Shaking Up School Operations with Blended Learning

Blended learning allows districts to rethink all parts of their operations.

By Michael B. Horn

Blended learning is growing in popularity across the country. The strategy, which mixes online learning with brick-and-mortar schools, gives students some element of control over the time, place, path, and pace of their learning. But blended learning goes far beyond merely deploying instructional technology in schools. Ideally, blended learning allows schools to rethink all parts of their operations, from technology and facilities to their use of time and human resources.

Why Adopt Blending Learning?

The motivations for adopting blended learning vary, but they center on three primary drivers: personalization, access and equity, and cost control.

Personalization. Educators know that students have different learning needs and learn at different paces. In traditional age-graded factory-model schools, educators struggle to differentiate for those diverse needs and to help every child achieve academically and fulfill his

or her potential. Incorporating online learning helps schools realize the benefits of providing individualized instruction for each student. Students can learn at different paces and take different pathways toward mastery; teachers have more flexibility and can work with individual students or with larger groups, depending on students' needs.

Access and equity. Schools are unable to offer the full suite of courses that every student might want or need to take. However, when online learning is added to the mix, even if just a few students are interested in taking Mandarin or AP Computer Science, a school can offer such courses by connecting interested students with expert teachers outside the school or district.

Cost control. When school business officials start thinking about the Internet-connected devices and the broadband connectivity necessary to implement blended learning, they may think that the costs of the learning model are prohibitive. In reality, limited budgets have been one of the big drivers of adopting blended learning, as schools are forced to figure out how to do more with less. Using online learning has allowed them to rethink their use of resources across the district's schools.

Transforming Operations

Blended learning has the clear potential to transform three aspects of a school's business operations: its technology, its facilities, and its staffing.

Technology. Blended learning requires Internet-connected devices and adequate broadband connectivity, but it doesn't have to break the bank—and it may allow districts to save money they would have spent on costly textbooks and other print-based curricular resources.

To achieve blended learning well, schools don't necessarily need to pay for an Internet-connected device for every student. Many school districts, such as Riverside Unified in California, have implemented BYOD (bring-your-own-device) policies for their students and pay for devices only for those students who cannot afford them.

The good news for districts that need to buy devices is that the prices are falling rapidly. A Google Chromebook, for example, retails for less than $300. In addition, some of the most successful blended-learning programs across the country don't provide a device for every student; some have ratios of two or even three students per device, depending on the design of their blended-learning program.

To determine the most effective configuration and types of devices, it's critical that schools begin not by considering their technology needs, but by determining what problem they are trying to solve with blended learning and then working through a design process to create the right model to address that problem. [For a

discussion of the process, see *Blended: Using Disruptive Innovation to Improve Schools* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2014).] Then, matching the device needs to the design is much more precise.

School districts like Mooresville in North Carolina show the wisdom of treating hardware and software as an annual operational cost.

When schools need to buy devices, many districts treat them as a capital expense and introduce a bond measure to raise the necessary funds. That strategy presents several challenges, however, not least of which is that devices typically need to be refreshed every three years, whereas bond measures are paid back over a much longer time. Voters' willingness to continually fund additional bond measures may be limited. Instead, school districts like Mooresville in North Carolina show the wisdom of treating hardware and software as an annual operational cost to make those efforts sustainable over the long haul.

Lackluster broadband connectivity in schools is also a real concern. But recent changes to the federal E-Rate program, including more dollars and flexibility in how those dollars are used, should help solve that problem.

Facilities. Blended learning allows schools to rethink building design, often allowing school leaders to adopt more modular arrangements and to align with the principles of student agency, flexibility, and choice that are at the core of their new instructional models.

Blended learning allows for significant cost savings when districts reimagine what a school looks like.

Money is often a significant barrier, limiting what schools can do with regard to facilities, but many schools are finding ways to hack their current space by knocking down the walls between classrooms, using simple furniture to create new types of learning spaces, or even leveraging existing space by keeping certain buildings open longer hours to serve students in different time shifts or in different configurations.

The real opportunity for cost savings, though, is when school districts can build a new school or renovate an old one. Blended learning allows for significant cost savings when districts reimagine what a school looks like. Intrinsic Schools in Chicago, for example, worked with an architectural firm to create a school that cost significantly less per square foot of instructional space

to build, even while using the same labor as other new schools in the city. The result is an inspirational place that awes visitors and provides ideal learning conditions for students.

Staffing. Teachers are critical to the success of blended learning, but blended learning allows for significant creativity in staffing. The result can be more rewarding jobs for teachers and a way for school business officers to address the challenge of reduced funding.

Some blended-learning schools are giving great teachers an opportunity to extend their reach and teach more students.

One of the most obvious benefits is the opportunity to use online learning to connect students with teachers from anywhere in the world. For example, if a school cannot afford a full-time Arabic teacher or a highly qualified physics teacher, online learning can give students access to those teachers outside the district.

Online learning can also help districts rethink the role of teachers to make the teaching job infinitely more impactful and rewarding. Many blended-learning schools are leveraging their reinvention of space and time to allow teachers to teach in teams. Some blended-learning schools are giving great teachers an opportunity to extend their reach and teach more students; some are using paraeducators in different configurations; still others are assigning individual teachers specialized responsibilities to enable them to focus on becoming content experts, small-group teachers and tutors, project-based learning designers, mentors, evaluators, data experts, and more.

Reimagining Education

By working through a design process to create the ideal instructional model for a particular school that harnesses the benefits of technology, school leaders are unlocking new ways to reimagine what schooling looks like and how it operates, which in turn creates significant flexibility in how resources are used.

We're only at the beginning of this revolution, but the future for students, teachers, education leaders, district administrators, and local communities is a bright one.

Michael B. Horn is cofounder and executive director of education at the nonprofit Clayton Christensen Institute for Disruptive Innovation. He coauthored *Blended: Using Disruptive Innovation to Improve Schools* with Heather Staker. Email: mhorn@christenseninstitute.org