Schools of the Future Taking Shape through Blended Learning Innovations

Charter models that integrate teacher-directed and digital learning are on the leading edge of school reform

CAMBRIDGE, MA – A new report on schools implementing blended, or “hybrid,” instructional methods -- which integrate traditional face-to-face teaching with greater use of online instruction -- are pointing the way toward more effective and efficient school models. The report profiles several charter schools that utilize sophisticated computer technology to individualize instruction, reinforce students’ basic skills, and provide immediate data on student progress, all of which helps teachers to fine-tune instruction and students to learn at their own pace.

The article, “Future Schools: Blending Face-to-Face and Online Learning,” by Jonathan Schorr and Deborah McGriff, will appear in the Summer 2011 issue of Education Next and is now available at www.educationnext.org.

The authors visited a selection of charter schools in communities across the country that are using blended or hybrid approaches. They write that Rocketship Education, for example, a network of three charter schools founded in 2007 in San Jose, California, has “probably done more than any other single place to create the market for ‘hybrid schools.’” Rocketship is building a model in which kids learn much of their basic reading and math skills in a computer lab using adaptive software such as DreamBox, leaving classroom teachers free to focus on critical-thinking instruction and provide extra help when students are struggling. The software provides teachers with a steady stream of data that will help them adjust instruction to students’ specific needs, and to guide afterschool tutors. Two of the network’s three schools rank among the 15 top-performing high-poverty schools in the state, and the newest site, opened last year, was the number-one first-year school in the state.

The key advancement in the new hybrid models is that they “use technology intensively and thoughtfully to tailor instruction to individual students’ needs, and provide robust, frequent data on their performance.” Their use of technology goes far beyond the level of student engagement with computers that has been in place in most U.S. schools to date. The authors report that much of the enthusiasm for the potential of blended learning comes from School of One, a math program operating inside three New York City public middle schools. The classroom is an open space that runs the length of the building wing, but is subdivided by bookshelves into workspaces where small groups of students work with the
teacher or individually with laptops. “The first sight that greets the eye,” they observe, “is an airport-
style video display, listing not cities and flights, but students’ names and how they will receive their
instruction during that period.” The real power of School of One is its creation of real-time, hourly
reports of students’ progress and shortfalls, which are reviewed by teachers at any time before, after, or
during the school day.

Another school profiled is the Denver School of Science and Technology, which enrolls a mostly-
minority, 47 percent low-income student population and has achieved “national renown” for its results,
including the second-highest longitudinal growth rate in student test scores statewide. Among
graduates, 100 percent have been accepted to four-year colleges, and only 1 percent require remedial
courses, compared to 56 percent for the Denver district. The authors also visited High Tech High,
whose campus near the San Diego airport they describe as “perhaps the most eye-poppingly technology-
rich charter school in the country.” The school features warehouse-sized buildings delineated with glass
walls 15 feet high. Students use the same computer-aided design systems that they would find in a
professional design firm and the hallways are lined by prize-winning robotics projects, with mixed-
media art hanging from every wall, door, and metal roof beam. High Tech High uses an “artificially
intelligent assessment and learning system” called ALEKS, which provides teachers with detailed
diagnostics that enable them to target areas where students need extra help. Students begin each session
on ALEKS by taking an adaptive assessment that pinpoints their level of knowledge in a given content
area, and ALEKS produces a multicolored pie chart documenting student progress that is continually
updated for both teacher and student.

About the Authors
Jonathan Schorr and Deborah McGriff are partners at NewSchools Venture Fund, a nonprofit venture
philanthropy firm that supports entrepreneurial innovation to improve public education for low-income
children.

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