The Phases of Blended Learning Initiatives

Overview: The phrase "blended learning" has created such a buzz that it's now used to describe almost any mix of learning modes. At Let's Go Learn, we use the phrase to describe the blending of traditional classroom learning with digital learning. We work to help districts move toward this more participative and personalized form of learning in four transformative phases.

When districts first undertake Blended Learning Initiatives, they often leap to implementations that are not fully developed. There is no blame in this. It's easy to see how in their passion to transform quickly, districts start with the purchase of technology rather than with a usage plan. Nothing is more sexy or motivating than declaring that your school or district is going to get laptops or iPads for every student and implement blended learning.

However, taking a plan from an idea to success requires a phased process in addition to securing funding for the one-to-one devices. We've summarized the phases of Blended Learning as we have seen them evolve successfully in the schools and districts with which we work. Hopefully, this will become a useful guide for your initiatives as you develop your own detailed plans.

Phase I: Initial Planning
- Determine grade levels and possible sites for an initial pilot. Limiting the grades and possibly the sites allows for a phased-in approach that permits the kinks to be worked out for a larger district-wide deployment.
- Determine basic requirement by grade level. Plan how the devices are going to be used: for web research, word processing, differentiated instruction for each student's unique learning path, etc.
- Start planning what "model" you will use for your blended learning initiatives. Study how districts that are similar to yours are employing blended learning to increase student achievement and teacher effectiveness.

Phase II: Developing Blended Learning Plan
- Develop an educational plan based on a model of blended learning, meaning classroom and computer-based instruction.
- Include in your educational plan a model of assessment and instruction that is critical to personalized learning.
- Plan your software needs. Examine your existing software subscriptions and determine if they are compatible with devices. For example, Flash doesn't work with iPads.

- Determine where new supplemental instructional tools will be sought. Ask yourself if you will get them from apps on touch-screen devices, from freeware, from open source resources such as Khan Academy, or from new subscriptions from publishers.
- Determine the implications of using these new supplemental instructional tools on the specific hardware.
- Decide which diagnostic assessment will be used to determine which programs are best for each student's personalized learning path. For example, benchmark or high stakes assessments, such as Smarter Balanced, PARCC, or NWEA MAPS, are not sufficient for analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of urban students, who often are many years behind in certain foundational skills such as reading and math.
- Determine how student growth will be monitored and measured.
- Invite current vendors to provide input on how their products can support your initiatives.

Phase III: Ready for Pilot Launch
- Put a Professional Development plan in place for training teachers how to efficiently personalize learning in their classrooms. Decide on possible topics, such as flipping the classroom, small group rotation planning and execution, etc.
- Put a Professional Development plan in place for teachers, students, IT staff, and administrators to train them how to use the new hardware devices.
- Determine additional resource needs: i.e., technology aides, data specialists, etc.
- Establish peer-to-peer planning for teachers at pilot sites so they can support each other as they implement blended learning.
- Establish how school or district administrators can help support these teachers during the pilot with support from successful outside districts, scheduled meetings, etc.
- Schedule the pilot rollout. Be sure to select a manageable subset of grades and sites.
- Schedule hardware that has been selected for the initial pilot but not for the long-term larger rollout. One huge lesson learned from many failed one-to-one rollouts is NOT to buy hardware until you need it. Advances in technology and price drops in periods as short as six months can have huge implications for one-to-one initiatives. For example, Chromebooks are proving to be better for some initiatives than touch-screen devices
- Determine how the success of the pilot will be measured. Qualitative and quantitative data points are necessary. Data should be collected from families, students, teachers, administrators.

Phase IV: Pilot Evaluation and Plan Modification
- Evaluate pilot data according to your pre-determined plan.
- Have the review committee make adjustments to the larger district rollout plan, including schedule adjustments.
- Review budgets to be sure that the costs of a larger rollout are feasible.
- Consider additional costs for schools that are less technologically experienced. Usually pilots are done with the "tech savvy" schools, so you have to adjust your expectations and costs for rolling out with schools which are not as tech savvy as the pilot schools.