNING SOLUTIONS

Since 2000, Stride Learning Solutions has been a leader in strategic solutions to solve district challenges. Stride's flexible and highly engaging online and blended learning options are designed specifically for virtual learning and supported by professional learning for educators — led by experienced Stride virtual instructors. With an innovative platform, comprehensive digital courseware, adaptable technology, and extensive support, Stride will help your school or district empower a brighter future for learners.

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