

Implementing Blended Learning:

Moving Toward the Eight Elements
of a “Truly Blended” School

Abridged Version



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Executive Summary

What happens when day schools enter the new, largely uncharted territory of blended learning? Where, and how far, do they intend to venture? What would it look like if they got there?

This report, based on a four-year study of day schools that are introducing and implementing blended learning practices with support from The AVI CHAI Foundation, presents overall patterns of these schools' goals and progress. Between fall 2012 and spring 2016, we visited schools, usually for two days of observing classes across grade levels and subjects, and conducting interviews with teachers and administrators. We studied 23 schools, visited 80 classrooms, interviewed 120 teachers and administrators, and reviewed dozens of school and classroom documents in print and online. We also spoke with program providers and funders, and tried out many of the online sites and programs the schools were using.

Our first finding is that schools exhibit considerable variation in their first steps toward blended learning. Depending on immediate needs, existing capacity, and even chance opportunities, the schools made decidedly different choices about where, what, and how to begin blending. Formats ranged from station rotation models¹ in elementary grades to flex models² in high schools, with almost every variation in between. Blended learning looks different even within a given school, varying considerably from classroom to classroom, subject to subject, and even day to day. Some schools (particularly new schools) adopted blended learning as a key element of their school design, for every teacher and in every classroom, while more established schools began with just a few teachers, moving cautiously toward wider use.

¹ Students remain inside their own classrooms rotating among “stations” for whole-class instruction, small group activities, and independent work on computers. Station rotation is not unlike “centers” employed by many pre-school and kindergarten classrooms.

² Students follow personalized programs or “playlists,” choosing among online instruction providers which lessons to do when. This method is often, but not always, accompanied by face-to-face student time and mentoring with a teacher or advisor.

The second, and most striking, finding of this study was that despite the wide range of variation in starting place, pace, and forms of practice, educators displayed surprisingly strong agreement on what a “truly blended” school would look like, offer students, and require of faculty and staff. They understand blended learning as existing on a **continuum** that extends from (1) the stereotypical image of a traditional text-based and teacher-led classrooms through (2) technology-enhanced (adding new tools to existing practice) to (3) truly blended, and on to (4) fully online education. Across schools, subjects, and grade levels, educators in the day schools agreed that their goal is *not* to move all the way to the fully online end of the continuum but rather to move to, and sustain, the stage they describe as “truly blended.” This continuum marks both a shared understanding and a common goal—further along than simply “technology-enhanced,” but not so far as “fully online.” In overall intent and direction, their consistency is strong.

Third, they share consistent, specific, and relatively concrete descriptions of what that stage entails. They describe **eight elements** that characterize a “truly blended” day school:

1. Increasing content opportunities
2. Variety of instructional mode and media
3. Diagnostic assessment and data use
4. Differentiated instruction
5. Personalized pathways
6. Production and publication of student work
7. Shift in teacher role to designer and facilitator
8. School-wide planning and support

Though most schools have not yet reached the goal of a truly blended day school, their administrators and teachers are convinced that they are moving in the right direction. The study shows that they are indeed making progress toward their intended destination.

To further explore these elements, we drafted—and then refined with the help of study participants—a rubric and implementation wheel graphic to describe and assess in greater detail progress from the default starting point of a stereotypical traditional school to the final aspirational attributes of each element in a truly blended school, with illustrating examples of current status in between. To the surprise of many, we did not find a particular element that offered the most advantageous starting point, or a particular order in which implementation should proceed.

Yet we did observe interactions and interdependencies (and some overlap) among the eight elements. For example, advances in one element could be constrained by delays in implementing other elements (e.g., teachers found efforts to do more effective *differentiating instruction* limited if they did not have access to *diagnostic data use* to guide them). On the other hand, when schools pushed forward immediately to use *diagnostic data* in classrooms, this was of limited use if teachers lacked access to a *variety of mode and media* to make anything more than the simplest changes in reading groups or extra practice time. An ambitious early adopter teacher *shifting her role* to become a designer/facilitator is likely to stall without *school-wide planning and support*. And a *school-wide plan* is not much use unless teachers are willing to shift their *teacher roles* and use the new tools in a *variety of modes*.

With room for local adaptations, carefully considered efforts across the eight elements, accommodation for variations in teacher interest and capacity, and considerable patience as they wait for programs to attain the high standards they've set, the day schools are making considerable progress in moving forward. They describe “truly blended” schools, as one staff member put it, as “not using technology for technology’s sake.” Instead, they view it as using new tools to leverage larger school and classroom improvement, create new benefits for students, better prepare students for 21st century lives and careers, and move their programs forward within the context of sustainable costs and tuition models.

We drafted a rubric and implementation wheel graphic to describe and assess progress from a stereotypical traditional school to the aspirational attributes of a truly blended school.

The path is long, and the schools’ leaders and educators readily acknowledge that they still have a long way to go. But overall, their direction and commitment to keep moving are clear. Blended learning, this study concludes, has much to offer day schools, and day schools have much to teach the wider field of general education about implementing blended learning.

Blended Learning Implementation Wheel



Blended Learning Implementation Rubric

	1-Traditional	2	3	4	5-Truly Blended
Range of Content Opportunities	Curriculum standardized for whole class	Enrichment and research activities online	Online opportunities for remedial or exceptional needs, without increasing staff	Array of courses and resources beyond what faculty can provide, available to all	Wide range of online instruction, accessed by all, when it suits student needs
Variety of Instructional Modes and Media	Teachers talk, students listen and read	Groups cover same content, vary pace; Online practice and extra help	Groups do different activities; Teachers use multiple media; Some online instruction and resources	Activities vary in form to match content and student needs; Some teachers shift instruction; Some students choose	Teachers shift easily and often; Coaching and self-directed learning informed by data; Independent learning opportunities available to all
Diagnostic Assessment and Data Use	End of course exams, state tests, teacher observations; IEPs for special needs	Resource rooms; Different placement of students and pace of instruction by category	Digital programs give feedback on skills and pace to teachers; Some teachers use data to group, some to assess competency	Digital programs give frequent and useful data to teachers on placement, pace and style, and to students on progress and needs	Teachers, administrators, students and parents view, use, and discuss data frequently to define needs, differentiate learning, and assess competency
Differentiated Instruction	Students in a class are processed as a "batch;" Extra practice after school, or summer school	Student groupings for level and pace	Data driven student groupings, i.e. bluebirds and robins; Regular data reports trigger regroupings	Time and task vary within some classes, and for individual students	IEP's for all students; Variations in time, task, and style are routinely and purposefully planned
Personalized Pathways	All students have same curriculum; Benchmarks at set times	Online activities given for extra practice, enrichment, or free time	Students at/above class level choose extra projects, courses; Students below clear level choose skill practice modes	Students choose when and how to work on set skills and curriculum; Monitor own progress	Students choose among options for content, media, pace, and place
Production/ Publication of Student Work	Work turned in to teacher; Some display at science fair, holiday concert, or classroom wall	Students share work and give feedback to peers	Projects shared within and across classes; Some teachers visit and view other student work	Teachers visit and share work; Some student work sent to external review; Data and feedback shared with students, parents	Students are expected to post and publish projects (e.g., films to YouTube) to real audience; Connections across subjects and to real world are expected
Teacher as Designer/ Facilitator	Teachers hired and evaluated to know content, keep control; Frontal teaching; Tech in lab; PD is idiosyncratic or generic	Talk about tech; Some teachers sent to iNACOL or ISTE; Differentiation is valued; Some tech in classes	Teachers hired and evaluated on being open and innovative; Some teachers create and curate; Online resources used in classrooms	Many teachers create and curate; Many access data and shift approaches to meet student needs and styles; Many choose among media options to fit content or student	All teachers use data to inform pace and personalize lessons; They are comfortable with a repertoire of media and approaches; They can and do relinquish control
School-wide Planning and Support	Individual teachers teach on their own; About blended learning? Teachers wish you luck with a "passing fad"	Early adopters are praised, but status quo prevails; Curriculum offerings match staff capacity	Leaders see value, approve PD and tech upgrades; Offer and schedule exceptional online activities and courses	Blended learning is topic at faculty meetings, and experiences are shared; Investment in class resources and infrastructure; IT is in strategic plan; Strategy to identify and assess products and providers	Schoolwide sharing of purpose, strategy and plan; Problem solving and adapting are routine; Different needs and resources seen as normal; Tech and blended learning recognized as tools to achieve mission beyond staffing capacity



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