



EDUCATION INSIGHTS

Four Keys to Success When Using Blended Learning Models in the Classroom and in a Remote Environment

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Introduction

A traditional blended learning approach integrates technology with teacher instruction. Blended learning aims to leverage the strengths of both educational technology and teacher-led instruction to provide individualized support to students at scale (Horn & Staker, 2011; Pytash & O’Byrne, 2018). A few years ago, a rising number of schools were piloting or beginning to implement blended learning programs. However, last spring, the lights went out in many schools across the country due to the pandemic. When students went home, educators, administrators, and caregivers suddenly found themselves in uncharted blended learning environments. Although districts that had already begun to implement some type of blended approach may have found the transition a bit easier, almost all schools struggled with connectivity and lack of devices, programs that did not lend themselves to remote or hybrid settings, and maintaining the teacher at the center of instruction over the computer screen.

One common misconception was that integrating technology into the school day constituted a blended learning approach when in actuality, the mere presence of technology is not enough. Blended learning models combine face-to-face instruction with computer-mediated instruction, but they also should empower educators with the appropriate tools to support personalized pathways for learning. For a successful blended learning approach during the pandemic, a remote learning plan also needed to be in place, especially once access to connectivity and devices was provided. Educators needed programs that could be easily implemented in a remote or hybrid environment. In addition, they needed dedicated professional learning around screen time engagement, using data to personalize instruction, and assessing student progress during independent learning periods.

This white paper will review the critical success factors to keep in mind if your district is in the process of exploring or implementing blended learning in the traditional classroom, remotely, or in a hybrid environment.



The reasons for engaging in blended learning play a major role in determining the approach’s success, which is why it is vitally important that teachers, administrators, and students understand the motivation behind the implementation.

Pre-Implementation Considerations

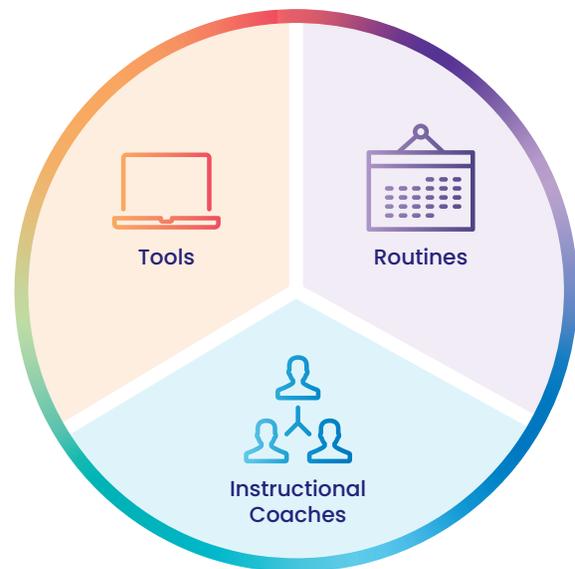
Before implementing blended learning, administrators need to build consensus with teachers and staff as to why a blended learning approach is beneficial to them and their students. They should also inventory their school or district's current infrastructure to determine whether there is a foundation in place to enable blended learning success.

Consensus Building

The reasons for engaging in blended learning play a major role in determining the approach's success, which is why it is vitally important that teachers, administrators, and students understand the motivation behind the implementation. Regardless of how blended learning is implemented, a consensus must be reached to avoid the perception of the initiative being adopted without these stakeholders' input. Because a blended learning initiative could require institutional change, reallocation of funding, or demands on limited space, transparency and understanding are important to avoid conflict and promote benefits. Most of all, educators who are tasked with implementing blended learning must have ownership and feel that blended learning is enhancing their instruction, not working against it. It is essential that these teachers are either perceived to have the skills necessary to implement blended learning or are provided with the professional development required to foster such skills.

Building Infrastructure

After a consensus has been reached, the next step is determining how blended learning will be implemented, which involves inventorying a school or district's current infrastructure to ensure a foundation for blended learning success. If the current technical and support infrastructure is lacking, blended learning might not be successful even if all stakeholders are on board, a scenario exhibited within many districts that were thrust into remote learning without the proper infrastructure. Updates may be needed—and were needed in many cases at the start of the pandemic—to ensure proper use of wireless networks, hardware, software, etc. Personnel and school schedules must also be inventoried to ensure adequate support and time for educators tasked with implementing the programs.



Once consensus has been reached and the proper infrastructure is in place, educators should think about how blended learning would best work in the classroom and/or remotely given their school's resources, schedule, and needs. The next step is to decide which technology-based programs to use. When researching programs, it is critical to remember the central role played by the teacher in all blended learning models. The data used to integrate online learning with teacher-led learning is essential to empowering the teacher and ensuring their instruction is targeted and time-efficient.

For schools that quickly implemented a program during the pandemic, it is worth re-examining the tools used, in terms of both program efficacy research and the success factors incorporated. Following are four key factors to consider when selecting a program for use in blended learning to help maximize student gains and teacher effectiveness.

1 Success Factor No. 1: A Technology Tool That Adapts to Each Student's Abilities

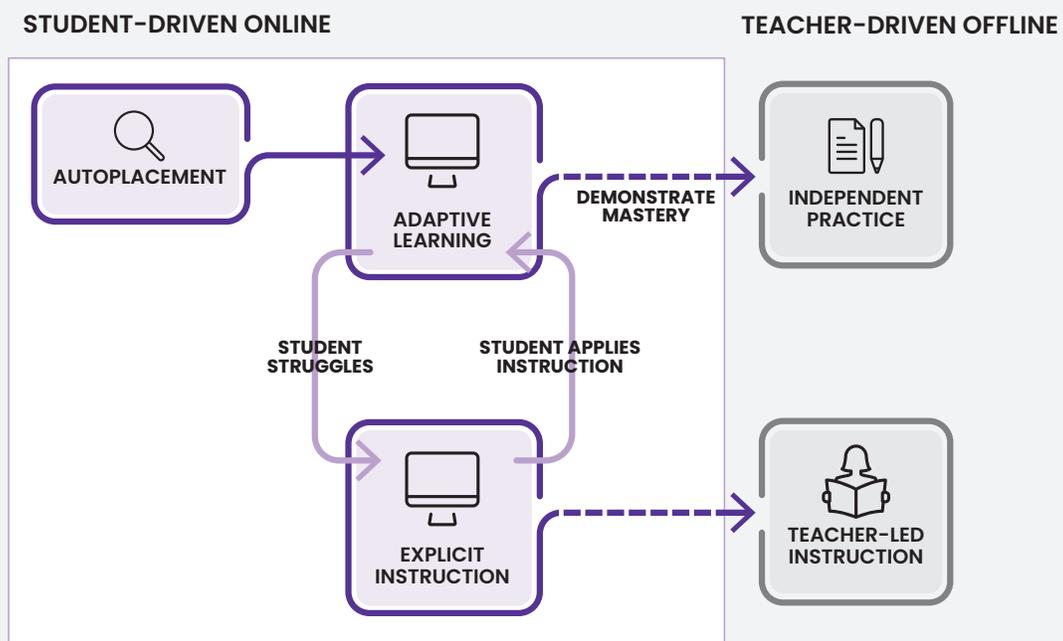
One of the core objectives of a blended learning model is to personalize instruction to meet the specific needs of each student. However, if the school chooses a technology-based curriculum that does not include elements of scaffolding and adaptive technology, student learning will be no more personalized than the traditional "one-size-fits-all" instruction. As a result, on-level and advanced students might become disengaged, while struggling students may experience frustration if the task is too difficult.

Many technology-based instructional programs across all subject areas provide personalized learning that adapts to each student's strengths and weaknesses in a dynamic fashion. This means that students at or above grade level can continue to soar ahead without being held back by the rest of the class and potentially becoming bored as a result. Students who struggle with particular skill areas can progress at their own pace, receiving scaffolding and additional instructional support through a structured and sequential approach within the online component of the blended learning model.

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Personalized learning also allows teachers to focus their class time on those students who have encountered an obstacle in their skills development while working independently, and to spend less time with students who are achieving mastery and are ready to move on. This engenders the most efficient use of teachers' skills by enabling students to develop basic skills on their own and to receive assistance from the teacher with more challenging concepts.

It is important to pay particular attention to the instructional "branching" that the chosen program provides, as some products may state that they provide "adaptive assessment" while not actually offering "adaptive instruction." Although these programs place students at the proper instructional level, students are subjected to the same one-size-fits-all instruction once they begin the instructional component of the program. For example, without adaptive instruction, all students would be required to receive direct instruction on every skill, regardless of whether they have demonstrated mastery or show signs of struggle. A truly adaptive approach would determine which students have not yet reached mastery and only provide scaffolding and instruction on that particular skill to those who need it.

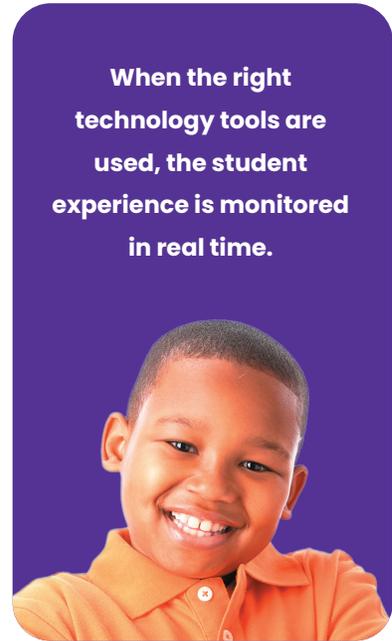


2 Success Factor No. 2: An Instructional Program That Captures Student Data

While structured practice or skill instruction delivered online can be beneficial in a blended environment, these online activities far too frequently occur without the data being captured or require a separate test event. If a blended approach is intended to help accelerate each student's skill development, the technology tools chosen must record student progress at a fairly granular level.

As part of their blended learning models, many schools integrate some of the free apps available online. Although these apps may provide valuable exposure to important skills and concepts, they often lack the ability to record and report student data back to the teacher. This dearth of data capture undermines the entire goal of providing a personalized approach, as students' paths are not differentiated from session to session and teachers cannot monitor student progress through at-home online instruction. Consequently, teachers need to spend additional time gathering progress-monitoring data through assessments and other means.

When the right technology tools are used, the student experience is monitored in real time. Teachers can view data showing which students have completed each skill area and which students encountered an obstacle and require individual or small-group direct instruction. These data inform instructional plans in the classroom, helping the teacher focus on the students most in need of help in a targeted and time-efficient manner.



3 Success Factor No. 3: Resources for Teacher-Led Instruction

Blended learning can provide a powerful, flexible way for each student to progress as quickly as possible. With real-time data capture, teachers have a window into student performance and can plan the classroom component of their blended model more effectively. However, when technology-based components identify students who are struggling and the skills with which they are having trouble, teachers are sometimes left to plan the curriculum and choose the appropriate materials to assist these struggling students.

An effective blended learning implementation provides resources that help the teacher connect performance data to instructional strategies. Some technology programs analyze and synthesize student data with the school's existing basal program while others provide customized strategies for direct instruction by a teacher or paraprofessional. The key is to help the teacher understand not only which students need support but exactly how to support them.



4 Success Factor No. 4: Next-Step Recommendations for the Teacher

Because a blended approach meets every student at their own level through personalized learning, the student experience can become much more individualized. Personalized learning technology allows students to work at their own pace, focus additional time on areas of weakness, and develop automaticity in skill areas that have been mastered. While this is of tremendous benefit to the student, it makes the teacher's role significantly more complex; as students' online experience is increasingly catered to their individual needs, the teacher's role in providing direct instruction and intervention becomes more individualized.



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With technology-based tools gathering data about student progress in real time, teachers can access fairly granular information about each student's performance. Although this kind of view into each student's strengths and weaknesses provides a wealth of information, teachers are still faced with the challenge of analyzing and connecting those data to the appropriate instruction or intervention strategies. Schools can dramatically improve their levels of teacher effectiveness if they implement technology that provides recommendations for teacher intervention by connecting personalized learning, embedded assessment, and teacher-led instruction.

Summary

When a blended learning model seamlessly incorporates the impact of both technology and teacher-led instruction, it becomes a robust tool for educators. If the model is powered by data gathered through adaptive technology, provides real-time progress monitoring, and includes the recommended next steps and resources to customize instruction for each student, teachers become more targeted, time-efficient, and effective at improving students' overall reading abilities. When they are included in the decision-making process, educators will embrace blended learning, understand the benefits of new initiatives, and have the skills—or the support to develop the skills—to accomplish what is being asked of them. This is why it is essential to have strong leadership to achieve consensus, build infrastructure, and then implement the model. Following these guidelines is the best way to personalize instruction with the goal of improving overall student outcomes through a blended approach of face-to-face and online learning.



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