Blended Learning – Develop a Thoughtful Approach

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Blended learning is one of a variety of educational approaches aimed at improving learning outcomes for students. It is most often a reference to the use of digital media as a part of the overall program by which a student is taught. The theory behind blended learning is that it gives the student some latitude over the pace of their work, therefore making the learning experience more individualized.
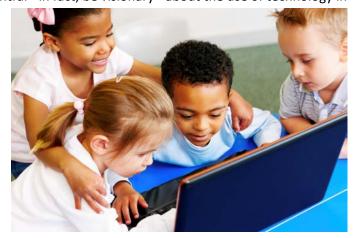
When evaluating a new approach, cost is a major consideration point, because like many educational approaches, blended learning has its risks and rewards.

At EdTec we see schools spend an increasing percentage of their budgets on technology, both hardware and software, to augment their students' learning experience. Especially with new schools, expensive infrastructure is put into place for network connectivity - thousands of dollars on routers, switches, servers, IT consultants, etc. This is exciting because of its potential to enhance student experience and student outcomes. However, for some, this technology may not fulfill its promise on the educational side and instead be a drain on a school's budget.

A high-tech school is a big draw for prospective students. One-to-one devices, flipped classrooms, personalized learning platforms, computer programming as a mandatory class – the buzz words go on and on. Does every school have to buy into this trend? Perhaps yes, in order to offer competitive programs, to raise the bar on outcomes, and meet 21st century learning standards. But before jumping on the blended learning bandwagon, be thoughtful - in fact, be visionary - about the use of technology in your academic program. This is almost guaranteed to increase your likelihood that your use of funds will be a worthwhile investment.

What does it mean to be visionary? It is easy to spend a lot of money on technology and not have a very clear view or plan for how it will be used or how it will improve student outcomes. Rather, having a strong academic implementation plan and being thoughtful about just *how much* technology you need, will help in achieving what you want.

The best place to start creating a blended learning vision is by visiting schools and classrooms that are doing it well. Some EdTec clients are leaders in this area: Summit Public Schools, Design Tech High School, and Navigator Schools, to name a few. You'll find that your fellow charter school leaders and staff will make themselves available for site visits and advice (assuming you plan ahead!).

The beauty of the site visit is that it does two things: first, it gives you a clear visual of what blended learning looks like in practice, and second, it's a starting place for you to ask for advice! This is the second step in improving your investment in technology – ask for help from other charter operators (in your area, if possible) regarding what service providers offer high quality products, good customer service, and the best prices. No need to reinvent the wheel when getting your network set up and buying your devices.

A few notes about buying devices - 1) tech leaders are finding that standardization of devices works well, 2) Chromebooks for some elementary schools are too flimsy, but are working great for high schools, 3) the cost of big tech purchases can be amortized over multiple years - check on your school's depreciation policy to see if this will help you outfit your program.

Finally, when you are designing the content of your program and how technology will affect the flow of the school day, be prepared for trial-and-error - you may not get it right the first time. Also *budget* for this fact - some of the software or curricular programs you think will work well don't end up fulfilling *their* promise! If possible, don't outfit the entire school with a new software license before you know that you like it, and be prepared for the possibility of switching programs mid-year.

The value of your tech program is only as good as the investment you make in planning it out up front. And engage your educators in the process! They are more likely to be strong advocates of the vision if they were part of the design process in the first place and deeply understand what success looks like. With a clear vision, good research through site visits, advice from experienced schools, the expectation that you'll need to iterate, and an open planning process that includes educators, you will be on the road to a cost-effective and academically-successful blended learning program.