Middle-level teacher leaders and administrators discuss implementation of the blended learning initiative using the Innovation Configuration after attending a blended learning conference in Denver, Colorado. Participants include (clockwise from left): Bill Fearn (in striped shirt), Ryan Fitzpatrick, Coleen Lowance, Teresa Santos, Katie Guilbert, Bill Alexander, Traci Underwood, Laura Williams, and Jon Cooney.

THE
PERFECT MIX

WITH BLENDED PROFESSIONAL LEARNING, LEARNERS CHOOSE TIME, PLACE, PATH, AND PACE

BY AMIE CIEMINSKI AND DEAGAN ANDREWS

Cathy Nelson is a pioneer. She says she likes leading change and will try new methods to get improved results for the students and staff at the elementary school where she is principal.

Three years ago, Nelson heard about blended learning as a way to integrate technology and teacher-led instruction in the classroom and was hopeful that blended learning might produce better learning outcomes for students at Meeker Elementary in Greeley, Colorado.

She participated in individual and collective learning with her staff as they participated in book studies, online

courses, school visits, and collaborative discussions. She attended our principal leadership in blended learning program and collaborated with other principals and district leaders.

Meanwhile, her assistant principal worked on getting more computers for their school. They made space for minilabs, added wireless routers, and minimized barriers to implementation.

Some staff members embraced technology and were eager to begin, while others were hesitant, but they all showed a collective will to try something different. Nelson and her staff created a shared vision and plan for blended learning, chose digital content, and began the implementation process.

They used collaborative planning and weekly released time to learn together and work on improved instruction. Nelson listened to teachers' voices and examined student results as they continued to refine their implementation. She used observation tools to provide focused feedback to her teachers and was open to improving schoolwide implementation through feedback from others.

In fall 2016, Nelson's school welcomed visitors as part of the school district's first blended learning summit. The visitors expressed amazement at the strides the school had made in just a few years. The school's rating on the Colorado School Performance Framework provides evidence of the

Greeley-Evans School District
Greeley, Colorado

Number of schools: 33 (12 elementary, 5 K-8, 4 middle schools, 6 high schools, and 6 charter schools)

Enrollment (2017-18): 22,301

Racial/ethnic mix:

Hispanic: 60%

White: 33%

Black, Asian, or two or more races: 7%

Limited English proficient: 24%

Free/reduced lunch: 63%

Funding: Currently ranked 145 out of 178 for per-pupil funding with the passage of a mill levy override in November 2017. Before that, the district was the 10th-lowest funded school district in Colorado.

growth in student learning. The school moved from Priority Improvement Plan in 2013, defined as not meeting state expectations for student performance indicators, to Performance Plan in 2016, defined as meeting expectations.

THE STARTING POINT

The Greeley-Evans School District in Colorado began moving toward innovation several years ago as district leaders searched for ways to improve student achievement, leverage technology, and stay within a very limited budget.

The district, which is north of Denver, serves a diverse student community of over 21,000 K-12

students, including a large population of English language learners. The district has a history of providing quality professional learning, usually in a face-to-face setting with a cadre of instructional coaches and leaders during the workday or at released time sessions.

Principals and other leaders support ongoing professional learning using observation tools, job-embedded opportunities, and data-dialogue meetings with teams of teachers.

In 2014, district leaders created a five-year blended learning implementation plan to increase student achievement that included actions related to devices, budget, infrastructure, connecting stakeholders, and investing in people.

To maximize human and material resources, we identified a few schools that would serve as pilot sites and provide information that would support the implementation of blended learning at other schools by assessing the readiness of teachers and leaders, technology, and school culture.

Blended learning is an instructional model that facilitates personalized learning by leveraging technology tools and digital content as well as teachers' content and pedagogical expertise. It takes place in a traditional school building and adds the effective use of education technology to transform the learning experience for students.

Blended learning allows technology

IDEAS

SAMPLE ELEMENT OF GREELEY-EVANS' SCHOOLWIDE BLENDED LEARNING INNOVATION CONFIGURATION			
KEY ELEMENT: Tight feedback loops (Data-driven decisions): Data from digital tools and other sources are used to make decisions about student learning related to standards and provide students specific and timely feedback on their performance and academic growth in relation to standards.			
1 Beginning	**2 Emerging**	**3 Stabilizing**	**4 Systematizing**
• Infrequent use of digital tools leads to not enough data to inform instruction. • Infrequent use of assessment data from digital tools to make differentiated student decisions. • Primary reliance on classroom data. • Individual teacher-determined data kept by teacher. • Students receive infrequent feedback.	• Digital content beginning to be used with some frequency, providing students additional feedback and more meaningful data to inform differentiated instruction. • Beginning use of assessment data from digital tools but inconsistent use inhibits decisions for differentiation. • Intermittent use of external, digital, and classroom data. • Data are analyzed primarily on an individual basis. • Students receive infrequent feedback that is timely or specific.	• Digital content is being used for the recommended time. • Assessment data used to make decisions about students — primarily differentiated student groupings. • Frequent triangulation of external, digital, and classroom data. • Data teams meet on a regular basis along with individual teachers to make instructional decisions. • Data are stored and used from online systems to provide general trends. • Students receive timely and specific feedback through a variety of sources.	• There is a clear link between data from digital content and differentiated instruction. • Assessment data are used consistently to make decisions about individual student paths. • Consistent and well-designed blending of external, digital, and classroom data. • Consistent use of data by teams and individual teachers. • Data stored and used from online systems to provide deep analytics. • Students receive immediate feedback regarding performance and growth through a combination of digital tools and directly from their teacher on a daily basis.
COACHING QUESTIONS			
• What assessment data are readily apparent? How can they be used? • Who has an awareness of the data? How are they used or shared?	• How are digital tool data used? • What is the frequency of the use? • How are classroom and digital data compared? • What are data used for? [grades vs. differentiation] • Who has an awareness of the data? How are they used or shared?	• For what purposes are data used? • What is the frequency of usage? • How are various data compared and contrasted? • How can data be used to differentiate groups? • What is the impact of the decisions?	• What are the differentiation decisions being made? Are there others? • What analytics is used to provide feedback? Are there others to use? • What is the impact of the decisions?

and teachers to do what they do best by integrating teacher-led instruction with high-quality digital educational content customized to each student's needs and abilities.

Professional learning for blended learning started with book studies and online courses to help teachers and leaders understand blended learning models and how to implement these models in the classrooms.

For any initiative to be successful, it needs administrator support. We needed to help principals and assistant principals become leaders of blended learning in their buildings. To make this possible, a team of principals and school district leaders participated in professional learning for facilitators at the Friday Institute at North Carolina State University in winter 2015.

They developed a five-module series to support leadership in blended learning centered on five core concepts: defining blended learning; creating a culture that supports blended learning; shifting teaching and learning;

supporting teachers; and planning, implementing, and sustaining blended learning.

By participating in mostly face-to-face learning sessions, site-based leaders would learn about leading change in and implementing blended learning and create a road map for their school. The district's leadership in blended learning team was excited about the content of these learning modules.

However, we immediately began thinking of ways to design the professional learning that aligned with blended learning principles. This would allow leaders to experience the kinds of learning they were expected to support for students in their buildings.

MOVING FROM TRADITIONAL TO BLENDED PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

When designing professional learning that would support school district leaders and teachers in blended learning, our leadership in blended learning design team decided that we should move beyond traditional formats.

The leadership in blended learning team identified the group's needs, set goals for learning, created learning experiences using blended instructional models, and made adjustments along the way. We intentionally built collaboration into each learning session so principals could share their experiences, build on each other's expertise, and solve issues together.

We began by integrating technology tools within the sessions. Principals brought their laptops and tablets, and we created new norms that encouraged the use of technology during professional learning sessions.

Instead of sticky notes and markers, we used apps such as Padlet to brainstorm and Plickers and AnswerGarden to check for understanding. We also explained to

participants that blended learning was vastly different than simply substituting technology for paper-and-pencil tools. We needed to redesign other aspects of the professional learning experience and incorporate blended learning instructional models into our professional learning design.

We looked back at our working definition of blended learning, which involved learner choice of time, place, path, and pace. Incorporating choice of pace and path into our training designs, we created online modules using Schoology, a learning management system. Learners self-assessed their prior knowledge and took the beginner or intermediate path to learn more about a topic. Participants also had a choice of readings, videos, and discussion topics within the learning module.

Because we did not want to create gaps in learning for some learners depending on the path they choose, we created learning menus, which are helpful tools for differentiated instruction. The menus contained "must-dos" so that we could make sure that all learners were mastering essential content and "can-dos," which allowed learners to choose topics that were of interest or need to them.

Although there are several models of blended learning such as flipped learning, flex models, or lab rotation, station rotation was the most popular instructional design for blended learning in our pilot schools. In a station rotation, learners generally rotate through two or three stations that each focus on a different mode of delivery.

One station may be small-group instruction with the teacher for targeted learning, another station may be independent work with digital content and technology, and a third station may involve collaborative, face-to-face tasks with other learners.

Station rotation allows for collective learning as well as personalized learning

as collaborative groups are flexible and needs-based, instruction with the facilitators offers just-in-time training, and learners are able to choose different paths within the digital content.

The leadership in blended learning design team wanted adults to experience station rotation as learners and then have time to reflect on the experience. At the teacher station, we modeled using flexible groups based on different learner needs because the principals attending had a wide range of experience. Some had been implementing blended learning, some were going to begin implementation in the next few months, and the rest were at the awareness and initial stages of learning about blended learning.

At the technology station, participants worked independently using digital content and discussion boards to take different learning paths.

At the collaboration station, participants shared personal experiences, resources, tips, struggles, and solutions with fellow learners. We structured the activities, and principals served as facilitators.

By putting the learners in the seat of a student in a blended learning environment, leaders experienced firsthand the joys and frustrations that students would experience in the classroom.

WITHOUT A MAP, YOU MAY GET LOST

One of the challenges of implementing any initiative, especially at multiple school sites, is implementation drift or failure. Our design team realized that we must create tools for school leaders that would paint a clear picture of blended learning instructional models and support the implementation of blended learning in their buildings.

We also knew that, for deep implementation, we needed to be

IDEAS

For more information on blended learning, check out these resources:

• What is blended learning?: **www.christenseninstitute.org/blended-learning**

• Blended learning resource library: **http://learningaccelerator.org/recommendations-and-resources-for-school-districts**

• Personalized learning resources: **www.edelements.com/personalized-learning-resources**

• Leadership in blended learning at the Friday Institute for Educational Innovation: **http://pllc.fi.ncsu.edu/lbl**

• Greeley-Evans School District blended learning information: **www.greeleyschools.org/Page/13456**

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mindful of the change process. We used our working definitions of blended learning to craft an Innovation Configuration map that would help clarify what the practices looked like in use. An Innovation Configuration (IC) map is a concrete tool that describes the expectations for implementation of a new program or practice (Richardson, 2004).

The design team created the initial draft borrowing ideas from similar tools created by blended learning consultants and leaders in the Uinta School District in Wyoming. The design team then took the IC map to groups of principals, assistant principals, and early teacher implementers for feedback and refinement.

We wanted to make sure that the tool reflected common understandings of best instructional practice, blended learning, and stages of implementation. Additionally, the review of the tool provided another opportunity for collaborative conversations and the co-construction of knowledge.

The map has four components: targeted small-group instruction, tight feedback loops (data-driven decisions), student ownership, and quality student-to-student interactions (see sample IC map on p. 52). Because we wanted to keep the focus on instruction, we did not create components about specific technology tools, devices, or digital content. We intended to be tight about the blended learning principles in the components and loose about the specific blended learning model teachers employ.

Some people may not initially view quality interactions as part of a blended learning implementation, but for our school district, it was a necessity. With almost 25% of our students learning English, we wanted to integrate the models of blended learning with previous professional learning efforts concerning quality teaching for English learners. Furthermore, since the IC focuses on instructional practices, there was more alignment with the instructional practices contained in the Colorado State Model Evaluation System for teachers.

Since its inception, the IC map has proven to be a valuable tool for quality implementation and is used for self-assessment, implementation monitoring, constructive feedback, and planning next steps for individuals and staffs.

At many of our site-based learning sessions and community of practice meetings, participants use one or more of the components of the IC as a preassessment and set personal learning goals. During one-on-one sessions, instructional coaches use a cognitive coaching model in which a teacher reflects on current practice, chooses a domain to focus attention, sets goals for using the descriptors, and creates a plan to move forward.

Principals report that they use the IC to focus professional learning at their sites, set individual goals with teachers, coach individuals, and measure schoolwide implementation of blended learning practices.

Often principals or leadership

teams invite other principals, assistant principals, district leaders, instructional coaches, teachers, or outside visitors to observe classrooms to look for evidence of implementation using the IC as an observation tool. The data is collected through an online survey and then compiled into a report complete with pictures of implementation, commendations, links to other resources, and possible next steps for the staff to consider.

As we have continued using the IC, we have learned that introducing all four components of the map can be daunting. For schools or teachers that are just beginning to explore blended learning, we focus on the targeted small-group instruction component because it emphasizes differentiated instruction.

Next, we focus on quality student-to-student interactions because the collaborative tasks are often overshadowed by technology or small-group instruction. Even though they are distinct components, one principal said, "The great thing about the IC is that if they (the teachers) are doing well in one domain, it positively impacts others."

TAKING RISKS

Because we are asking other educators to take risks in their teaching and leading, we want to make sure that we model risk-taking through our professional learning designs. We created community of practice groups that meet face-to-face and virtually using our learning management system

with other practitioners to solve problems of practice, share successes, and network.

We used social media to encourage people to build their own personal learning networks and connect with others outside the school district. We experimented with webinars, back-channel tools, and virtual meetings. We discussed microcredentialing and tried badges.

There have been bumps in the road, such as when the Internet connection is lost, we forget to share documents, or our strategy is not effective. We have used these experiences as additional learning opportunities and ways to further the implementation of blended learning by asking, "What can you do when the technology fails?" or "How do you know that what you are doing is working?"

In the last few years, we have seen principals take more risks in the professional learning design at their sites, allowing more teacher leadership and choices for learning, and incorporating more technology tools and blended models. For example, one school combined the efforts of its professional learning and technology committees to offer three different learning options for teachers during site-based professional learning times.

One K-8 principal offered teachers a personalized professional learning menu that allowed each teacher to choose an area of focus from the IC and the preferred method for professional learning. He also leveraged the learning management system to house resources and online discussions so that teachers could learn at their own pace and at times convenient to them.

An elementary principal said, "I am learning that teams can learn, have deep conversations, and high levels of implementation without sitting and hearing the same information from me. In fact, better ideas come from teams

when I'm not leading."

One middle school principal said she sees students and staff more willing to try new things and know that failing is part of the learning process. "There has been support from students when they see their teachers trying something new, just as there is support from teachers when students are working on new learning," she said.

However, blended design is not always the best mechanism, and forcing a certain model into professional learning does not always work well. One principal explained his approach to personalized professional learning for his staff this way: "Sometimes we use a traditional model, sometimes individual flex. Sometimes we break out into targeted groups, and sometimes we use a hybrid of these."

CONTINUING THE LEARNING

Upon reflection, our team has identified several keys to our success, including the importance of establishing communities of fellow learners that were implementing blended learning, allowing participants to personalize learning for themselves and their schools, and continual reflection and refinement.

By creating a diverse team of lead learners, we tapped the strengths of each person, built credibility with other leaders, and developed stronger norms of collaboration. By leveraging partnerships within our community and with outside organizations, we accelerated our learning of best practice and tailored practices to meet the needs of our school district.

Evaluations from our sessions indicated that teachers and leaders appreciated moving away from one-size-fits-all professional learning, having choices, and meeting with other learners in communities of practice.

We intentionally seek opportunities to learn from others, reflect on that

learning, adapt to the needs of students and adults, and share learning with others in and outside of the district. To that end, we have taken high school teams of teachers and principals on excursions to other high schools implementing blended learning models.

In fall 2016, the school district hosted a blended learning summit in which we showcased what we have learned from our attempts to leverage technology for the sake of our students through speakers, breakout sessions, and site visits.

We demonstrated the use of the IC as a tool for growth and several blended learning practices at the district's 2016 and 2017 blended learning summits, which attracted participants from other school districts. By incorporating blended learning models in our professional development, we differentiated and met the needs of all of our adults better than before.

We have seen our best teachers change the blended learning model to match the intended learning targets and students' needs daily. We want to demonstrate that same openness to new learning and responsiveness to meeting the needs of our principals and teachers through all of our professional learning.

REFERENCE

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