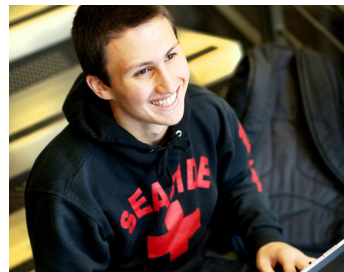# BENCHMARK STUDY | 2014

Third annual review of best practices for implementing
online and blended learning in K–12 school districts

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About This Report

MDR's EdNET Insight Service conducted the third annual survey of district and school-level leaders on behalf of Fuel Education in the spring of 2014. The purpose of the study was to determine best practices and lessons learned when implementing online and blended learning programs in K–12 schools. MDR is the leading provider of education marketing information and services in the United States. MDR's EdNET Insight is the K–12 education industry's premier information and consulting service, combining the proven research and analysis with recognized industry experts to deliver an insightful, comprehensive view of the trends and influences that are shaping the education market today—and tomorrow. For more information on EdNET Insight, go to schooldata.com/mdrednetinsight.asp.

INTRODUCTION

More and more schools and school districts are implementing online and blended learning to personalize education in order to help boost graduation rates; address academic shortfalls across multiple student populations; expand their course catalogs; and provide a flexible, personalized learning experience for every student. To ensure the success of these programs—whether they are individual courses or full-time online programs—it is important to understand the challenges and obstacles educators may face. This report highlights best practices reported by experienced educators when implementing online and blended education programs in K–12 schools.

The study is based on a spring 2014 survey that was sent to district and school-level leaders, specifically targeting superintendents, assistant superintendents, curriculum directors, principals, and teachers who have had experience implementing online and blended learning programs. The research was supplemented with phone interviews with FuelEd customers who shared their experiences with online and blended learning programs.

Distribution of Survey Respondents by Role

- **Superintendent** — 37%
- **Assistant Superintendent** — 13%
- **Curriculum and Instructional Coordinator** — 31%
- **Other** — 19%
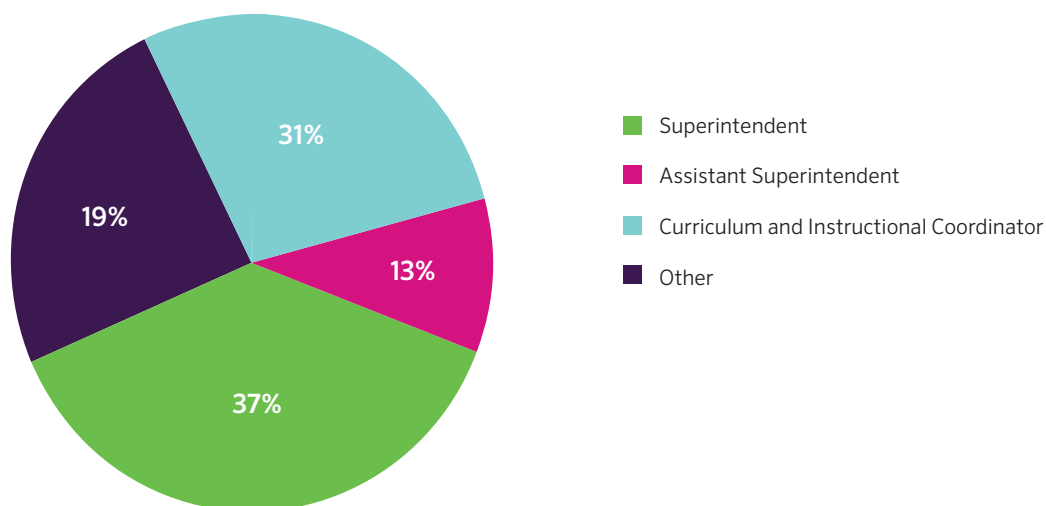
Respondents by District Enrollment Size and Location

Survey respondents were fairly evenly distributed by district size. Urban, suburban, and rural districts were all represented, with the largest number of responses—37 percent—coming from rural districts. A quarter of the respondents did not indicate their metro status.

Number of Enrolled Students in District
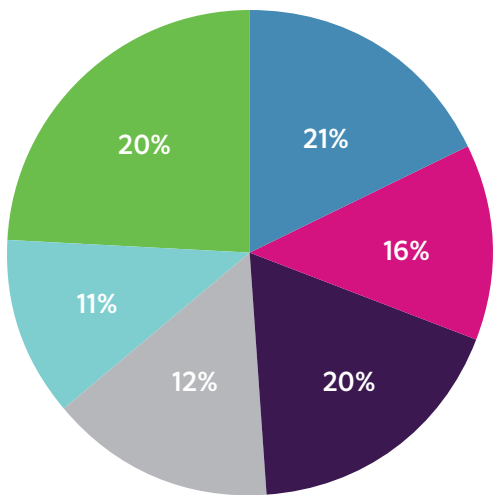
- 499 or fewer students
- 500–999 students
- 1,000–2,499 students
- 2,500–4,999 students
- 5,000–9,999 students
- 10,000+ students

Metro Status
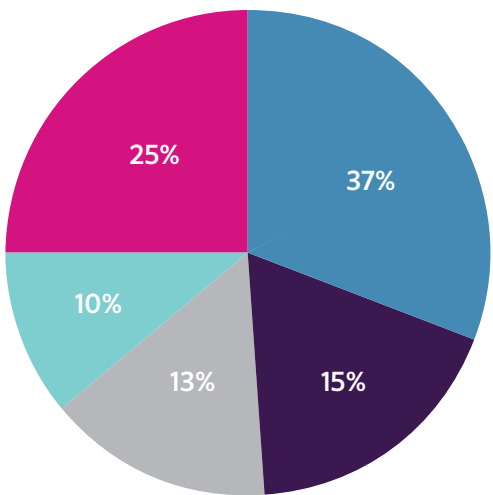
- Rural
- Suburban
- Urban
- Town
- Unclassified

Experience with Types of Online Learning Programs

Respondents were asked to identify the type of online learning programs they offer in their district. Of the 173 respondents who offer online learning programs:

- 93 percent offered online courses, including credit recovery, versus 34 percent who offer full-time online programs.
- Full-time online programs are more likely to be offered in districts in towns (61 percent) and rural areas (36 percent) than in their suburban counterparts (16 percent).

Online Learning Programs by District Size

Program Type	2014	District Size		
	Total	<1,000	1,000–10,000	10,000+
Online Courses	93%	86%	99%	94%
Full-Time Online	34%	38%	28%	40%

Online Learning Programs by Metro Status

Program Type	2014	Metro Status			
	Total	Rural	Suburban	Urban	Town
Online Courses	93%	92%	100%	96%	100%
Full-Time Online	34%	36%	16%	32%	61%

Blended vs. Fully Online Learning

Respondents were asked to select the delivery model of online learning that best reflects the primary model used in their district. The survey shows that blended learning continues to be a popular delivery model for online learning, with 73 percent of districts reporting that they primarily use a blended learning model while 27 percent say they primarily use a fully online learning model. Those respondents who offer both online courses and a full-time online program more heavily use a blended learning model (68 percent).

Blended learning in this survey is defined as a program where the student learns at least in part at a supervised brick-and-mortar location away from home and at least part of the curriculum is delivered online with some element of student control over time, place, path, and/or pace.

Fully online learning is defined as a program where the student learns outside of the brick-and-mortar location and the majority of the curriculum is delivered online with some element of student control over time, place, path and/or pace.

Full-time online is defined as as a program where the student is taking all of their courses online, either in a blended or fully online method of delivery.

Online Learning Models by District Size

Online Learning Model	2014	District Size		
	Total	<1,000	1,000–10,000	10,000+
Blended Learning	73%	77%	72%	71%
Fully Online Learning	27%	23%	28%	29%

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Learning Models

Blended learning programs continue to outpace fully online learning programs, with 73 percent of districts in the survey using a blended learning model as their primary online learning program—up from 66 percent in 2013. Only 27 percent of districts primarily use a fully online learning model.

Blended learning programs may offer the right combination of teacher intervention, social interaction, and structure while still empowering the student with control over time, place, path, and/or pace. Also, blended learning programs may offer better opportunity for disengaged students to receive one-to-one attention and to build relationships with their teachers or mentors compared to traditional learning.

Blended Learning Implementation Still Evolving

It appears that many districts offering blended learning have yet to completely implement the model. When asked whether districts offering blended learning allow students to complete some coursework outside the classroom, only 41 percent had substantially implemented this as part of their program. And only 34 percent had substantially implemented online/digital curriculum as part of their blended program. It was surprising that these response choices did not receive a higher rating, as both seem to be hallmarks of blended learning.

TRAINING TEACHERS

Training teachers in their role in a blended classroom is critical, says Joel Smith, eLearning facilitator at Spring Branch Independent School District in Houston, TX. He describes four stages that a teacher will go through as he or she progresses from traditional educator to confident and effective blended learning teacher and facilitator:

Sage on the Stage In this stage the teacher takes on traditional lecture-style teaching and hasn't yet implemented any online or blended learning strategies.

Stranger in a Strange Land Next, the teacher becomes a Stranger in a Strange Land, as instruction moves to the computer, and the computer becomes the primary instructional tool. At this stage, the teacher is still unsure of how they fit in but is experimenting with and utilizing online tools to enhance instruction.

Resource As the teacher continues to evolve, they enter the Resource stage, and while the computer is still the primary instructional tool, the teacher is comfortable being a resource, answering questions and re-teaching when asked.

Facilitator and Initiator of Interventions Once the teacher has fully evolved into a robust online teaching facilitator, he or she enters the Facilitator and Initiator of Interventions stage. It is at this point that the teacher begins to anticipate where students will have trouble and will intervene by initiating small-group workshops.

Attributes for Success

Survey respondents were asked to rate the attributes needed for successful full-time online programs and online courses on a 7-point scale, with 1=not important and 7=extremely important.

Common Attributes Rated as Extremely Important in 2014 for Successful Online Programs

Attributes	Full-Time Programs	Online Courses
Offering rigorous and engaging curriculum	88%	94%
Tracking student progress/adequate reporting tools	90%	89%
Teachers available to intervene/assist students in a timely manner when the students struggle	92%	85%
Providing students with enough training/clear expectations around their responsibilities to take courses online	92%	83%
Instructors well trained in delivering online courses	86%	80%

- **Offering rigorous and engaging curriculum**—Survey respondents identified rigorous and engaging curriculum as the most important success factor for online learning. Engaging curriculum helps keep the student moving forward and focused, and a well-designed curriculum provides different methods of delivering content to accommodate different learning styles.

- **Reporting tools/progress monitoring**—Reporting and progress monitoring tools are crucial for teachers to know how students are doing and if intervention is needed. The tools also provide immediate and specific feedback that teachers can use to personalize instruction.

- **Availability of teachers to assist struggling students**—When a student struggles with a concept or falls behind, it is extremely important to have a teacher available to assist so the student does not become frustrated and disengaged. This finding reinforces that teachers continue to be a critical component of the learning process, regardless of whether the online program is taught in a virtual or blended program.

- **Providing students with enough training/clear expectations around their responsibilities to take courses online**—Students must have clear expectations of what they need to do to be successful in an online course. The upfront investment in training students how to use the technology and clearly defining what is expected of them could mean the difference between a successful and unsuccessful course completion.

- **Instructors well trained in delivering online courses**—Training is crucial to the success of any program in schools, whether technology-based or not. Respondents with experience in all types of online programs rate "instructors who are well trained in delivering online courses" as extremely important.

Defining an Effective Personalized Learning Experience

This year a new question was introduced to determine how districts define what a personalized learning experience should look like from the student's perspective. A number of factors were rated as effective in creating a personalized learning experience, with flexibility shining through as essential: flexibility for students to work at their own pace, flexibility around the time of day or week that the coursework is completed, and the ability to receive instructional and system help when needed, day or night. All of the survey options were selected by more than half of respondents, indicating that they are all important factors in personalization.

RESEARCH INFORMS BLENDED PROGRAMS

Daniel Mahlandt, coordinator of virtual education at Ephrata Area School District in Pennsylvania, says he looked to research to inform his blended learning program. He found that the greatest academic increases come from tutoring, so he has incorporated one-to-one time with teachers as a key part of his blended programs. Students in his blended learning program can visit a district computer lab Monday–Friday, from 8 AM until 8:30 PM. While at the lab, teachers make sure the students are on track and provide one-to-one support as needed.

Measuring Quality in Online Learning Programs

The top four measures of quality have remained consistent from 2013 to 2014, with slight variations in percentages but no significant differences. The most important measure is that the student demonstrates significant academic progress. Engaging curricula, high student attendance, and active participation are additional measures cited as important.

KEY RESULTS

Rating Attributes that are Important for Success

To identify key best practices and lessons learned from educators who have experience implementing online programs, respondents were asked to rate "attributes that are important for success" on a scale of 1 to 7; with a rating of 6 or 7 deemed as extremely important for online courses and full-time online programs.

Online Courses

The top five attributes for the success of online courses remain the same as they were last year, although the levels of the ratings differ slightly.

Attributes Rated as Extremely Important for Successful Online Courses

Attributes	Rated Extremely Important in 2013 (Rating of 6 or 7 on a 7-point scale)	Rated Extremely Important in 2014 (Rating of 6 or 7 on a 7-point scale)
Offering rigorous and engaging curriculum	92%	**94%**
Tracking student progress/adequate reporting tools	95%	**89%**
Teachers available to intervene/assist students in a timely manner when the students struggle	97%	**85%**
Providing students with enough training/clear expectations around their responsibilities to take courses online	80%	**83%**
Instructors well trained in delivering online courses	95%	**80%**

Rating Attributes that are Important for Success *continued*

Full-Time Online Programs

Having teachers available to intervene to assist struggling students, and providing students with enough training on clear expectations and responsibilities to take courses online were tied for the top two most important attributes for success (92 percent) in a full-time online program. Tracking student progress/ adequate reporting tools dropped from first place (98 percent) in 2013 to third place (90 percent) in 2014.

Attributes Rated as Extremely Important for Full-Time Online Programs

Attributes	Rated Extremely Important in 2013 (Rating of 6 or 7 on a 7-point scale)	Rated Extremely Important in 2014 (Rating of 6 or 7 on a 7-point scale)
Teachers available to intervene/assist students in a timely manner when the students struggle	90%	**92%**
Providing students with enough training/clear expectations around their responsibilities to take courses online	83%	**92%**
Tracking student progress/adequate reporting tools	98%	**90%**
Offering rigorous and engaging curriculum	92%	**88%**
Instructors well trained in delivering online courses	81%	**86%**

Implementing Blended Learning Programs

Respondents who primarily use a blended learning model were asked to rank the importance of several factors that are typically integral to a blended learning delivery model on a 7-point scale, with 1=not implemented and 7=fully implemented.

Less than half of the respondents—41 percent—say they have "substantially implemented" (as rated by a 6 or 7) a model in which students complete some coursework outside the classroom. This may imply that districts are still working toward full implementation of blended learning.

A third of respondents say that they have "substantially implemented" a blended learning program using curriculum in an online or digital format. This means that roughly two-thirds of the respondents have further to go to fully implement digital curriculum. In general, the "substantial implementation" rates are low for all response items for this question, which is unexpected.

Blended Learning Implementation

Implementation	Not Implemented (Rating of 1 or 2 on a 7-point scale)	Substantially Implemented (Rating of 6 or 7 on a 7-point scale)
Student completes some coursework outside the classroom	13%	41%
Curriculum is in online/digital format	9%	34%
Teacher is focused on small group and individual instruction	17%	28%
Instructional support available outside regular classroom hours	24%	28%

GETTING STARTED WITH A NEW ONLINE PROGRAM

In the open-ended comment section, one respondent suggested starting small and growing.

"We began by offering already-developed courses in conjunction with our community college for students seeking dual enrollment/ dual credit courses. We structured the courses within our block schedule with a facilitator. Now these students are familiar with the processes and procedures, and we have teachers who understand the course structure and content."

Another respondent recommended tapping into local and national resources to learn from the mistakes of others.

"Collaborate with people in your area who are offering online learning. Go to the iNACOL conference. Pick others' brains. Share lots of information and documents. Find out what your needs are first and talk to others about how to best meet those needs. Then, find a good provider that can tailor to your needs."

Creating an Effective Personalized Learning Experience

Students working at their own pace was rated as an important factor in creating an effective personalized learning experience by 79 percent of the respondents. Also rated as important, as determined by a rating of a 6 or 7 on a 7-point scale, was the ability for students to receive instructional and system help when needed (69 percent), and for students to have flexibility around the time of day or week that the coursework is completed (67 percent).

USING DATA TO PERSONALIZE LEARNING

Daniel Mahlandt, coordinator of virtual education at Ephrata Area School District in Pennsylvania, defines personalized learning broadly as using any kind of data—academic, social, emotional, and safety—to show what a student's needs are. A program needs good data management to track student achievement and provide an up-to-date progress report. It also needs a good intervention system, he adds. In his blended programs, there are specific daily protocols that define teacher–student interactions.

Factors in Creating an Effective Personalized Learning Experience

Factor	Importance (Rating of 6 or 7 on a 7-point scale)
Student can work at his/her own pace	79%
Student can receive instructional and system help when needed (day and night)	69%
Student has flexibility around time of day when coursework is completed	67%
Student has options to complete course work at home, for at least part of the week	65%
Student has very broad range of course choices to customize their learning path	64%
Content within a course is tailored to each student	55%

Measuring Quality in Online Learning Programs

The top ranked measure of quality in an online learning program—student demonstrates significant academic progress in the year—remained the same as in 2013. The second highest rated attribute was "engaging and highly interactive curriculum" at 88 percent. A high level of student and/or family satisfaction moved up in the ranking to fourth at 76 percent, compared to 69 percent in 2013.

MEASURING SUCCESS

Ephrata Area School District measures success in its fully online programs by whether students perform well on state and local assessments, and with satisfaction ratings from parents, says Daniel Mahlandt, coordinator of virtual education. For at-risk students, measurement is mastery-based, with success defined as achieving proficiency in the course content.

Measurement of Quality in an Online Program

Measurement	2013 Extremely Important (Rating of 6 or 7 on a 7-point scale)	2014 Extremely Important (Rating of 6 or 7 on a 7-point scale)
The student demonstrates significant academic progress in the year	87%	**93%**
The curriculum is engaging and highly interactive	85%	**88%**
The student has high attendance and active participation in the course	81%	**83%**
High level of student and/or family satisfaction	69%	**76%**
The student scores at or above the level of other similar student on end-of-year standardized tests	79%	**75%**

ADDITIONAL TOPICS FOR CONSIDERATION

Respondents raised a number of issues not addressed in the survey in open-ended questions.

The Value of the Teacher

"Teachers are the biggest factor to successful implementation of blended learning. If they are open and willing, then it can be successful. Regular monitoring by a teacher/administrator is the key. Online students can easily become online-out of sight-out of mind, and if we forget them, they will most likely fail."

Helping Students Succeed

It is important to train students in how online education programs work and set clear expectations, says Joel Smith, eLearning facilitator at Spring Branch Independent School District in Houston, TX. His district provides students:

- **Pre-enrollment training** Face-to-face meetings and informative videos on the district website answer many of the questions students and their parents have when evaluating a virtual or blended model, including "How does online learning work?" and "How will this impact my GPA?"

- **Survival skills training** Upon enrolling in the program, students get answers to questions that are unique to an online class, such as: How do you take a screen shot? How do you get help? Are there required computer plugins? Where do you go to get computer fixed? How much time do you spend on a class?

Clarifying the commitment and requirements helps students and parents determine if online learning is a good fit, says Smith. This upfront investment in managing expectations directly correlates to course completion.

About Fuel Education

Fuel Education 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. PEAK—our open, easy-to-use Personalized Learning Platform— simplifies administration and enables teachers to customize courses using their own content, FuelEd content, third-party partner content, as well as open educational resources. We offer the industry's largest catalog of flexible digital curriculum, certified instruction, professional development, and educational services tailored to district and student needs. FuelEd has helped more than 2,000 school districts to improve student outcomes, better serve diverse student populations, and expand educational opportunities by leveraging the new power of technology-enabled learning.

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