Blended learning on the rise

Combining the best elements of face-to-face and online instruction, these six schools have adopted various blended learning models successfully.

Here's how

It's a typical weekday, and Leah Rogers is greeting students as they arrive at school. She hasn't seen any of these kids in a while, because they haven't set foot in the building for a week … but that's by design.

Rogers is acting head of the Chicago Virtual Charter School (CVCS), an innovative school that is a cross between a traditional school and a virtual one: Students work online from home four days a week and come to school for the fifth.

In a typical school environment, all students in a classroom have to learn the same thing at same time. But at CVCS, students can work on material at their own pace, and educators can tailor their instruction to each student individually to fill the gaps in that child's knowledge.

"In a traditional setting, students are at the mercy of the teacher, who decides how fast they're learning [and] how much time they have to spend on the subject," Rogers said. "We give those who 'get it' faster the ability to move on."

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Although students are working from home most of the time, they appreciate the chance to come to school one day a week to see classmates and their teachers face to face. The occasional face time is like an anchor that keeps them from drifting too far off their course of studies, supporters say.

CVCS is one of a growing number of schools that have adopted a blend of face-to-face and online instruction, an approach that appears to be paying off: Despite serving many poor and minority students, the school made Adequate Yearly Progress in 2008 and 2009 and has posted considerable gains in both reading and math, becoming one of 147 public schools in Illinois to win an Academic Improvement Award.

Best of both worlds

For many school reformers, blended learning is an exciting instructional model because it combines the best elements of both face-to-face and online instruction.

As technology advances and new digital tools become available to educators and students, a steady migration toward online learning has begun to take place. Many students who struggle in a traditional learning environment now have the opportunity to attend a "virtual" school, where they can learn at their own pace: Advanced students are not held back by the slower pace of their peers, while students with disabilities have more time to understand the material before moving on. Parents in rural communities who home-school their children because of the time and distance it takes to travel to the nearest brick-and-mortar school can have the support of a strong online curriculum. And students who have dropped out of school have the chance to resume their education, finish high school, and get a diploma via distance learning. Meanwhile, multimedia options give online learning an edge often not found in traditional learning environments.

But despite the potential benefits that virtual learning offers, traditional, face-to-face learning has significant strengths of its own. Students can interact in person with a teacher who can answer questions and help motivate them. Teachers can evaluate students more individually, taking into account personal elements in a way that even the best computer program cannot replicate. (They can more easily tell if a student is moody, or anxious, or depressed, for instance—and they can intervene as appropriate.) Traditional schools offer more opportunities for peer interaction and the chance to develop deeper personal relationships. Brick-and-mortar schools also offer a physical place where students can learn, which gives working parents the ability to leave the house for their jobs and know that their children are in a safe environment.

Because both the traditional and online models have their own unique benefits, a number of schools have found that a blended, or hybrid, approach works well.

"I believe the blended model is the future of education," says Darren Reed, vice president of hybrid schools and programs for the online-education company K12 Inc. "With a traditional school, you label kids with the terms 'above grade level,' 'on grade level,' and 'below grade level.' But that can be misleading. A kid can know a certain skill within a subject really well, and not know another skill within that same subject at all. With a hybrid model, we can tailor their learning, using technology and face-to-face learning, in a way that we might not be able to in a pure traditional model."

That's not to say that traditional brick-and-mortar schools and online-only schools cannot be successful, Reed adds—but "hybrid models capture the best of both worlds."

K12 is the nation's largest provider of online curriculum and full-service education programs for students in kindergarten through high school. In July, K12 acquired KC Distance Learning, a Portland, Ore., company that—through its Aventa Learning brand—also offers online curriculum and virtual-school solutions for K-12 districts.

There are a variety of ways to blend virtual and face-to-face instruction—from entirely online schools that offer occasional in-person interaction, to programs in which brick-and-mortar schools incorporate virtual learning to supplement their existing offerings—and such hybrid models can be created to meet any number of requirements.

K12 has identified at least five different approaches to blended learning being used by its school district customers; here's how these schools have adopted blended learning successfully to meet their own particular needs.

Learning lab model

The learning lab model is for school districts that want to supplement their existing, traditional offerings with additional classes or remedial learning opportunities. Students go to school as usual, but part of their time is spent in a computer lab, learning online with an on-site facilitator available to help them as needed.

The learning lab model works well for schools that might not have the budget or the teachers or the classroom space to teach certain subjects. For example, a rural school district might not be able to afford an advanced physics teacher, but by creating a learning lab setting, with

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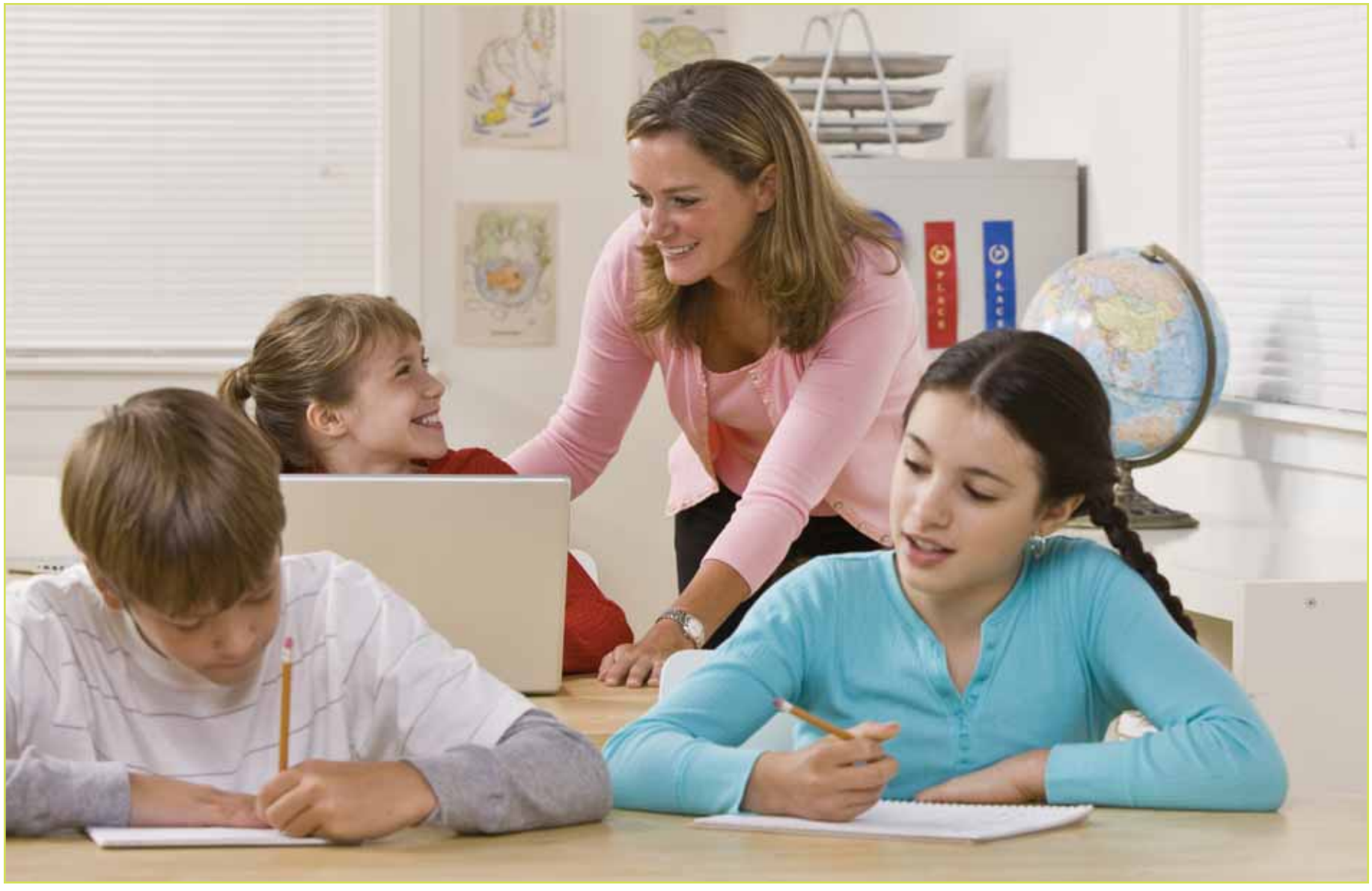

Because both traditional and online instruction have their own unique benefits, many schools are finding that a blended approach works well.

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computers and a teacher or mentor available to answer questions, the district can offer online physics classes to students who want to take advanced or AP courses.

The learning lab model also could be used to teach additional foreign languages, beyond the Spanish and French typically taught in schools today, or to help students who are behind in certain classes catch up and excel.

Another use of the learning lab model might be for rural school districts to attract or cater to home-schooled children. Often, these rural areas are less wired than other areas of the country, and students might not have high-speed internet access at home. In the East Valley School District in Spokane, Wash., for example, home-schooled students can come in to a learning lab to get the technology piece of their education.

"A blended model works really well to reach students in very remote areas, or in non-traditional communities," says John Glenwinkel, superintendent of the East Valley School District. He mentions the local Hutterites, a community mostly made up of farmers who tend to not engage in the public school system. "We've been able to work with those communities to provide some very unique learning opportunities that we wouldn't be able to do if we didn't have access to online learning," he says.

The district's learning labs are available within traditional school buildings, as well as in rented spaces off campus. "I like to rent space in strip malls," says Barbara Cruse, principal of the Washington Academy of Arts and Technology. "Right now, there are often empty stores in strip malls, the rent is cheap, and they're often wired the right way."

Dropout recovery programs

These programs give students who have dropped out of school the opportunity to complete their course work and get the credits they need to earn a diploma.

If students have been out of school for a few years—perhaps they got pregnant and dropped out to have a baby, had to stay home to take care of younger siblings, or were held back too many times and got frustrated—they might want to complete their education but would feel uncomfortable returning to school with students who are younger than them. At the same time, some parents of high school students might not want their children attending school with someone who's 19 or 20. A dropout recovery program like the one in Chicago gives these students the chance to make up their missing credits and graduate.

In Chicago, between 18,000 and 20,000 students drop out of school every semester, and a program from the Youth Connection Charter School (YCCS) offers a blended option to help those students complete the credits they need. The YCCS has 22 campuses in Chicago, and the newest of those, which opened last year, is the YCCS Virtual High School powered by K12.

The YCCS Virtual High School's campus is located at the Malcolm X Community College. Students who have dropped out of Chicago's public schools can sign up for the virtual school and attend classes online at the college. Students spend 60 percent of their time on campus and 40 percent at home. The classes run in three-hour blocks, from 9 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. and from 12:30 p.m. to 3:30 p.m. each day. One hour per day is direct instruction from a teacher, while the other two hours see the students using the K12 curriculum online; two teachers for each class of 24 students help facilitate during the online portions of a student's in-class learning.

Two additional hours per day are then completed at home. This schedule makes school flexible for the students, many of whom have jobs or other responsibilities they're trying to juggle—yet it meets Chicago school law by having students attend three hours per day at a physical school location.

At the Malcolm X campus, YCCS Virtual High School has core teachers in English, math, science, and history, while K12 teachers teach via the online resources offered by the company.

YCCS Virtual High also partners with a variety of organizations within the community. "We set up paid internships for students who want to work. These are done through referrals by teachers who say, 'Hey, I have this stellar student…'" says Early King, head of school. "These jobs are usually pertaining to something they want to do career-wise, so if they're interested in architecture, we set them up with an architecture firm."

Because many of the school's students have had traumatic experiences, the school offers a social services piece to students. It also offers free childcare. "That's huge. One reason students often can't go to school is they can't afford a babysitter," says King. The school also offers free medical and dental services and free bus passes to get the students to the school.

"We have everything covered," he says. "We say, 'As long as you do your part, we'll do our part and see this through together.' We took away all the barriers [students] claimed they had and made it easier for them."

Part of the school's attraction is that the students feel

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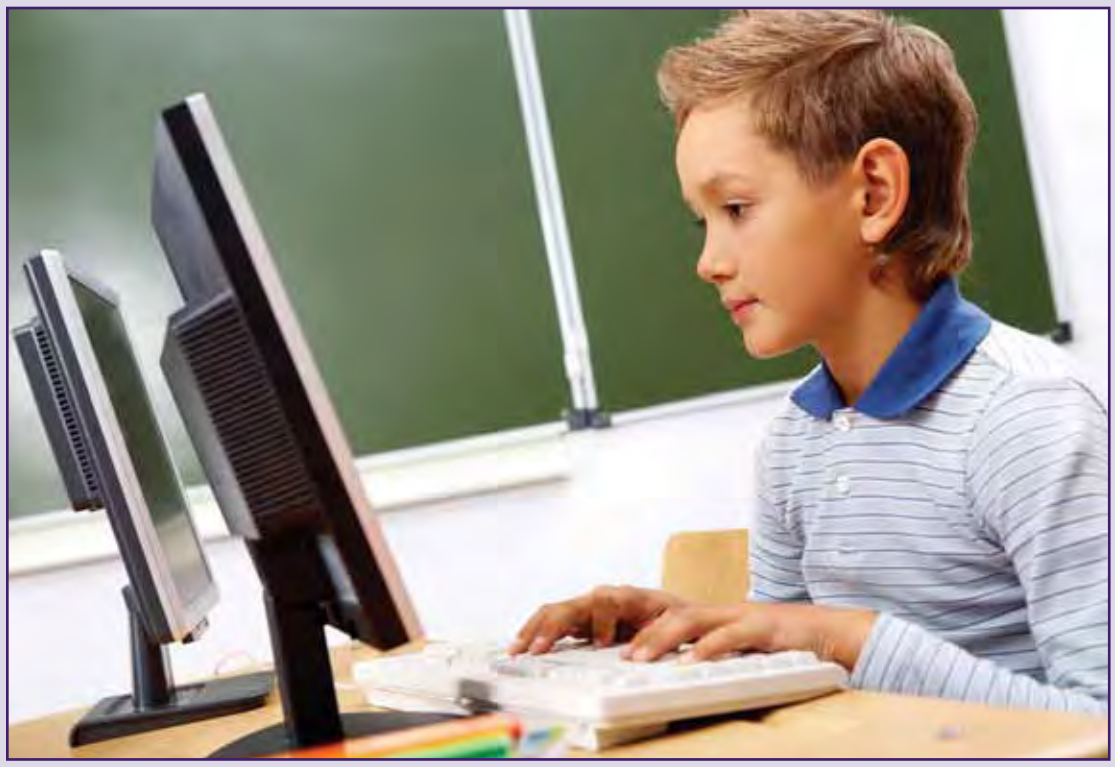


Blended learning can help raise achievement

With interest in blended learning models on the rise, there is evidence to suggest a blended approach might help boost student achievement.

An analysis of existing online-learning research by the U.S. Department of Education (ED) last year revealed that students who took all or part of their class online performed better, on average, than those taking the same course through traditional face-to-face instruction. What's more, those who experienced a mix of online and face-to-face instruction performed best of all.

Most of the studies examined by researchers dealt with college-level courses, and ED officials cautioned against generalizing the report's findings to the K-12 level. Still, the report could help educators as they seek to create effective learning environments for all students.

The detailed meta-analysis was part of a broader study of practices in online learning conducted by SRI International for ED's Policy and Program Studies Service. The goal of the study was to "provide policy makers, administrators, and educators with research-based guidance about how to implement online learning for K-12 education and teacher preparation," says the report.

The meta-analysis found that the effectiveness of online and blended-learning approaches spanned several different types of content and learners.

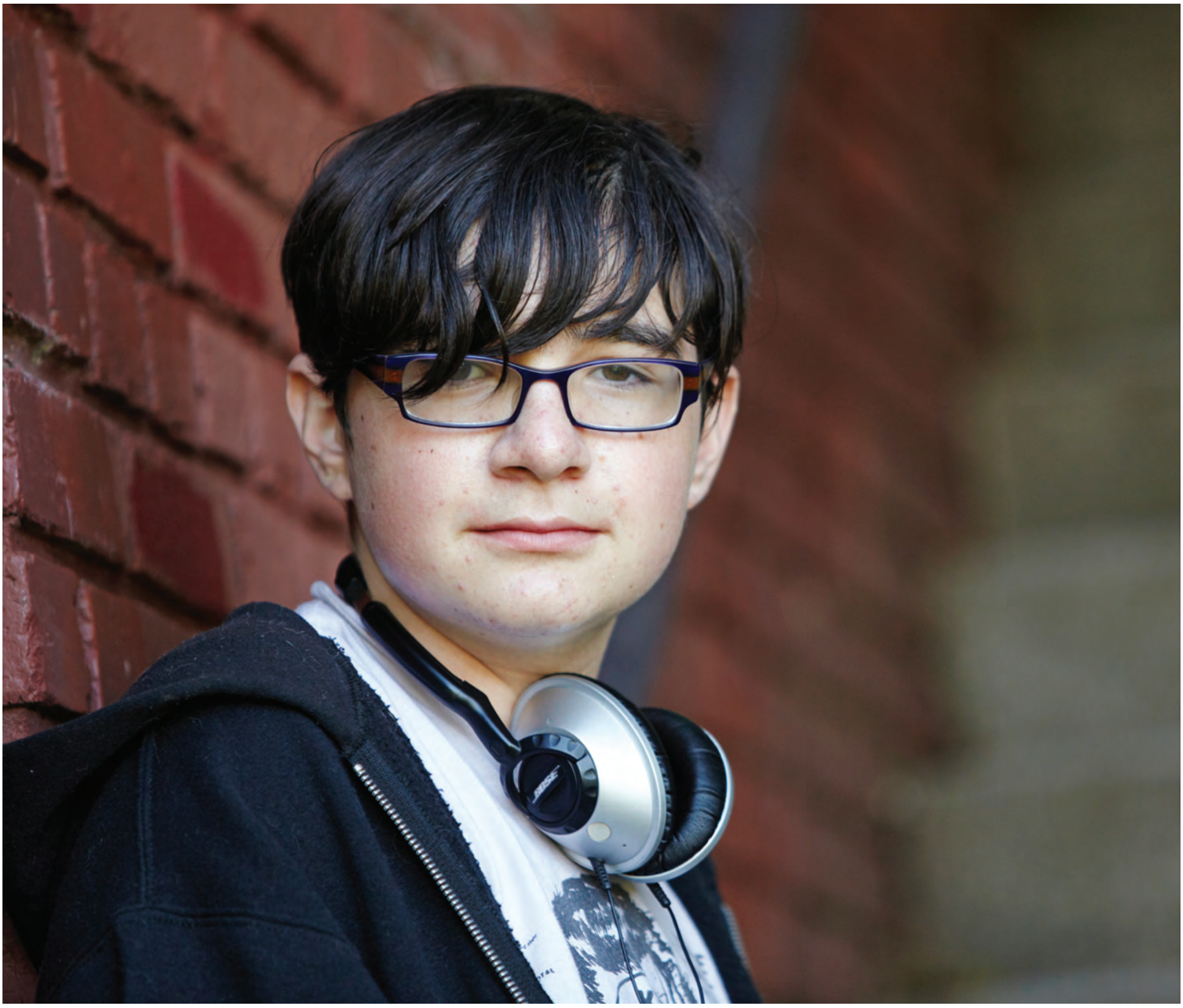
Susan Patrick, president and CEO of the International Association for K-12 Online Learning, said the advantage of online or blended learning over face-to-face instruction alone "is the combination of rich student-teacher-peer communication and interactions that are both asynchronous and synchronous, better utilizing the precious resource of time during, and outside, the school day to maximize learning—and personalize it in a way never before possible."

According to Patrick, the factors that make blended models better than most face-to-face models are the factors that also define good teaching: "Increased interactions between students and teachers, increased depth of rigor and exploration into content, customized learning to meet the students exactly where they are in learning the lessons, better use of data to inform instruction, and providing additional student support to help personalize instruction by the teacher."

LINK:

"Evaluation of Evidence-Based Practices in Online Learning"

http://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/tech/evidence-based-practices/finalreport.pdf



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as if they're in college rather than in high school, because of its location at the community college. In fact, many of the students say they are in college, and many find a desire to go on to the community college after receiving their high school diplomas. But it's the sense of community that is the most important part of the program, King says: "Students love the safe environment. It's like a home away from home. You can feel the community the minute you walk in the classroom. Everyone has a stake in what's going on."

This community feeling is enhanced by school groups such as the weightlifting club and events like the Student of the Week ceremony. "Our people connect with the students," explains King. "It's what keeps them coming back for more every day."

One YCCS student, for example, became homeless during her high school years after her mother lost her job. The student was forced to help care for her younger sisters and brothers. She also ended up going from one school to another in Chicago. And even though she persevered, she was informed during her senior year that she did not have enough math and science credits to graduate.

At that point, she felt like giving up, but when she heard about the YCCS virtual program, she decided to give high school one final try. This past summer, the student graduated—with honors. She applied and was accepted at Trinity Christian College, with a partial scholarship.

"I was shocked. ... Now I know I can do anything. I can go to college and make my dreams come true," she says.

This student is just one of many of the school's success stories. In fact, in the first year of the program, 94 percent of the students who were eligible to graduate earned their high school diplomas. And 12 of the 61 students who graduated went on to attend Malcolm X Community College. The school also had a retention rate of 88 percent after the first semester, compared with a 59-percent retention rate at the traditional public schools.

"The whole premise, when partnering with other college kids, is it helps them think they're college students… and sure enough, that's what they go on to do," King says.

Adjudicated youth programs

A program of this type meets the needs of school-age children who have been incarcerated because they have broken the law.

"I did not think it was fair that [those kids] could not earn a high school diploma," says Rebecca Janowitz, director of reentry policy for the Sherriff of Cook County, Ill.

Janowitz runs a program, called the Sherriff's Virtual High School, that gives students in the custody of the Sherriff of Cook County the ability to earn a high school diploma that comes from the last high school they attended, not from the Cook County Jail. "There's nothing to say the circumstances under which it was obtained, so no one ever has to know you had trouble when you were young," she explains.

For many school reformers, blended learning is an exciting instructional model because it combines the best elements of both face-to-face and online instruction.

Though some jails and prisons offer GED programs, studies have shown that 75 percent of all students with a GED who start at a community college don't finish. With an actual diploma, the chances of finishing a college degree program are much better. "We have a bunch of kids who are in custody of the sherriff who did not have access to high school. So I looked for ways we could offer that," Janowitz says.

A little less than a year ago, Janowitz started the Sherriff's Virtual High School program at the Cook County Jail, a pre-trial detention facility in Chicago. The jail contains more than 2,000 people between the ages of 17 and 21 on any given day, and it releases about 15,000 people a year within that same age range. Janowitz's program involves computer labs within the jail's facilities where the students, under supervision, can complete the credits they need for a Chicago high school diploma.

The first program she started was not for kids in general detention, but for those on "day reporting"—that is, kids who are either out on probation or who are sent home with an ankle bracelet while they await trial. For these children, attending school is a condition of their bond. In addition to online instruction in a computer lab, these students come to the jail on a daily basis for drug treatment, counseling, and/or cognitive therapy. Computer labs are rented at outside facilities, and one mentor is on site for every 12 students, to monitor the students and help them with their studies as they pursue the K12 curriculum.

Janowitz also has started a second program for the kids within the detention facilities. There are now computer labs within the facilities; the number of mentors needed to monitor the students fluctuates depending on the security rating of the facility.

Flexibility was the key to creating a program that works. "Kids come in with a great range of experience. Our students are all over the place. Some were in high-performance institutions and tested at a high range. Some haven't been in school for a very long time," Janowitz explains. She also needed an affordable solution. The K12 curriculum offered the flexibility that was needed, she says.

But Janowitz emphasizes the importance of the drug counseling that goes hand-in-hand with the educational component. "Offering these services without a drug treatment component is a waste of time," she says. "If you aren't willing to deal with the role that drugs play in people's lives, and that the drug trade plays in poor communities, you're hiding your head in the sand. There's an enormous potential to put kids on the path to lead to really good employment, but they have to change the way they behave—and we have to change what we offer them."

The fact that students are learning on computers is another key element in the program. Many arrive from poor backgrounds, with little experience on a computer, and it's essential for them to learn computer skills, no matter what type of job they plan to pursue. "There's no job you can get today that you don't have to work with a computer," Janowitz says. "Even the guys who put things on shelves have to work on a computer."

Motivation can be a challenge with these students, some of whom say it was easier to learn when a teacher was telling them what to do. Additionally, they often come from traumatic backgrounds, having faced violence, sporadic school attendance, the death of family members, parents who have been incarcerated, and a variety of other challenges. But simply by beginning to take responsibility for their own education, many students begin to get a taste for learning.

"A lot of these kids have failed a lot of things before they came to us, so learning that they can pass a class is very motivating," says Janowitz. For day-release students, officials announce the fact that a student has passed a class at the daily morning meeting. "Everyone in there, from 70 to 17, whoops and stomps for these kids. All the old guys tell the young kids they're very lucky to have this opportunity, that nobody helped them out when they were young," she says.

With a high school diploma from an actual high school, the child has a better chance of not returning to jail. And jail becomes less a disruption in the child's life and more a factor that is helping them get back on track. This, says Janowitz, is important not just to the child but to the community as well.

"If we don't provide the kids the opportunity to take difficult high school classes, we're short-changing ourselves," she says. "It's way better for them, but it's also way better for us. If you help people finish high school, you're contributing to the health of the community."

Flex school model

With a flex school model, students are truly experiencing a full blend of face-to-face and online instruction at a traditional school facility. The online component isn't just a supplement to traditional classes, but an integral part of the school's curriculum for every student.

The San Francisco Flex Academy, a charter school

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housed in the old Press Club quarters a block from San Francisco's Union Square, is one such school. The idea behind the school is that, while the state of California allows for students to attend virtual schools full time, such a school requires a great deal of commitment from the parent, or "learning coach." And if both parents work, a virtual school becomes a non-option.

With the San Francisco Flex Academy, students get the flexibility of a virtual learning experience combined with the convenience of a brick-and-mortar facility. Students come to school on site, where they have learning carrels at which they can work. Learning coaches are on hand to help the students, and the number of these learning coaches varies based on the size of enrollment.

Students take English, math, science, and history with certified teachers on site, while their electives are taken online with virtual teachers. The curriculum is tailored individually for each student, and students learn at their own pace—and even much of the coursework for the core classes is done online.

Students at the San Francisco Flex Academy love the fact that they are on site with other children. But the most important element of the school is the fact that it is based on individualized learning.

"With the traditional classroom, a teacher asks a question and one kid gives an answer, and then the teacher moves on, or the teacher doesn't assess whether all the kids understand or not. And kids can get left behind," says K12's Reed. "This way, nobody gets left behind. And if a kid is working on something that's at a lower level than the others, nobody has to know." Likewise, advanced students can work more quickly, not having to slow themselves to the pace of the other students in the their grade.

Full-time model

The Chicago Virtual Charter School is an example of a full-time model; students are enrolled full-time in the virtual school, but one day a week they attend school for two-and-a-quarter hours in a physical building—the charter school rents space in the Merritt School of Music—for face time with teachers.

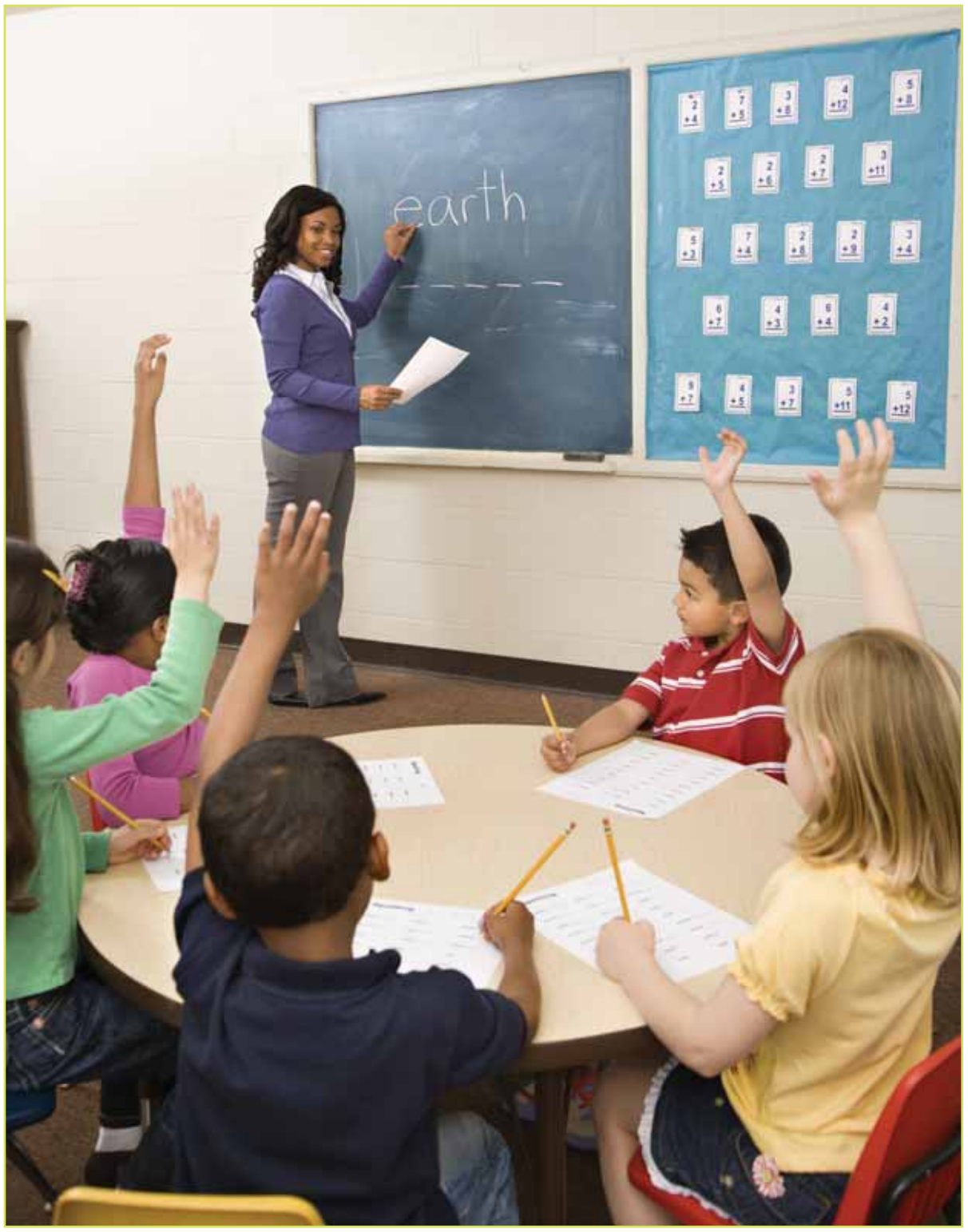
During this one-day-a-week face time, students learn with certified teachers. At the K-8 level, the teachers who work with the students online are the same who work with them at the school. For high school, there is one English teacher and one math teacher, and the rest of the teachers are online-only through the K12 program. That's so the school can offer a larger variety of classes. Last year, for example, the school offered 38 different classes to high school students.

But it's not just the students and the teachers who work together online and face-to-face: Parents play a big role as well. "We put a large emphasis on the commitment parents are making when they choose to attend our school," says Rodgers. "Unlike a traditional school, where if you don't have a parent as involved it's the teacher's responsibility to pick up the pieces, we require three people in order to make this work: the student, the teacher, and the parent."

With that in mind, parents undergo an "on-boarding" process when they sign their child up for the school. The process is an orientation that helps them understand what it means to be a learning coach. Then, throughout the year, parents can take part in workshops at the school, or they can access K12 Speaker Series sessions on how to be a successful partner to the teacher and the student.

CVCS is ideal for students who aren't getting their needs met at a more traditional institution, Rodgers says.

"Students here weren't learning in a traditional approach. They needed an approach that can support their needs, and we can give them a curriculum that is supportive to help that child succeed," she says. "That means allowing them to move at their own pace. We do have parameters: They need one year's growth each year. But if someone comes to us two years below grade level, we can create an individual path that will move them forward."



The face time for students in blended programs is like an anchor that keeps them from going adrift.

Something in between

Another example of a blended learning model is the Hoosier Academies of Indiana, which offers a variation of the CVCS approach.

The Hoosier Academies feature 50 percent of school time as face-to-face instruction, with the rest of the student's time spent at home, working online. Hoosier Academies has two K-8 facilities, one in Muncie and one in Indianapolis, and a high school in Indianapolis. Students attend school two days a week, and they're supported at home by a parent or other responsible adult who acts as a learning coach. Teachers use the K12 curriculum, while the core subjects of English, social studies, science, and math are taught by teachers on site. In the high school, a computer lab gives students access to electives.

"The uniqueness of our hybrid can be seen by the uniqueness of our settings," says Lynn Black, head of schools for the Hoosier Academy. "The Muncie center is in the back half of a school we lease space from, the Indianapolis school is in an office park, and the high school is in a one-time General Electric plant turned into office space."

The students who choose to attend the Hoosier Academies represent a broad mix of experiences—from special-education students and those who are on the autism spectrum, to brighter students who feel held back in a traditional school setting. "A two-day setting means it's not an overload; it's the right amount of school for some of those students," Black says. "A significant percentage also come from a home-schooling background, and this is a compromise to a five-day week." This model works well when there are parents who want to be actively engaged in what their children are learning, she adds, because parents act as the facilitator at home.

The school also gives Indiana students a choice in their education. "There are 92 counties in the state of Indiana, and last year, we had students coming from 44 of those counties," Black says. "And we had students from 104 of the state's 300 public school districts." eSN

Jennifer Nastu is a freelance writer in Colorado who writes frequently about technology and education.

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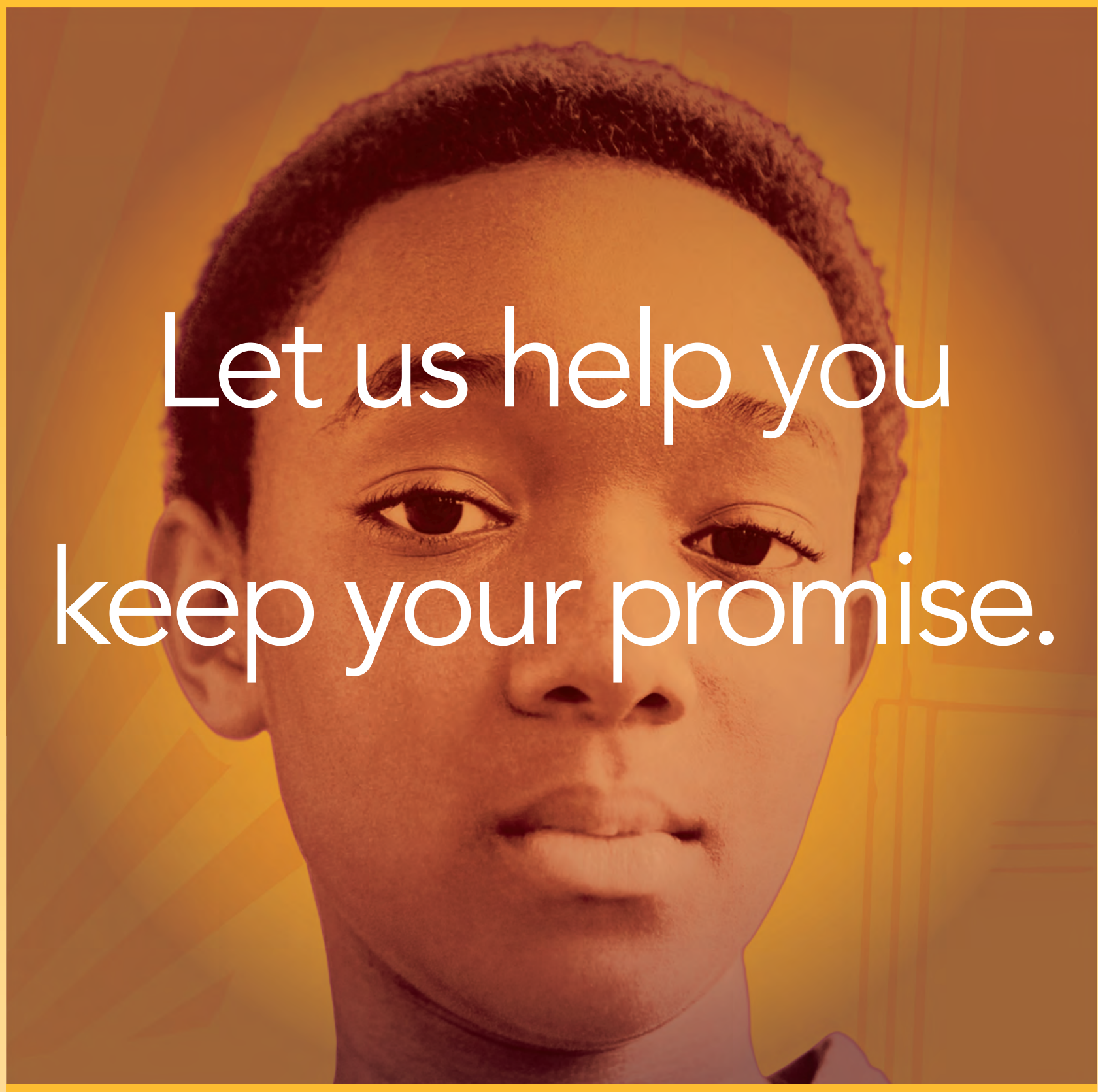

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