

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

# BLENDED LEARNING BLENDED LEARNING BLENDED LEARNING

## the best of both worlds

How the integration of face-to-face and digital learning can lead to greater educational equity, opportunities, & efficiencies for Colorado schools and their students.

By: Amy Berk Anderson and Amanda Skrzypchak | Donnell-Kay Foundation | [www.dkfoundation.org](http://www.dkfoundation.org)



DONNELL-KAY FOUNDATION



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Donnell-Kay Foundation strongly encourages education and policy leaders in Colorado to develop a vision and strategy where all students have access to high-quality learning options, regardless of where they live or the school they attend. Expanding digital and online offerings can begin to alleviate significant inequities that exist within our system today between students who have access to high quality teachers and a diverse array of courses and schools and those who lack such access because they live in communities that struggle to attract talent or lack the resources to provide the variety of options that a wealthier or larger district can offer.

It is also becoming increasingly evident that while we use technology and digital devices regularly in order to function in our personal and professional lives, schools have failed to keep up pace with this societal trend. When one walks into a typical public school in our state, it feels like a flashback to the 1950s.

The purpose of this paper is to provide policymakers and education leaders with information about today's digital and online offerings for public school students in Colorado. A shift to a blended model of learning that combines face to face, online and digital learning is an important next move for our state. Policy direction and innovative ideas are offered as leaders of our state grapple with ensuring that all students have access to quality courses and teachers.

## THE CURRENT STATE OF ONLINE AND DIGITAL LEARNING IN COLORADO'S PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Today, students in Colorado learn in a variety of classroom settings: traditional school buildings, blended settings that combine face-to-face and online learning, and full-time online classrooms. However, the overwhelming majority of Colorado's 843,316 students (just over 98%) attend public schools located in brick-and-mortar buildings. The concept of blended classrooms is new, primarily district-based, and serves a small (but unknown) number of students at this time. And, a small percentage of Colorado students attend full-time online schools: 1.8% of the total student enrollment in 2010-11.

Full-time online schools provide families with another public school choice which is important and necessary for many students. Some of those who are well-served by full-time online schools include students who travel frequently; students who miss a lot of school because of illnesses, pregnancy or parenting; students who are at risk of or have already dropped out of school; students who are self-motivated and thrive in a setting where they can move at their own pace; or students whose parents prefer to home school.

Despite these strengths the academic performance of students in full-time online schools is considerably lower relative to their peers in brick-and-mortar schools. And, only a small subset of the overall student population is able to or interested in attending a full-time online school.

Supplemental online courses are an option available to select students that take courses that might not be offered by a home district and/or provide students the option of taking a course online instead of in a traditional classroom setting. A number of "private pay" options exist for students and, in some cases, students can access supplemental online courses that their district offers or pays for on their behalf, such as through Colorado Online Learning (COL). However, COL's enrollment is capped at 1,400 students per year. And, district-initiated efforts to offer supplemental courses are limited to only a couple of metro-area districts. In reality, very few schools in Colorado are using online or other technologies to their full capacity, if at all, and choices are very limited for students statewide.

**In reality, very few schools in Colorado are using online or other technologies to their full capacity, if at all, and choices are very limited for students statewide.**

## WHAT IS BLENDED LEARNING?

A relatively new concept in public education, blended learning is more student-centered in its approach, allowing students and schools to use time and resources more flexibly than in traditional school environments. Various definitions for and approaches to this new type of learning exist. The recent report, *The Rise of K-12 Blended Learning*, identifies six models of blended learning occurring across the country today. *\*Note: a chart with descriptions and examples of these six models is available in the full report.*

It is important to note that blended learning is not just about integrating online content or using cool new technologies. As is the case in any quality educational setting, blended learning requires an effective teacher to guide and support student learning.<sup>1</sup>

**It is important to note that blended learning is not just about integrating online content or using cool new technologies. As is the case in any quality educational setting, blended learning requires an effective teacher to guide and support student learning.<sup>1</sup>**

## WHY NOW FOR BLENDED LEARNING?

Whereas traditional brick and mortar programs may fail to embrace the opportunities available to us in this digital age, and full-time online schools are not the answer for every student, blended learning is emerging as a “best of both worlds” strategy for schooling in our country.

## STUDENT INTEREST AND MOTIVATION

Today’s students want learning experiences that are relevant and engaging. A 2009 survey of students conducted by the non-profit organization, Project Tomorrow (“Speak Up 2009,”) found that students enjoy online learning and are more connected to school through such experiences.

“These free-agent learners are not waiting for their schools to catch up with them. They are, in fact, adopting and adapting these emerging technologies such as online learning to increase their own productivity as a learner and to personalize their learning process. Learning is not tethered to the traditional school or classroom in students’ vision for 21st century education.”<sup>2</sup>

## EXPANDED CONNECTIVITY

In 2010, Colorado was awarded a \$100 million federal grant to expand broadband access across the state to underserved schools, libraries, colleges and communities. At the time this grant was received, Colorado ranked 42nd out of 50 states in broadband connectivity, and broadband service in our state cost 10 times that of neighboring states. Because of this lack of connectivity, inequities were becoming increasingly apparent between connected schools (primarily urban and suburban) and unconnected schools (primarily rural). By providing all schools with high-speed internet, every student in our state, regardless of geographic proximity, will soon have access to quality education options in ways that have never existed before.

## INCREASED INTEREST ACROSS STAKEHOLDER GROUPS

The national policy community is also paying attention to this topic, as evidenced by the creation of the Digital Learning Council headed by former Governors Jeb Bush and Bob Wise.

At the state level, former Colorado Commissioner of Education, Dwight Jones, demonstrated Colorado's commitment to online and blended learning via the creation of the Expanded Learning Opportunities (ELO) Commission in 2010 and the Advisory Council for Online Learning in 2009.

## POTENTIAL EFFICIENCIES

In addition to expanded access for students and teachers, expanded use of technology and online systems present opportunities for greater efficiencies. With expanded access to the internet, the state can play a role in helping districts purchase at scale, develop shared learning management systems and platforms, share courses and content, and provide professional development on blended teaching.

In their paper *3X for All* (2010), Emily and Bryan Hassel of Public Impact talk about the power of blended learning as a means of extending the reach of great teachers.<sup>3</sup> Highly effective teachers can be leveraged and utilized to reach more students. As broadband access expands in Colorado, schools and districts in this state will increasingly have the opportunity to bring in high-quality teachers virtually.



<sup>3</sup> [www.publicimpact.com](http://www.publicimpact.com)



## POLICY OPPORTUNITIES AND QUESTIONS

Like in other states, Colorado schools and districts creating blended learning opportunities are encountering policy challenges. A recent national report from the Digital Learning Council (DLC) identifies 10 Elements of High Quality Digital Learning<sup>4</sup> and makes state policy recommendations to help states move closer to a blended model of delivering education.

Moving from a traditional, brick and mortar-based (and largely digitally un-connected) model of educational delivery to one that is student-centric, personalized and blended is no small shift, nor can it be implemented overnight. The following list raises important questions and ideas to consider as our state moves further down this path. These policy issues, along with the DLC's recommendations, are discussed at length in the full report and summarized here.

**Moving from a traditional, brick & mortar-based (and largely digitally un-connected) model of educational delivery to one that is student-centric, personalized and blended is no small shift, nor can it be implemented overnight.**

### SHOULD THERE BE DIFFERENT ACCOUNTABILITY REQUIREMENTS FOR ONLINE SCHOOLS?

Some argue that there are more requirements placed on online schools than on their brick and mortar counterparts. The state should assess which requirements continue to be necessary and which requirements can either be eliminated or changed, given the passage and requirements of the Education Accountability Act (2009) that are in place today but didn't exist when the Online Learning Act was passed in 2007.

### DOES OUR CURRENT SCHOOL FINANCE SYSTEM SUPPORT BLENDED LEARNING?

In a blended model, a student may take some courses from their brick and mortar schools and others online. Yet, our schools are funded based on seat-time, typically within a given school, not taking into account the possibility that students may choose to take courses from multiple schools/vendors. As such, what are some funding models that could ensure that both the online school or provider and the brick and mortar school receive the resources they need in order to best educate the students they are serving?

<sup>4</sup>[www.digitalllearningnow.com](http://www.digitalllearningnow.com)

## HOW SHOULD WE COUNT STUDENTS WHO ATTEND BOTH ONLINE AND BRICK AND MORTAR SCHOOLS FOR STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT PURPOSES?

Who “owns” the achievement results on the CSAP for a student? For example, if a student takes their math courses from an online school and the remainder of their courses in a brick and mortar school, who should get credit for the student’s CSAP results in math? Currently, the student’s brick and mortar school is held accountable for all academic results. It would be worth looking into other options that would allow for shared accountability and more accurately measure the entities responsible for student outcomes.

## CAN WE BETTER ALIGN TEACHER PREPARATION AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT TO A BLENDED MODEL?

Some states are beginning to require teacher licensure applicants to have experience in online instruction. Currently, no such mandate exists in Colorado. We encourage schools of education and alternative teacher preparation programs to embrace the digital age and train teachers going in to schools for the first time on quality instruction in online and blended settings. And, we encourage the state to consider requiring online experience and/or coursework for teacher licensure.



## HOW CAN THE STATE HELP DISTRICTS AND SCHOOLS THAT WANT TO SHIFT TO MORE PERSONALIZED SYSTEMS OF INSTRUCTION AND ASSESSMENT?

A key to serving all students well is finding ways to personalize learning and providing teachers with the data they need in order to best meet the needs of their students. Yet, the systems needed to run a blended model that collects and analyzes student data to provide a more personalized system of instruction are often incompatible with the other types of learning and information system management systems. Additionally, a growing number of schools and districts are interested in unbundling their curriculum in order to access digital content and free themselves from traditional textbooks. What role can the state of Colorado play in creating some economies of scale around purchasing, licensing, and building flexible data platforms so that more schools can implement blended learning and serve students in more personalized ways?

## HOW CAN WE ENCOURAGE INNOVATION AND PROVIDE INCENTIVES FOR MORE BLENDED LEARNING IN COLORADO?

Blended learning is already occurring in our state, but its impact is limited. What if our state created an innovation fund, through public and private means, that could incubate and expand innovative and promising models of blended learning? The funded initiatives would demonstrate the potential and efficacy of this mode of educational delivery.

**A key to serving all students well is finding ways to personalize learning and providing teachers with the data they need in order to best meet the needs of their students.**

BLENDED LEARNING: *THE BEST OF BOTH WORLDS*

By: Amy Berk Anderson and Amanda Skrzypchak | Donnell-Kay Foundation

*Electronic copies of this Executive Summary and the full report are available online at [www.dkfoundation.org](http://www.dkfoundation.org).*



DONNELL-KAY FOUNDATION