

Blended Learning: Leveraging teachers and technology to improve student outcomes

CASE STUDY 3

By Steve Robinson, Policy Analyst

INTRODUCTION

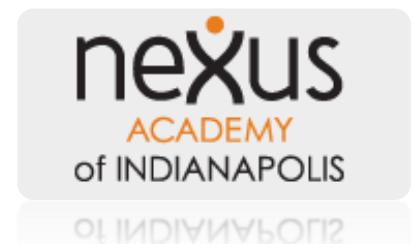
Technology has become a vital part of American life. Combined with the Internet, innovative new technologies bring the information of the world into the palm of our hands. Kids of all ages use iPhones, iPads, Facebook, Email, Wikipedia, and myriad other Web-based platforms every single day. Now imagine if we could leverage Web-based technology to deliver a customized, rigorous and creative education to Maine students. The good news is, we can. It's happening every day in classrooms across the country where students are engaged in blended learning.

So what is blended learning? Blended learning happens any time a student learns, in part, at a supervised brick-and-mortar location away from home and, in part, online with some element of student control over time, place, path, and/or pace. It can be done through traditional public schools or through public charter schools. Wherever it happens, blended learning takes advantage of innovative digital technologies while preserving the socialization of traditional classroom learning. Blended learning combines the best of old and new approaches to education.

The rise of digital learning presents parents, students, teachers, administrators and policymakers with the opportunity to positively transform education in Maine. In this third and last installment of our blended learning case studies, we'll explore a school that is using its own strategic approach to blended learning as they make a positive impact on students' lives.

CASE STUDY: **Nexus Academy of Indianapolis**

In the Midwestern United States, one charter school's approach to blended learning was ambitious right from the start. The first five Nexus Academy schools - three in Ohio (Cleveland, Columbus, and Toledo) and two in Michigan (Lansing and Grand Rapids) all launched on the same day: September 4, 2012. All were conceptualized, designed and launched as fully blended schools from the beginning, with the goal of creating an altogether different kind of high school. Nexus Academy schools are public and free to all students.



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According to the founders of Nexus, the goals were to preserve the personalization of virtual schooling while providing a physical space that inspires learning. The Nexus model allows flexibility and freedom of movement for students, uses individual student learning data (as opposed to the rotational clock) to arrive at the appropriate balance between face-to-face and online instruction, and provides an innovative staffing model with altogether new roles for teachers and mentors. In this model, teachers and mentors focus on the academic and emotional well-being of each student.

The early results for Nexus Academy are very promising. At the end of its first school year (2012-13), the Nexus Academy network of schools saw 92 percent of its seniors graduate, with 95 percent of those graduates being accepted into college. Comparatively, the student graduation rates for Michigan and Ohio are 74 percent and 80 percent, respectively.

Blended Learning at Nexus

What sets Nexus Academy apart from traditional public schools and other public charter schools is a unique approach to campus space and student freedom, a strategic delivery of online learning, and a reliance on data to drive students' daily experience.

Nexus students attend classes at a brick-and-mortar location four days a week. The schools are small by design, with an average total 9-12 grade enrollment at 300. According to the academy's founders, recent research has shown that smaller, more intimate school environments can boost performance and graduation rates.

Students choose whether they will go to class in the morning (8:00 AM – 12:00 PM) or in the afternoon (12:30 PM – 4:30 PM). Morning sessions are held Monday through Thursday and afternoon sessions are Tuesday through Friday.



Students typically spend fourteen hours per week on self-directed online lessons off campus, a.k.a. homework. This scheduling system serves two purposes. First, it ensures an optimal student-to-staff ratio throughout the week; and second, it allows students to engage in internships, take college classes, or pursue extracurricular activities such as athletics or performing arts.

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Nexus gives students a great range of freedom during the typical school day. Its approach to campus space and school day structure is more akin to a college campus or modern office than a traditional school. Rather than a typical classroom – chalkboard at the front and rows of forward-facing desks – Nexus campuses have subject-specific classrooms, large open spaces with various workstations, and “team zones,” where students can collaborate on projects.

The typical school day begins with an advisory session, during which students engage in collaborative activities and skill-building exercises with their “Success Coaches,” who serve as personal student mentors. The advisory sessions are followed by small-group face-to-face classes with English and math teachers who help students master concepts. The remainder of the school day is spent in online coursework and virtual classes.

Teachers remain the mainstay of students’ learning experiences. They are the knowledge authorities and they deliver traditional lectures on core subjects. Nexus provides an all-digital curriculum taught by teachers who work with students, either face-to-face (math and English) or online (all other subjects). Teachers’ efforts are bolstered by the Success Coaches, who develop one-on-one relationships with students and can tailor an educational experience to a student’s specific needs and interests. Success Coaches serve as advisors and mentors to students, while also providing a critical link between parents and teachers. Each coach works one-on-one with students to identify strengths and weaknesses, develop action plans, set goals, and deliver individualized help when it is needed.

Students are free to tackle their work from almost anywhere on campus, and they can even listen to their choice of music while they work. They are guided by an online planner that shows which lessons and assessments they need to complete for a given day. Success Coaches monitor the lesson planner to ensure a student is staying on track, and parents can access similar information from an online Web portal to see how their son or daughter is performing.

Both the teachers and the Success Coaches benefit from unique technologies as they work to provide a customized learning experience. “Nexus Academy is a high school designed around each student from the ground up, with the daily routine driven by data about his or her learning and activities designed to maximize both academic performance



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and social and emotional growth,” said Mickey Revenaugh, executive vice president and co-founder of Connections Education.

The Tech

The Nexus Academy approach to blended learning leverages advanced technology to provide students with customized educational experiences, and parents with unprecedented insight into their child’s progress.

Nexus uses two proprietary technologies to facilitate blended learning. The first is Connexus, an education management system provided by Connections Education, a subsidiary of Pearson. The second is LiveLesson®, an online tool, also provided by Connections Education, which allows students and teachers to interact through a virtual classroom.

Parents can use the portal to track their student’s progress, monitor performance, and communicate with teachers through secure message boards. Students use the same portal to measure their own progress, explore diverse educational resources, and learn about the extra-curricular activities available to them.

LiveLesson® serves as an online alternative to the brick-and-mortar classroom. The online classroom allows students to experience lectures remotely, view teachers’ instructions via a digital whiteboard, and answer questions posed to the class. Students can ask questions of their teachers and peers as they collaboratively explore new concepts and subject matter. Sessions on LiveLesson® can include an entire classroom, a small group, or even one student.



Data on student performance is also used to “dynamically group” students who need help with, or who excel in, certain subject areas. These groups are rearranged every 4-6 weeks. This classroom arrangement is vastly distinct from traditional public schools, where age is the primary determinant of student grouping. Nexus’ focus on data, however, ensures that similarly advanced students learn together, which is far more efficient.

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Another thing that makes the Nexus approach to blended learning distinct from other schools is its broad offering of electives. In addition to the usual core offerings of language arts, math, science and social studies, Nexus provides access to a diverse slate of elective courses.

Unlike most American high schoolers, Nexus students can take courses in journalism, marketing, art history, sports management, up to six foreign languages (including sign language), marine science, psychology, and computer programming. The school also offers a full array of Advanced Placement and Honors courses for students who excel. Perhaps the most original element of Nexus' blended learning model is Juilliard eLearning – an innovative partnership with the Juilliard School that equips students to learn and play music.



Nexus Principal, Jamie Brady, is a veteran educator who believes that blended learning is the way of the future for American education.

"I have watched education evolve over the past 17 years and I am amazed that some educators still believe that standing up in front of a classroom, writing on a chalk board, and lecturing to young children is impactful and beneficial," Brady told a local newspaper last year. "We are educating our future leaders and we better make sure they are prepared to compete in a global economy," she said.

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Great Schools for ME is a project of The Maine Heritage Policy Center, which focus on improving Maine's education system through customized education opportunities for all Maine students. All information is from sources considered reliable, but may be subject to inaccuracies, omissions, and modifications.

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