25 TIPS FOR BLENDED LEARNING SUCCESS

When Implementing a Program to Personalize Education
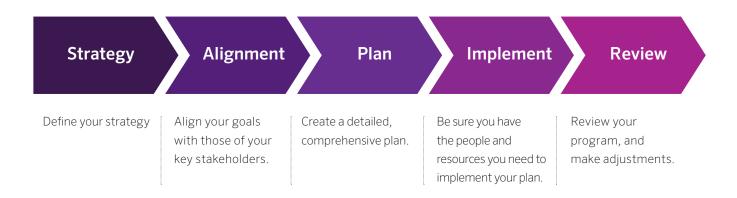
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INTRODUCTION

Blended learning is a formal education program that integrates online instruction with traditional face-to-face class activities. Schools across the country are using blended learning to not just supplement, but to transform and improve the learning process by personalizing each student's learning experience. These blended learning programs have resulted in greater productivity for teachers and better outcomes for students because students receive the attention, support, and resources they need—and teachers can spend more time differentiating instruction.

During a live webinar, three prominent educators—Mary Fluharty, Bryan Wood, and Heather Hiebsch—shared some of what they've learned during their years of experience with blended learning education. Their discussion focused on the five steps to implementing a successful blended learning program:

Strategy	Alignment	Plan	Implement	Review
Define your strategy	Align your goals with those of your key stakeholders.	Create a detailed, comprehensive plan.	Be sure you have the people and resources you need to implement your plan.	Review your program, and make adjustments.

Read on to learn about how they are using blended learning to transform the educational landscape in their districts.

Mary Fluharty
Coordinator of Online Learning
Alexandria City Public Schools
Alexandria, VA

Mary works regularly with at-risk students at T.C. Williams High School and its satellite campus. T.C. Williams is a one-to-one laptop high school serving over 3,000 students. The satellite campus offers a full online curriculum with flexible scheduling and student-centered support. Students work with online teachers and have face-to-face time with mentors who are certified teachers. If they need help, the mentor works with them individually or conducts small-group sessions.

Bryan Wood
Executive Director
Crater Lake Charter Academy
Jackson County, OR

As principal of D9 Online in Eagle Point, Oregon, Bryan oversaw the fall 2013 launch and rapid growth of the D9 Online blended learning program. The program started with just 19 students in September and, less than a year later, was serving more than 400 students. Some students are full-time D9 Online students while others take courses part time at D9 online and other courses at their traditional school. D9 Online offers more than 100 online courses and has a learning center staffed with certified teachers from 8 to 5, five days a week. Students are free to come in when they need help. The learning center also provides after-school tutoring.

Heather Hiebsch
Principal
PSD Global Academy K–12
Fort Collins, CO

PSD Global Academy launched in 2009 as a fully online credit recovery and alternative school for students in grades 6 through 12. In the second year, the school added grades K through 5, an acceleration model, and hired its own local teachers. Under Heather's leadership, PSD Global Academy started expanding toward a blended learning model. In fall 2014, the school became fully blended with all students in grades K through 12 on campus two days a week and learning remotely three days a week.

STRATEGY

1 **Define your goals.** It is important to set clear goals—whether it is to provide students with flexible, personalized, self-paced instruction or to offer a larger selection of courses. It is equally important to be open to reevaluating and broadening your goals when needed.

"We started as a credit recovery model and a way to keep kids in school and in our district. As online learning and blended learning started growing, we revamped our program to make it more of a general education option—even an acceleration option. We looked at how blended learning can be used to personalization education to benefit all kids, even in large traditional classrooms. Our teachers can have 30 students in a class, and they're at 30 different places, all moving forward at their own pace. Blended learning can be an effective tool to help teachers differentiate instruction to meet the needs of all kids." **-Heather Hiebsch**

2 **Do your research when selecting curriculum and technology.** Weigh all the pros and cons when deciding whether to build your own curriculum or use a curriculum provider. Most public schools don't have the time and resources to create the type of curriculum schools would like to offer. Curriculum providers in the private world are able to put a lot of money into research and development that the public sector simply doesn't have.

3 **Visit blended learning programs in other districts to get ideas.** Talk to educators and see how they are using blending learning in their schools. Find out what works for them. Don't forget to ask what didn't work too—so you can avoid making the same mistakes.

Alignment

4 **Align your program's goals to the school or district's objectives.** Getting support from district leadership will be easier if your program will help them achieve their goals—whether it's to increase the graduation rate, implement Common Core State Standards, or to keep students in the district by offering greater flexibility and more course offerings.

"Tie your implementation into school or district goals and choose one area to begin with. So while credit recovery may be the highest need, be prepared for the floodgates to open because once others start to see the gains and the potential, they will want to utilize blended learning as well. And that's great—but you need to have your policies and practices in place before starting so that you have an answer to those questions that will quickly arise." **-Mary Fluharty**

5 **Talk to all the stakeholders—teachers, administrators, parents, and students.** Listen closely to what they have to say. Be sure to let the teachers union know that you are creating new teaching jobs, not replacing current teachers.

6 **Enlist the support of the local media.** A new blended learning program that personalized instruction and helps students learn 21st-century skills is a story that will interest the public. A local news segment is an opportunity for you to get the word out about your program, share your goals, and attract students.

PLAN

7 **Know where your funding is coming from and how much.** When it comes to funding, some states view blended and online schools differently than brick-and-mortar schools. Make sure you are leveraging your funds effectively by consolidating idle computers and re-evaluating reliance on textbooks. Seek grants that are available to support programs

8 **When staffing, look for the same type of people you would need with a traditional school.** You need strong counselor and student support because students looking at online and blended programs often have a story that is coming with them. Build a team that is committed to the success of the program.

9 **When hiring, the teacher's character and buy-in to blended learning is as important as his or her experience.** Of course, teachers must be certified and highly qualified. But being able to make students feel valued, both online and in person, is just as essential.

"In our hiring process we screen initial applicants by having them complete an online questionnaire to make sure that a warm personality comes through an e-mail because that's going to be one of the ways they communicate with their students. We ask 'Why are you interested in our school?' and cross out anyone who mentions being able to work from home or not wanting to be in a classroom every day—because we don't work from home, and we have kids on campus. We really look at the hard skills—'How do you monitor progress and use your classroom data?'—and the soft skills—'How would you engage a student? What if that doesn't work?'" **-Heather Hiebsch**

10 **Develop a job description for mentors.** Mentoring positions have never existed in school districts in the past. Mentors need strong technical skills and excellent interpersonal skills. They play a key role in the students' success by building relationships with them, motivating them, advocating for them, and serving as a liaison between the student and the online teacher.

11 **Find the right mix of online and face-to-face time the student needs to be successful.** Some blended learning programs require all students to spend one or two days a week at the learning center. Other programs specify the face-to-face time requirement in the Individualized Learning Plan after meeting with the student and parents. Either way, it is important to set the policy upfront so that everyone knows what is expected of them.

"We use a progress-based attendance. If our kids are making expected progress through a course, then it really doesn't matter to us how long it took them. If they take 20 minutes for a math assignment, that's great. If it takes them 3 hours, that's great. That's the flexible part of online learning." **-Heather Hiebsch**

IMPLEMENT

12 Create a warm and welcoming learning environment.

"We're not looking to duplicate a traditional school. We wanted to create something new that caters to the personalized education of each student who walks through the door. Our building is completely WiFi, and every student has a laptop. In our main learning center, we have couches, bean bags, and rocking chairs. It is a warm, comforting environment. And everyone—administrators, mentors, office staff, and especially our teachers—makes a point of greeting the students. We visit with them and get to know them. We want to make every student feel valued and cared for." **-Bryan Wood**

13 Hold an open house before school begins and explain the program. In many ways, blended learning is more rigorous than the education students get in brick-and-mortar schools. It requires motivation, perseverance, and organization. Be upfront and honest about the time commitment required for parents and students.

"Blended learning is not homeschool. It is school that might be based at home on some days. Our teachers are 100 percent accountable for kids even though they might only have 20 to 40 percent face time. Be careful targeting homeschoolers or describing the program as flexible. Instead emphasize the innovative ways you are personalizing education by blending face-to-face and online instruction."
-Mary Fluharty

14 Have parents and students sign a contract. Meet individually with each student to be sure they understand what is expected of them. Explain how attendance will be taken and how students will be graded. Have students set goals and complete an orientation course in a blended learning environment so they will have a better understanding of what they are getting into.

15 When enrolling special needs students, have honest conversations with the IEP team, the services team, the parents, and, if appropriate, the student, to determine if blended learning is a good solution. Some of the common accommodations in an IEP are inherent in an online learning program. Kids can take extended time, they have preferred seating, and they've got the notes written for them. But if students have very high needs, then a blended learning program might not be the best option because there's a certain level of support that the school may not be able to provide because they don't have 100 percent access to the students.

"The students continue to have their IEP as well as the case manager assigned to them from the brick-and-mortar school. I have a classroom where one of my mentors is actually a special ed teacher, so I try to pair the special ed student taking an online course into that classroom. It's been great because he is really good at establishing relationships with kids and the kids have been very successful. We also share the IEPs with the online teachers. Some online teachers even Skype into IEP meetings to make sure we are addressing the goals of the IEP. If a student needs a modification in content, we work directly with the online teachers. Our vendors have also been great about making adjustments to content to meet the IEP specifications."
-Mary Fluharty

16 Use technology to personalize learning and free-up the teachers' times to work one-to-one with the student.
Quality online curriculum is aligned to Common Core State Standards and has built-in assessments that identify what a student already knows and where he or she needs more practice. That means teachers don't need to spend as much time creating and grading tests and homework, and figuring out how to apply Common Core standards. Instead they can work with the student one-to-one or in small groups to help them understand concepts they are struggling with.

17 Keep students engaged. When students know that at some point during the week they are going to have to stand in front of their teacher and own their decisions, they tend to work harder. Another strong motivation for students in online classes is that they can see much of their own data and watch their percentage increase every time they turn in an assignment. Building strong relationships with students through online chats, e-mails, and face-to-face interactions also helps keep students engaged. Field trips, science and art competitions, and clubs can help too.

"We always try to lead our horses with carrots rather than sticks. We encourage engagement by teaching personal skills like accountability, ownership, and community. And we try to follow the national PBIS model—Positive Behavior, Intervention Support. When translated to online and hybrid programs that means a lot of incentives, rewards, and celebrations. We celebrate one another, and we always celebrate our kids. We do all kinds of things, like having pizza parties, to incentivize the kids"
-Heather Hiebsch

18 Communicate frequently with students and intervene quickly if they start falling behind. If students aren't making expected progress, look at their actual attendance or time in the content to see if the lack of progress is an academic issue or if they just haven't been logging in.

19 Involve parents. Let parents know if their child is falling behind pace. And always have someone available to answer the phone and discuss any concerns parents may have.

"Our doors are open, 8 to 5, five days a week. Parents can walk in anytime. It's very seldom that there's not a certified teacher or a mentor who can sit down with them and discuss how we can meet their needs."
-Bryan Wood

20 Give students a chance to make up for mistakes. You never want to get to a point where a student who is behind gives up because he or she thinks that there's no way to catch up.

"We have amnesty days where students can turn in something late. Every student gets two late passes. If they don't use them by the end of the year, then they can turn them in for extra credit." **-Heather Hiebsch**

21 Create a nonthreatening testing environment for state-required exams. Consider testing in small groups by grade level to make students more comfortable. Students and parents coming from a homeschool environment are often the most apprehensive about standardized tests. Explain that the tests are not being used to evaluate the student, but to find out how you can best serve the student by placing him or her in the right classes.

REVIEW

22 Gather and evaluate data from your curriculum providers each week.

"I look at weekly reports from our curriculum providers, analyze the data, and share the results—highlighting areas of concern—with mentors and counselors across the district. I also have weekly meetings with each vendor to discuss issues, concerns, and upgrade requests so that we are both reactively managing our programs and proactively planning for the future."
-Mary Fluharty

23 **There are many ways to measure success.** Academic quality that results in successful students and happy families is one measurement. The number of students who re-enroll is another good indicator of success; as is a growing enrollment spurred on by families sharing their success stories. Equally important are the individual stories of students who stayed in school—or came back to school—after giving up on traditional schooling.

"Be careful what you're judging as success. Our valedictorian is a 4.0 kid who transferred from the local high school to us, so we have high achieving students like her in our population. But we also have a junior who came in with two credits and may earn three credits the whole year. But that's twice as many as he got the previous two years and that's a stepping stone. So don't just look at the data, examine the individual student and what his or her growth is." **-Bryan Wood**

24 **Look at the student's progress when evaluating performance.**

"We have a physical attendance requirement of 20 hours, but 20 hours is not going to get a student through a full course load. We look at three reports—week-on-week progress, physical attendance, and time spent online—to calculate the student's score." **-Mary Fluharty**

25 **Listen to what the students have to say.** Ask them how their relationship with the online teacher and their mentor was and if they felt supported. When students feel connected to what they're doing, they are much more likely to succeed in school and in other areas of their life.

ABOUT FUEL EDUCATION

This white paper was produced by Fuel Education. FuelEd partners with schools and districts to fuel personalized learning and transform the education experience inside and outside the classroom. We provide innovative solutions for pre-K through 12th grade that empower districts to implement and grow successful online and blended learning programs.

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