A *KEEPING PACE WITH DIGITAL LEARNING* REPORT

MARCH 2019

PLANNING FOR QUALITY

A Guide for Starting and Growing a Digital Learning Program

digital learning COLLABORATIVE

About the Digital Learning Collaborative

The Digital Learning Collaborative (DLC) works to illuminate key issues in digital learning, disseminate data and best practices, and guide practitioners, policymakers, the media, advocates, and interested observers.

As a membership-based organization, the DLC includes school districts, intermediate units, public agencies, non-profit organizations, and companies. Collaborative activities are supported financially by annual membership fees paid by providers, depending on the type and size of the member organization. School districts, most public agencies, and some non-profit organizations may join free of charge. We accept foundations as members but do not seek nor accept foundation funding at levels higher than members.

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Background

Data on student outcomes show that blended and online programs can be high-quality, low-quality, or anywhere in between. These results demonstrate the need for planning and investment by districts, schools, consortia and other entities that wish to create or expand blended or online learning options for students.

The following Planning for Quality Guide, excerpted from the tenth edition of *Keeping Pace with K-12 Blended and Online Learning*, researched and published by the Evergreen Education Group, presents strategies to address critical initial questions that all educators and stakeholders should ask when starting or expanding a blended or online program:

- What educational goals are we trying to meet?
- How do we plan and implement a successful program to meet those goals?
- How do we support and foster the cultural change created by this shift?

Those goals may include creating options for credit recovery and at-risk students; improving college readiness by increasing the availability of advanced courses; improving educational opportunities while addressing growing competition and shrinking budgets; maximizing funding, facilities, and staff; and ultimately transforming the instructional model with a goal of improving student outcomes. They must be prioritized and grounded in an understanding of existing constraints.

An unbiased guide to assist administrators

The following pages offer a roadmap to help you plan and launch your own blended or online or digital learning program. This guide serves as an unbiased guide to assist administrators faced with many choices that must be made to effectively implement blended and online learning in their school districts. Use this guide as a map to navigate through the maze of content and technology providers and critical planning decisions necessary to launch a quality blended or online learning program.

We trust you will find “Planning for Quality” a useful tool, and the Digital Learning Collaborative looks forward to providing you with even more resources like this guide to support your work to create digital learning options for your students.

Whether your program is for 50 students or 5000, blended or fully online, whatever your timeline and existing infrastructure, and whatever your educational and instructional goals; this guide can help you navigate the best route to design your program.

Introduction

The critical initial question that all educators and stakeholders should ask when starting or expanding an online and blended program is:

What educational goals are we trying to meet?

Those goals may include personalizing learning and improving college readiness for all students; creating new options for credit recovery and at-risk students; expanding the school day; providing innovative alternatives to challenge advanced students; and ultimately transforming the instructional model being used with a goal of improving student outcomes. Educational goals must be prioritized and grounded in an understanding of existing constraints.

Pages 5-9 in this guide provide an outline of major strategic planning issues and key questions to consider in the early stages of development. They are organized around four categories: **Content**, **Teaching**, **Technology**, and **Operations**.

QUESTIONS TO ASK

1 ORGANIZED STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS

A Include key stakeholders

B Agree on defined educational goals for a targeted group of students

- What grade levels will be served?
  - Will you offer blended learning, supplemental, full-time, or a mix of all?
- How will you manage the change process in your organization?
- Have you identified a high quality program leader?
- How will the blended program impact teacher and student roles and the use of time?
- What are your goals in terms of individualizing instruction for students?
- Will you operate on a traditional school calendar?
- Will courses be open entry/open exit?

Remember:

The goal is student learning

2 FOUR FOCUS AREAS

DECISIONS TO MAKE

CONTENT

- Content Acquisition
  - build,
  - buy,
    - Content Purchase Options
      - Comprehensive provider *(full curriculum)*
      - Individual courses
      - Individual learning objects *(units, lessons, or other objects)*
  - or a mix?
- How do Open Educational Resources fit into the plan?
- How do you evaluate the quality of online content? *(National Quality Online Standards)*
- How can you link course quality to student outcomes?
- Have you confirmed alignment with district instructional strategies?

TEACHING

- What are the standards for good online and blended learning instruction?
- How will you plan for teacher recruitment?
- What does professional learning look like for first-time online or blended learning teachers?
  - Teacher preparation programs
  - Mentoring
  - Professioanl learning by discipline
  - In-house or outsourced training?
- What process will you use to evaluate your online and blended learning teachers?
- How will you offer Special Education services unique to online and blended learning?
- What supports are needed for teachers in their first year of online or blended instruction?

TECHNOLOGY

- How will you ensure interoperability between technologies?
- Have you considered Total Cost of Ownership when making decisions?
- Which platform or LMS approach serves us best?
  - Commercial LMS
  - Open source LMS
  - Proprietary content platform(s)
- Internet access?
- End-user devices?
- Do you plan to use mobile devices?
- What features do we need in a Student Information System (SIS) going forward?
- How to create a process to choose the most appropriate LMS or platform
- How will our existing SIS work with online and blended learning?
- Do we need a synchronous tool?
- Professional learning for technology staff?

OPERATIONS

- What facilities upgrades are required to support the program?
- Counseling
- Enrollment and orientation
- Technical support
- Academic support
- Learning centers
- How will you communicate the new blended approach or program to students, parents, and teachers?
- What will the budget look like for this new instructional model?
- How will you conduct an evaluation of your program and learning results?
- Have you engaged in a strategic planning process?

3 PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION

CONTENT

Content Acquisition

- build,
- buy,
- or a mix?

Choose a mix of building and buying content, which will help you develop your expertise. Make sure you have a vision and leader to champion the effort.

Train teachers to design online courses and teach online. Online instructional design is not a skill inherent in all teachers. Building online content requires staff expertise, the commitment of resources, and an extended time horizon for development, but you maintain control and ownership. Engage outside course reviewers to evaluate homegrown content.

Remember that buying gives you access to high quality online content with immediate availability, but costs can be high and customization can be limited.

Content Purchase Options

- Comprehensive provider *(full curriculum)*
- Individual courses
- Individual learning objects *(units, lessons, or other objects)*

Keep in mind that many content providers offer turnkey blended solutions pairing a complete online curriculum with technology and services. This comprehensive approach is relatively quick and easy, but can limit options and precludes content ownership.

Weigh out options when it comes to acquiring complete courses and allowing for individual learning objects.

Keep in mind that free always seems better, but quality can vary and the responsibility for search and retrieval requires dedicated staff time and expertise.

How do **Open Educational Resources** fit into the plan?

To best utilize individual learning objects requires a commitment to the community that supports and fosters Creative Commons licensing, and it can be an effective component of the content acquisition mix. You should factor in the act of adding back to Creative Commons as well to share the expertise of your educators.

How do you evaluate the **quality of online content?**

Take the National Standards for Quality Online Courses and localize them for your use. Apply these standards to both content you develop internally or acquire externally.

Establish a review committee with various skill sets to examine content, instructional design, online assessment, technology interoperability, and usability. Make it better than the textbook committee.

Use formative and summative assessments in your blended program to demand more from your digital content. Challenge students to maturely rate online content. Engagement counts.

Will your content support **individualized instruction?**

Plan to track courses, units, lessons, and even learning objects to gains in student outcomes. Leverage the longitudinal tracking built into your LMS and SIS to retire ineffective content.

Have you confirmed alignment with **district instructional strategies?**

Align content with district instructional strategies, including Common Core implementation. Strive for equal course rigor through shared assessments across instructional environments. Blended courses are not the easy way out.

TEACHING

What are the standards for good online and blended learning instruction?

- Take the National Standards for Quality Online Teaching and localize them for your use. Quantify standards where possible and establish an evaluation rubric for teachers. Help them know what is expected.
- Help students take responsibility for their learning. In blended learning environments, commit to instruction that gives students an increased level of control over the time, place, path, and pace of their instruction.

How will you plan for **teacher recruitment?**

- Know your program type, academic goals, and targeted student population. Develop a local profile of an excellent blended learning teacher. Challenge existing teachers and new hires by using online instructional tools in review and hiring processes.

What does **professional learning** look like for first-time online or blended learning teachers?

- Teacher preparation programs
- Mentoring
- Professional learning by discipline
- In-house or outsourced training

- Avoid the myth, “any regular classroom teacher is qualified to teach online.” Some teachers will thrive using the new tool set offered online while others will struggle.
- Get ahead and have your own required, in-depth, rigorous professional learning offering available to teachers prior to their first online or blended teaching experience. Don’t rely on teacher preparation programs. Make professional learning your first thought, not an afterthought.
- Be willing to look outside your organization for quality online and blended learning professional learning expertise. Consider organizing by discipline. Math teachers unite!

What supports are needed for teachers in their **first year of online or blended instruction?**

- Push teachers towards a community of peers to share success strategies and work through tough times. Provide a formal structure, but encourage informal connections.
- Support teachers who are making a big shift in their instructional style. Online and blended environments call for teacher as facilitator. Help them master the new communications tools and requirements. Communicate, communicate, communicate.

How will you offer **Special Education services** unique to online and blended learning?

- Plan ahead to support special education students and Individual Education Programs (IEPs). Include special education staff members in professional development that allows them to engage students in support of their online instruction. Support a culture that involves special education staff early in the online course.

What process will you use to **evaluate** your online and blended learning teachers?

- Equip and train your administrators to understand online learning so they know good online and blended instruction when they see it. So much better than a brief classroom observation.
- Work with master teachers to establish a teacher evaluation rubric using nationally accepted standards, combined with local learning goals. Keep this group together to update the expectations based on successful online teaching techniques. Reward excellence.

TECHNOLOGY

How will you ensure **interoperability** between technologies?

Save money by truly integrating systems. As online and blended learning becomes an essential part of instruction, the need for technologies to seamlessly work together becomes critical.

Have you considered **Total Cost of Ownership** when making decisions?

Calculate the indirect and non-budgeted costs associated with the implementation of an online/blended learning technology. Low initial investments can be misleading.

Make sure the educational goals of your program drive your LMS choice. Create a review committee of LMS users in your organization to ensure that various use cases are considered.

Which **platform or LMS** approach serves us best?

- Commercial LMS
- Open source LMS
- Proprietary content platform(s)

Create a process to choose the most appropriate LMS or platform.

Choose an LMS that supports the 'native' importation of content as it will save you time and money while taking full advantage of the LMS features. If you purchase or license content, understanding how your online content will function in each LMS is an important part of the evaluation process.

Incorporate a tightly integrated Student Information System (SIS). Leveraging the instruction and achievement data gathered by your LMS requires a tight integration with your SIS. Look for solutions that are real-time and require less manual intervention.

How will students **access** their online tools?

- Internet access?
- End-user devices?
- Do you plan to use mobile devices?

Get ready for a large jump in school-based Internet bandwidth use and consider the access issues for all students outside the school building.

Consider your instructional goals when purchasing end-user devices or establishing Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) programs. Have a plan to support multiple types of end-user devices. Leverage online and blended learning to support 1:1 laptop initiatives or BYOD.

Implement a strong technical staff to support an Open Source solution, especially if you choose to customize the LMS for your needs. Always understand the long-term costs of a commercial LMS contract. Programs grow and costs increase.

Understand that commercial LMS solutions support organizations with limited technical resources. Be informed about what support is offered with an LMS contract.

What features do we need in a **Student Information System (SIS) going forward?**

Support delivery of student data from an LMS to an achievement 'dashboard' by using an evolved and flexible SIS that can also provide an easy and cost effective customization for unique blended learning programs and proven scalability for when your program grows.

How will our existing SIS work with online and blended learning?

Engage your SIS provider in a discussion about online and blended learning. Urge them to add features that support the unique nature of online learning. The bell schedule and defined academic terms may no longer apply.

Support those who support your quality instruction. Establishing a scalable online or blended learning program requires unique technology expertise.

Do we need a synchronous tool?

Professional learning for technology staff?

OPERATIONS

How will you offer **student support services** unique to online/blended learning?

- Counseling
- Enrollment and orientation
- Technical support
- Academic support
- Learning centers

What facilities upgrades are required to support the program?

Involve your guidance counselors in the planning and implementation process for any online or blending learning program. Give them a view into some representative online courses, so they can properly advise students.

Develop an online orientation course for students to set performance expectations, familiarize the students with the technology and gauge their commitment. Consider successful completion a requirement to gain access to registered courses.

Plan ahead for facilities upgrades needed to support your chosen style of blended learning. This might include, but not be limited to, room configurations, flexible furniture, power availability and providing non-traditional, student work spaces.

Consider offering non-traditional Learning Center environments in support of blended or credit recovery programs. Support student success with access to blended courses outside of school buildings and during extended hours.

Commit the resources needed to hire a dynamic leader. Blended learning offers an opportunity to consider new staffing models, including teachers, instructional coaches, graders, lab monitors, and other roles.

What will the **budget** look like for this new instructional model?

Be aware of the pitfalls of underfunding a new blended learning program in the first year of operation. Investment may be higher than initial revenues. Your best marketing is referrals from successful students in year one.

How will you conduct an **evaluation of your program** and learning results?

Work your program evaluation into your strategic planning and initial budget. Develop an integrated approach that allows you to monitor student outcomes, stakeholder satisfaction, and the quality of your content and teaching.

Plan to use data from LMS to inform your evaluation process. Put the systems in place that support commitment to longitudinal data. Establish transparency to the community through your stakeholder group.

Have you engaged in a **strategic planning process?**

Start your strategic planning process with a needs assessment to help identify targeted educational goals that will affect student outcomes, especially where you are presented with unique educational challenges.

Complete a vision, mission, and educational goals exercise and then use the outcome to drive key decisions. Involve diverse stakeholders, and post the results in a prominent place for all to see; don't file them away.

Make sure you engage in a competitive market analysis if you operate in an environment of choice. Outreach and marketing to parents and students is more important than ever.

How will you **communicate** the new blended approach or program to students, parents, and teachers?

Change the internal culture that assumes students are geographically bound.

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