



Research BRIEF: Blended Learning Initiative

Teachers, Principals, and Student Perspectives on the Blended Learning Initiative (BLI)

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Summary:

- Teachers and principals would have liked PD to happen before the beginning of the school year and to have more frequent follow up trainings throughout.
- A major benefit of the BLI was that it helped teachers to differentiate instruction both in terms of the vendor programs' ability to personalize student learning and the opportunity for teachers to engage other students in small group instruction while some students worked on Chromebooks.
- While teachers and principals appreciated the availability of data via the vendor programs, many did not take advantage of it because they did not have adequate training and/or felt it was not updated frequently enough.

Overview of the BLI

In the 2016-2017 school year, 39 schools were selected to be part of year one of the Blended Learning Initiative (BLI). Each BLI school chose a blended learning model (a la carte, inquiry, or station rotation) and program from a list of approved vendors. The vendor list included programs for math, reading/literacy, social studies, and science.

Across the schools, there was variation in the number of classrooms that participated in the BLI. This determined the number of Chromebook carts each school received as part of the BLI. There were over 200 classrooms at the 39 schools that participated in BLI, with the majority of classrooms using a station rotation model.

How Did We Gather Feedback and From Whom?

ORE administered surveys to principals and teachers in all 39 schools and conducted interviews and focus groups with principals, teachers, and students in six schools. Surveys were open from March 13 to April 3 and sent via email to all teachers and principals participating in the BLI. The response rate for teachers was 45% (N=146) and 54% (N=21) for principals. The survey was pre-populated so that teachers were asked to respond specifically about the vendor they used in their classrooms, which allowed ORE to disaggregate the responses by vendor.

ORE used criterion sampling to identify schools as sites for interviews and focus groups. The criteria was designed to ensure that ORE spoke with stakeholders from elementary, middle and high schools in various areas of the city who used vendors that were the most common across the BLI schools. These vendors included Redbird, ThinkThroughMath (TTM)/Imagine Math, Achieve3000, and Edgenuity. In consultation with the Office of Educational Technology, ORE selected six schools: two high schools, one middle school, and three elementary schools.

ORE created interview protocols for principals and focus group protocols for teachers and students. The questions for principals and teachers were similar and aligned to the following areas: training and support, use of data, implementation of blended learning, benefits, and challenges. ORE staff visited each of the six schools in June in order to conduct the interviews and focus groups. ORE staff took notes and recorded the interviews, then reviewed and coded to identify themes.

What Did We Learn?

Given that the interviews focused on the most common vendors, the findings discussed below will focus on survey and interview data that speaks to these vendors: Achieve3000, Redbird, ThinkThroughMath/Imagine Math, and Edgenuity. The findings are organized based on the following three themes that emerged from the feedback: training and professional development (PD), implementation of the vendor programs, and implementation of the blended learning model.

Training and Professional Development

Overall, teachers reported three areas where they would like additional training or professional development supports: implementing the blended learning model in their classrooms, mastering the programs and all their features, and understanding the various data reporting options and best practices for using this data to inform lesson planning and instruction. The degree to which teachers received support in these areas varied by school and the perceptions of the effectiveness of the support varied across teachers.

For the majority of the 39 BLI schools, the principals selected the schedule for PD, which meant that when and how often teachers received support from the vendors varied by school. For example, one principal explained how she contacted the vendor in the middle of the school year because she saw her teachers were struggling with implementation. As a result of this request, the vendor staff made a trip to the school to work with the teachers to address some of the challenges. At another school, the initial PD was delayed due to funding issues (the PD purchases were rejected).

Survey data showed that the majority of teachers thought that not enough training was a least a slight challenge (61%). In the interviews, many teachers noted that while it was helpful, the training they received around how to use the vendor programs happened too late in the school year. They explained that having PD prior to the start of the school year would have allowed them to begin implementation of the blended learning model and programs from day one and, as one teacher put it, “hit the ground running.” In several instances, teachers reflected on the frustration of having to incorporate the vendor program into their teaching without adequate - or at times any-

PD. Many teachers reported that the initial vendor-specific PD occurred in November or December or not at all. In cases where there was PD earlier in the school year, some teachers noted that much of the time was spent getting the students rostered and set up in the online platform and that it would be useful to have students already set up with accounts before the start of the year. Because of delayed or limited PD, many teachers shared instances when they learned about a vendor program feature in the middle or towards the end of the year that they wished they had known about earlier, such as a feature that helped them motivate students or set limitations on the personalized pathways.

Both teachers and principals reflected that having PD before the beginning of the school year would also reduce scheduling conflicts and challenges. In more than one instance teachers reported that they missed some or all of the PD provided by the vendors because of a conflicting commitment and multiple principals noted the difficulty of getting BLI teachers covered to allow for them to attend PD. Additionally, teachers that were new to the school or to their position in the fall of 2016 did not attend the training, as they did not know they would be participating in the BLI. Other principals we talked to mentioned this challenge as well, noting that full day PDs prior to the beginning of the school year would have been a better option and would have enabled all teachers to get the same training. One principal pointed out that scheduling PD was easier for the grades that already had common planning time and that the flexibility of the vendor support staff was extremely helpful.

One teacher noted a training that focused specifically on integrating the vendor program and the blended learning model would have made implementation easier. A high school principal touched on the importance of making this connection as well, especially for high school teachers that are accustomed to whole group instruction. Multiple teachers and principals reflected that modeling and classroom coaching would have been beneficial.

Implementation of the Vendor Programs

As part of the BLI, teachers had to incorporate the Chromebooks and the vendor programs into their classrooms, which required teachers, students, and principals to learn how to use the vendor program (e.g., Redbird, Achieve3000, etc.). Overall, teachers and principals reported this incorporation of technology as a benefit of the BLI, as students enjoy and excel at using technology. Teachers explained some of the ways that the vendor programs helped them to engage students; because the programs allowed teachers to track student progress, teachers could offer incentives when students reached certain goals in the program. Students also mentioned some of the specific features of the programs as reasons why they thought it helped them learn. For example, when talking about Achieve3000, students liked that if you did not know a word, you could highlight it and get the definition. Students that used Redbird were excited about the “on fire” feature, and reported that it helped to motivate them. When discussing ThinkThroughMath, students highlighted how the virtual teacher option was particularly helpful. Elementary school students reported liking the games as well. From the teacher perspective, it would have been useful to be able to turn off student access to the games in Redbird so they could limit the amount of time students spent playing games.

Students were able to articulate their appreciation for the self-pacing and differentiation capabilities of the programs. For example, students said that one program was challenging because it allowed them to keep progressing when they answered the questions correctly but also liked that when you got a question incorrect, it would show you the right way to do it. One program provided students with leveled articles, which covered the same content but were aligned to the Lexile levels of individual students. This meant that the entire class could engage in discussions around the same article topic, regardless of reading level. While elementary school teachers said that this prevented students from knowing that they were on different levels, which can sometimes be marginalizing for those who are at lower levels, students seemed to be aware of the differentiation. For example, one student said she liked the program because she had longer articles than some of her classmates and this helped her feel challenged. Additionally, one high school teacher explained that using the Lexile levels as a way to group students resulted in students feeling stigmatized, as they immediately knew that was the basis for the groupings.

Based on responses from students and teachers, using the vendor programs also seemed to increase student ownership over their learning. Some teachers and principals saw this as a benefit that resulted in increased student engagement and motivation. For others, this posed challenges because students struggled to maintain focus. Some teachers explained strategies they found helpful for combating student distractions, which included setting up the classroom so that the teacher could see all computer screens while working with a small group, using the features on the programs that allow for the tracking of student activity (as opposed to just log-ons), and offering incentives for students to reach usage and activity goals. High school teachers also noted that students were motivated once they realized that the work they did on the vendor programs would be incorporated into their grades.

Implementation of the Blended Learning Model

Most of the BLI schools, and all of those that participated in the interviews, used the station rotation model.¹ This model is based on the assumption that blended learning supports differentiation through personalized pathways in the vendor programs and small group instruction. Ideally, teachers use data from the vendor programs and their interactions with students to group students. These groups (typically three) then rotate between stations, one where the teacher provides small group instruction, one where students are working on the Chromebooks, and a third where students do independent activities. Overall, teachers and principals were able to describe this model and agreed with it theoretically. Additionally, survey data showed that the majority of teachers using Redbird, Achieve3000, and ThinkThroughMath felt the BLI provided a great or moderate benefit in their opportunities to differentiate instruction (87%). However, during the interviews, many teachers reported that they modified the three-group rotation model, and

¹ The rotational model is defined as “a program in which within a given course or subject, students rotate on a fixed schedule or at the teacher’s discretion between learning modalities, at least one of which is online learning” (Staker & Horne, 2012). This is distinct from the a la carte model where “students take one or more courses entirely online with an online teacher of record and at the same time continue to have brick-and-mortar educational experiences” (Christensen, Staker, & Horne, 2013).

students corroborated this in their accounts. The modifications included only having two groups, keeping with a whole group model so students would all log on and use the vendor program at the same time, and/or scheduling rotations across days rather than within a class period. Other teachers reported a lack of space as a challenge to implementing the three-group rotation as well.

Principals shared their perceptions around why some teachers did not move away from whole class instruction. One principal said that teachers sometimes assume that implementing the blended learning model means they are losing instructional time, and working to overcome this assumption can be a challenge. Other principals agreed that there was a “learning curve” for teachers, especially veteran and new teachers. Principals further explained that for the veterans, it can be difficult to rely so heavily on technology and/or change habits that have been reinforced for many years. For new teachers the challenge is often a result of struggles with classroom management. One common challenge to implementation cited by teachers and principals alike was that they felt overwhelmed by the number of new initiatives that coincided at the beginning of the 2016-2017 school year. In contrast, more specific challenges articulated by teachers and principals arose when trying to implement the blended learning model with special education students and English language learners. For example, teachers noted that it would be useful if all the vendor programs were available in other languages. They also suggested that read-aloud options for the math programs would be helpful for students who may have low literacy levels, but higher-level math skills.

Conclusions

Teachers’ survey and interview responses indicated that participating in the BLI increased their capacity to differentiate instruction in their classrooms and that additional training would be beneficial. The particular areas where teachers reported they would like additional professional development supports varied. While some teachers felt PD around using the vendor program and accessing data would be beneficial, others noted they needed additional support around the blended learning model.

References

- Christensen, C.M., Horn, M. B., & Staker, H. (2013). *Is K–12 Blended Learning Disruptive? An introduction to the theory of hybrids*. Clayton Christensen Institute for Disruptive Innovation. Retrieved from: <http://www.blendedlearning.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Is-K-12-blended-learning-disruptive.pdf>
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