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Blended learning proof points showcase district schools

by Michael B. Horn

Public school districts began innovating with blended learning before most charter schools. According to surveys that Brian Bridges has conducted in multiple states, including California where blended learning is growing rapidly, more school districts utilize blended learning than do charter schools. And the pace of innovation with blended learning is picking up within school districts nationwide.

Despite all this activity, the charter schools pioneering blended learning get far more attention for their innovations. There seem to be two reasons.

First, the charter schools that garner attention for blended learning have, in many cases, used it to transform their entire schooling model. In contrast, many district schools first used blended learning in the classic areas of nonconsumption in which disruptive innovations typically start, where the alternative was nothing at all. In this case that meant at the fringe of schools—in the advanced classes, foreign languages, and credit and dropout recovery options they couldn't otherwise offer, for example. As blended learning has grown within district schools, it's often been a bit more ad hoc—a class here, one subject there—than in many charters in which blended learning has become a core part of the school's operations.

Second, the charter schools using blended learning and attracting attention over the years—from Rocketship to Carpe Diem and from KIPP LA to Summit Public Schools—have produced impressive student outcomes that are concrete and objective. Those clear and measurable results have been missing from many of the district schools adopting blended learning.

There are plenty of district schools though that have adopted blended learning and boosted student outcomes. It's important to publicize the success these schools are having and understand what is driving it, particularly given that the majority of students in this nation will continue to receive their formal education in district schools. At the Christensen Institute, we partnered with the Evergreen Education Group to do just that: research and profile district schools with measurable positive student results from having adopted blended learning. We published the first of these reports recently as a series of case studies titled [Proof Points: Blended Learning Success in School Districts](#). We'll be releasing more profiles in the weeks ahead.

The first batch of profiles features six schools.

Kenneth Grover founded [Innovations Early College High School](#), in Salt Lake City, Utah, to boost the district's graduation rate—its three high schools were losing 10 percent of their students *every year*. With its Flex model of blended learning, the school boasted a graduation rate of 89 percent for its 2014 graduation cohort.

The [Poudre School District Global Academy](#) opened in 2009 to provide a flexible schooling option. Based on student

growth measures in several different grade levels and subject areas, the school is ranked as the first or second best school in the district and is in the top 5 percent of all schools in the state.

The [Virtual Instruction to Accentuate Learning](#) program in Putnam County Schools in Cookeville, Tenn., has used blended learning to improve the district's graduation rate and help hundreds of students gain college credits while in high school.

The elementary school in the [Randolph Central School District](#) uses blended learning to actually differentiate instruction and has significantly improved its students' math scores on state assessments.

[Spokane Public Schools](#) has used blended learning for many years; its graduation rate has risen from 60 percent in 2007 to 83 percent in 2014.

And the [Spring City Elementary Hybrid Learning School](#) in Spring City, Penn., has bolstered its test scores in math, reading, and science since implementing a Station Rotation model of blended learning.

These are all exciting stories worth telling. My Evergreen Education colleague John Watson, who led the research, has done a good job distilling several of the lessons behind these schools' successes in a series of [blog posts](#) that chronicle the importance of leadership in blended learning; the critical role in-person teachers and mentors—not just monitors—play; the persistence district schools must have as they navigate the inevitable bumps on the road to implementing successfully blended learning; and the important role data plays.

We would be remiss, however, if we didn't also point out how many districts employing blended learning do not even track student success data—and what a problem this is along several dimensions (including that it violates the first step we outline for schools implementing blended learning in our book [Blended: Using Disruptive Innovation to Improve Schools](#), in which we show educators why starting with a SMART rallying cry—a specific, measurable goal that drives their blended-learning implementation and allows everyone to know what constitutes success—is so important).

This is a trend that we've noticed since we began researching the field; one school district my colleague Katherine Mackey profiled in a case study several years ago didn't even know how many students it had served in its dropout recovery program in a given year, let alone how they had fared in the program. But our research process for this project highlighted just what a significant problem it is.

As John [wrote](#) in a blog post, when we released the initial survey asking for examples of blended learning success, we received 65 responses. Half of the submissions said they did not have student outcomes data—shocking in its own right but even more so given the survey said we were looking explicitly for measurable student success.

If we are to help school districts implement blended learning not just for its own sake but to transform our education system into one that allows all children to realize their fullest potential, then we need to amplify the stories of these proof points from around the nation that are doing it right—and push districts to get more rigorous.



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