

# Blended Learning

**T**echnology—and the ease with which it can be accessed—has changed the way we live and work. Today’s students will not only compete with students that sit next to them, but also with their peers from across the globe. The world has truly become “flat” and, for students to compete in this new reality, they must develop the skills to use technology appropriately and ethically to enhance their learning.

The National Education Association (NEA) believes that technology in the educational process improves learning opportunities for students, quality of instruction, effectiveness of education employees, and provides opportunities to reduce educational inequities.

## **NEA supports blended learning**

Despite years of research, there is no final conclusion or definition of blended learning, and—remarkably—there are no rules in place to prescribe what the ideal blend might be. The blend of face-to-face and online materials varies depending on: (1) the content, (2) the needs of the students, and (3) the preferences of the instructor.

A May 2011 report identified 40 different blended-learning organizations that currently support 48 different models of blended-learning environments and describes six different models into which such programs fit.

- The online and blended learning landscape is changing quickly and substantially. In 2011, 75 percent of school districts were utilizing some form of online learning. In 2014, it was reported that 62 percent of all the states offered fully online courses, including the District of Columbia. Eleven of these states have some kind of restriction on the online course.
- As of 2014, Arizona, California, and Ohio had the largest percentages of K-12 students enrolled in online courses, while Alaska, the District of Columbia, and New Hampshire had the lowest percentages.
- In school year 2013–14, over 315,000 (estimate) students attended these statewide fully online schools, a year over year increase of 6.2 percent.
- The evolution of the common term online and blended learning space is changing so quickly that the term Digital Learning is replacing it, signifying a major change in the way it is analyzed and reported.

Source: Watson, J., Pape, L., Murin, A., Gemin, B. and Vashaw, L. (2014). Keeping Pace with K-12 Digital Learning, 11th Edition. Retrieved from [http://www.kpk12.com/wp-content/uploads/EEG\\_KP2014-fnl-lr.pdf](http://www.kpk12.com/wp-content/uploads/EEG_KP2014-fnl-lr.pdf).

For our purposes, blended learning (aka “hybrid” and “mixed-mode”) is an environment in which a student learns in a “blended” model of face-to-face instruction with a licensed teacher and technology-based instruction that best meets the educational needs of the student. During the technology-based instruction, under the guidance

of the teacher, the student has control over the time, place, path and/or the pace of the curriculum to form an integrated instructional approach. NEA supports the effective use of technology as a companion to classroom learning.

Technology became embedded in instruction almost from the time it was invented. But with the meteoric expansion of the Internet and its utility in instruction, the difference between blended learning and learning online must be clarified, as they are often used simultaneously to explain the same model. NEA believes that instruction provided completely online is a different kind of model and should not be confused with blended learning. In addition, blended learning includes multiple technologies, not simply online technology.

There are compelling reasons to differentiate the two models. For most students switching from an in-the-classroom education to a complete online education program is not necessarily a good alternative. Students, especially elementary-age students, benefit from classroom structure, age-appropriate activities and information, a sense of community that a public school offers, and an interaction with peers, teachers, education support professionals, and other members of the education team.

A blended learning model incorporates the best aspects of both face-to-face and online instruction:

1. Classroom time can be used to engage students in advanced interactive experiences.
2. The flexibility and convenience of the technological/online portion of the course can provide students with multimedia-rich content at any time of day, wherever the student has Internet access.
3. Early evidence suggests that a blended instructional approach can result in learning outcome gains and increased enrollment retention.

Examples are plentiful. One example of a blended approach to a traditional, face-to-face course is where

a class meets once per week instead of the usual three-session format. Learning activities that otherwise would have taken place during classroom time are moved online. In another elementary school, students attend four periods a day with one or two of those days spent in a “learning lab” where they work on math and literacy problems advancing at their own pace.

### **NEA supports blended learning directed by a licensed teacher**

A current report suggests that, “the push toward blended learning is motivated by two factors: A huge industry out there ‘that’s dying to make money,’ and the idea that in the long run this will save money on teachers—a claim that so far does not have research to substantiate it.”

Other research recommends that small scale blended learning pilots are necessary to determine the value and success of the proposed program. They caution that without pilot testing, “...this is a very costly, large-scale experiment on our children.”

But whatever the rationale, most research reveals that a clear and consistent teacher presence is essential to the “blending” of technological/online resources with in-class time. The teacher:

- Facilitates learning, even within an online environment
- Develops student-centered courses—not traditional lecture-based classes
- Organizes online learning to contain small-group activities and team projects where students must collaborate
- Communicates clear expectations for students where activities and assessments should account for different learning styles and best practices are implemented

- Prepares for the challenges of online instruction and the use of all kinds of technology, and is proficient in the content area

A teacher in an effective blended learning environment would:

- Use modern information, communication, and learning tools
- Promote online dialogue to deepen the learning experience
- Use adaptive technologies to meet individual needs
- Assist students with speech impairments, e.g., computers that speak through speech synthesis, and text-messaging-equipped mobile phones
- Use effective written communication
- Collaborate with students online to further student participation
- Understand how the content management system (such as the “Cloud”) works and how they can help facilitate the learning

### **A framework to ensure the quality of online resources and instruction**

Online resources should be managed to ensure effective student and school participation and provide for regular interaction between students and their instructors. Ongoing professional development for teachers is essential to ensure that teachers maintain the skills appropriate for an online environment. Additional preparation time, ongoing technological support, and collaborative planning time must be granted to teachers using technology to enrich their instruction. Students who take online education courses should receive the preparation and support necessary to help them function effectively in an online environment that includes the appropriate equipment and technical support.

### **State trends**

Every state in the union has legislation related to blended or online learning. Some states require online courses for graduation, and others use online courses for credit recovery. However, legislation typically focuses on courses provided solely online, and does not include “blended” courses.

In some cases, the state uses online courses to offset decreases in revenues. For example, of 47 states with newly enacted budgets, 23 have made deep cuts in preK and/or K-12 spending. In addition, the elimination of the No Child Left Behind, Title II, Part D, Enhancing Education Through Technology (EETT) program to close the achievement gap and reduce the digital divide caused states to consider all kinds of options to reduce spending. With the loss of as much as \$461 million from EETT (2006 information), states have scaled back and developed other priorities. While some states decreased their teaching force, Virginia used available funds to increase the number of instructional personnel integrating technology into instruction.

So far it appears that while blended learning has the potential to transform K-12 education, the movement is mostly propelled by budget concerns and the prospect of teacher shortages, with limited consideration for providing all students with access to high-quality blended learning. Misconceptions about blended learning and online courses hamper the movement and impede progress on preparing students for success in a technologically savvy global economy.

### **Policy Recommendations**

1. Clearly define the “blended learning” model as one combining online resources and technology with face-to-face instruction by a licensed teacher.
2. Increase federal, state, and local resources, along with public/private partnerships, to fully fund equipment purchases/leases/upgrades, maintenance, technical

support, training/professional development, evaluation, and staffing to support the full use of technology in public schools, colleges, and universities.

3. Ensure that students have access to and instruction in technology, as well as the responsible and ethical use of technology, especially in places where they are not otherwise available.
4. Provide every school classroom, office, teacher workroom, and library/media center with affordable, high-speed, seamless, and equal access to the Internet.
5. Develop an acceptable use policy (AUP) to address the appropriate use of the Internet, for example, parental permission, proper citation and compliance with copyright laws, and privacy and information protection.
6. Revise, create, and implement state standards, learning objectives, and assessments using technology for all content areas that reflect 21st century expertise and the power of technology to improve learning.
7. Design, implement, and evaluate technology-powered programs and interventions to ensure that students progress seamlessly through our P-16 education system and emerge prepared for college and careers.

## RESOURCES

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