EDITOR’S NOTE
Personalized learning tailors instruction to the individual needs and abilities of each student, increasing engagement and improving overall learning outcomes. This Spotlight will help you investigate online tutoring as an academic support; evaluate how schools can improve their online tutoring programs; explore how schools can integrate academic recovery into the school day; learn effective strategies for tailoring instruction to individual students; and more.

Personalized Learning

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Schools Are Spending Big Bucks on Online Tutoring. Here’s What They’ve Learned

By Libby Stanford

Tutoring works.

That’s been the message for schools and educators since before the COVID-19 pandemic, with lots of research to back it up. But pervasive staffing problems have gotten in the way.

That is, until online tutoring came along. For decades, companies like Varsity Tutors and FEV Tutor have been offering online and virtual tutoring services to school districts. Startups like Paper, which began offering on-demand tutoring in the 2018-19 school year, seized the pandemic moment and ramped up services.

For many districts, the online tutoring services have been a logical investment, a way to reap its benefits while avoiding the logistical complications of finding in-person help, especially as federal ESSER funds rolled in.

But it hasn’t been that simple.

Researchers say tutoring works best if it’s high dosage (offered three or more days of the week), consistent, and personalized to the student. The on-demand chat box version of tutoring that many have come to associate with the online world doesn’t often meet those qualifications. It requires students to show up on their own accord and be self-aware of the areas in which they may need help. Often, students don’t get the same tutor at every session.

Such pitfalls have led districts in Columbus, Ohio, and Santa Ana, Calif., to cancel contracts with Paper, which offers exclusively on-demand tutoring, after not enough students utilized the service, according to Chalkbeat.

“High-impact tutoring is a relationship-based tutoring,” said Susanna Loeb, the director of the Annenberg Institute at Brown University, which produces research on effective education practices. “It relies on an adult to understand a student, understand their needs, be there to celebrate successes with them, be there to support them.”

Most districts initially went for on-demand tutoring and since haven’t seen the benefits, said Anthony Salcito, the chief institution business officer at Varsity Tutors.

“The thing that’s happened in this country is [on-demand tutoring has] been the bulk of what schools have opted for initially,” Salcito said. “[We all have] sort of put what I would consider the supplemental support as the foundation as opposed to actually putting tutoring front and center.”

Now, some companies and district leaders have found themselves altering their virtual tutoring strategy so that it is most effective for students.

The most popular strategy in town

Since the start of the pandemic through March 15 of this year, school districts across the country had spent $1.7 billion, or $199 per student, of their COVID-19 federal relief funding on tutoring, both online and in person, according to data from FutureEd, a Georgetown University research center that has been analyzing COVID-19 relief spending.

There’s a federal stamp of approval, too: The Biden administration has made it clear that tutoring should be one of the top priorities for the pandemic funds. It launched its National Partnership for Student Success, an initiative to bring 250,000 tutors and academic mentors to schools through partnerships with education nonprofits and AmeriCorps.

The support behind tutoring makes sense—it’s a strategy with significant evidence backing it. On average, tutoring can increase student achievement by around three to 15 months of learning across grade levels, according to a research review from the Annenberg Institute. It’s also one of the most effective strategies to increase achievement for lower-income students, the report says.

“When you look at the research, what’s interesting is that tutoring stands out above everything else,” Loeb said. “We know that things are important for schools: good teachers, good curriculum, all sorts of things like that. But if you’re thinking about a student and how to make sure that student really does better over time, tutoring is the only thing that we found with evidence—and it has substantial evidence.”

Online tutoring itself is also not new. Not long after use of the internet broadened, tutoring companies have popped up offering students and educators online services.

But the pandemic pushed online tutoring into a new arena. More districts invested in devices and internet services so students
could access schooling at home. That shift toward technology, coupled with increased funding from the federal government, made online tutoring a more alluring investment for district leaders.

“The pandemic didn’t really change the demand for academic support,” Paper CEO Philip Cutler said. “I think what really changed was the use of technology more broadly in schools.”

Not a simple fix

In December 2020, the Jefferson County school district in Louisville, Ky., entered into a contract with FEV Tutor to offer about five hours of tutoring per week to around 7,000 3rd through 12th graders.

“We, like every other district in the nation, are experiencing staffing shortages,” said Dena Dossett, the district’s chief of research. “What this online tutoring allows us to do is provide that additional support that would be very challenging to do in person.”

The Jefferson County district made a point to ensure that its tutoring would follow the Annenberg research, Dossett said. That’s why the district went with FEV Tutor for the bulk of its program. The tutoring service helps schools in the district to identify students struggling with core subjects based on their MAP scores, which come from tests administered at several points throughout the year. Those students then participate in live video tutoring with the same tutor five hours a week during class time.

“We anticipated seeing growth because [FEV Tutor is] using the MAP scores to pinpoint what instructional needs the students have,” Dossett said. “It’s individualized one-on-one. So they’re able to dig a little bit deeper and have more time to provide differentiated support.”

The company has offered personalized tutoring to districts since its inception in 2009, said Ryan Patenaude, the executive vice president and co-founder of FEV Tutor. Its goal is to improve learning by strategically working with the district, Patenaude said. The company uses the Annenberg research to guide its tutoring model.

“Everyone thinks tutoring has to be after school, it has to be homework help, it has to be what the status quo tutoring is,” Patenaude said. “There’s so much more that can be done with tutoring.”

So far, it has worked for Jefferson County. Students who used FEV Tutor saw their math scores increase 4.5 points and their reading scores increase 4.2 points in a winter-to-spring 2021-22 analysis of NWEA MAP scores. Students who didn’t use FEV Tutor grew, too, but not as much.

Other tutoring companies are starting to shift their tutoring models to more closely follow the research. Varsity Tutors has expanded its high-dosage tutoring to include on-demand and teacher-assigned tutoring.

The high-dosage tutoring allows districts and schools to provide targeted tutoring to a population of students who might be struggling more in one subject area than another, while the teacher-assigned tutoring allows schools to provide intensive support as needs arise, said Salcito, the Varsity executive. Both options give students access to the same tutor every time they log on.

“It’s giving tremendous power to teachers to help individualize instruction, not only reactively but proactively,” Salcito said. “We think this is going to be not only great for identifying kids at risk of failing but also empowering teachers to help relieve the stress and burden that they have to do this work on their own.”

Where on-demand tutoring fits in

So why does on-demand online tutoring seem to fall so short? For one thing, it requires students themselves to take initiative. Only students who log in three days a week for at least 30 minutes of live tutoring help are going to have significant academic gains, and those students are often already high achievers, Loeb said.

“When you start to get computers involved with online tutoring, it’s easy to move to that opt-in, and you’re really going to miss a lot of kids,” she said. “In general, it’s really hard for students to understand what they need support with. So that’s why a program that uses data to understand students’ needs, has material there to support their development, is really much more beneficial.”

That doesn’t mean on-demand tutoring has no place in schools. Jefferson County uses Paper as an on-demand service for middle and high school students in addition to its tutoring with FEV Tutor. Cutler, the CEO of Paper, sees such services as one piece of the overall academic-recovery puzzle, when used as a tool alongside other academic-recovery strategies—such as after-school programs, mental health supports for students, and extended learning time.

“I don’t think that it’s a one-size-fits-all solution,” Cutler said. “Districts need to know their community; they need to know what works best.”

The Omaha school district in Nebraska recently applied this approach when developing a three-pronged tutoring program for its students. In addition to on-demand online tutoring offered by Paper, the program includes in-person, high-dosage tutoring by teachers, who will be paid extra for working with students after school. Other students in the district’s separate after-school programs will also receive in-person tutoring.

Susanne Cramer, Omaha’s executive director of school improvement, noted that the district has also placed academic-recovery liaisons at each school to oversee both the district’s tutoring and summer learning programs.

“That consistent relationship, alignment to [core classroom] instruction, and that dosing component of 50 hours or 36 weeks, that’s the golden triangle of what we’re trying to achieve,” she said.

Cramer said the district is following the same Annenberg research that shows consistent relationships and high doses of tutoring are most effective. The program is new, so the district doesn’t yet have data to track students’ progress, but it will be assessing students throughout the program to see how well it’s working. ■
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How to Make Online Tutoring Work For Your School: 5 Best Practices

By Libby Stanford

Many districts have invested in online tutoring as an academic recovery strategy, partly because staffing shortages make it difficult to find in-person tutors.

But research says it will take more than on-demand homework help for most students to make academic gains. That’s because online homework help doesn’t ensure a consistent relationship between student and tutor and often has low engagement.

There are ways for districts to optimize the impact of online tutoring, however. And, if done well, online tutoring can help schools reach more students through services with multiple languages, flexible schedules, and the ability to get help from home.

“Online tutoring doesn’t have to mean after-school tutoring; it doesn’t have to mean opt-in tutoring,” said Susanna Loeb, the director of the Annenberg Institute at Brown University, which has produced research on effective tutoring practices. “It really can be very similar [to in-person tutoring].”

Here’s how districts can ensure they get the most out of online tutoring programs.

1. Be strategic about who receives tutoring

One problem with on-demand tutoring, in which students must opt in to receive support, is that it requires students to take the initiative to receive help.

That often leads to already high-achieving students utilizing tutoring instead of students who need it most. It also requires students to know where they need support, which can be difficult for young students especially, Loeb said. Instead, districts should select who receives tutoring based on students’ specific academic needs.

The Jefferson County school district in Louisville, Ky., uses this approach to identify students for its online tutoring program with FEV Tutor. Around 7,000 students receive high-dosage tutoring through the program, and those students are chosen on a school-by-school basis.

2. Develop relationships with consistent tutors

Effective tutoring is relationship-based. That’s why in-person can be so much more effective than online tutoring, Loeb said.

But online tutoring can still provide students with those relationships by having them work with the same tutor every session. Some online tutoring companies, including Varsity Tutors and FEV Tutor, offer this approach, citing evidence that shows relationships improve tutoring outcomes.

“It’s very much a relationship-based activity; that’s what makes it impactful,” Loeb said. “So, you want to make sure they have that same tutor.”

Not only can this help students improve their academic outcomes, but it also gives them access to a mentor, who can help them with their social-emotional well-being.

3. Ensure tutoring is high-dosage and done during the school day

Low engagement is one of the most common issues with online tutoring. When tutoring is used as a resource for students when they’re at home, it’s nearly impossible for schools to ensure they are engaging with the program.

The best way to get around that is to build the tutoring into the school day, Loeb said. Often, teachers set students up for online tutoring during work time in class periods. This allows students to get the one-on-one help with the tutor without taking the teacher away from their duties.

“The benefit of offering online tutoring during the school day is that the students who may need it the most usually have a much easier time engaging if they’re at school.”

SUSANNA LOEB
Annenberg Institute at Brown University

4. Involve teachers

To embed online tutoring into the classroom even further, districts can weave teachers into the virtual tutoring process.

Varsity Tutors recently launched a teacher-assigned tutoring program to help with this. The program allows teachers to get students targeted help as soon as the need arises.

Often, teachers identify students in need of tutoring based on their scores on MAP, an assessment given three times a year, said Dena Dossett, the district’s chief of research.

“We rely on the schools,” Dossett said. “They know the students best in terms of which students need what types of support.”

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The benefit of offering online tutoring during the school day is that the students who may need it the most usually have a much easier time engaging if they’re at school.”
one with a tutor right away.

“The teacher can go on their portal, upload the lesson, click a button, and say ‘I need three sessions with Billy,’ and the tutor is right there to reinforce, provide notes to the teacher, et cetera,” said Anthony Salcito, the chief institution business officer at Varsity Tutors. “So it’s giving tremendous power to teachers to help individualize instruction, not only reactively, but proactively.”

The teacher-assigned tutoring approach can also give teachers the opportunity to challenge students who are advanced with different materials, Salcito said.

5. Evaluate throughout the school year

It’s important for districts to know how impactful their online tutoring programs are. The first step to that process would be to look at engagement, Loeb said.

“I would start really simply by seeing, first, which students are receiving tutoring,” she said. “Are you getting tutoring to the students who need it the most? Are they attending? Those two ways of assessing are really important before you get into its effectiveness.”

Then districts can look at how tutoring is impacting students’ academic achievement and well-being. Assessments given periodically, such as MAP, can be helpful tools to see how tutoring is impacting student academics, Loeb said.

Tutoring can also positively impact indicators of student well-being, such as attendance and behavior. It’s important for districts to assess students who receive tutoring on those factors as well, Loeb said.

“You can just ask them some questions about how well they feel supported, how much they like school, some of those softer measures that importantly capture students’ engagement and general well-being,” she said.
Making Time for Academic Recovery In the School Day: Ideas From 3 Principals

By Denisa R. Superville

Schools are still figuring out how to add time for academic recovery during and after the regular school day to help students catch up from the upheaval of pandemic-era schooling.

It’s not always easy, given the constraints of the school day schedule and the logistics of staffing, not to mention the barrage of vendors offering their recovery services and products. Many principals are in uncharted territory and are most likely defaulting to the traditional ways of doing things—and that’s likely limiting access to accelerated learning and other academic recovery, according to Sarah Woulfin, a professor in the department of educational leadership at the University of Texas, Austin.

“Leaders have more agency than it looks like on paper, and yet we’re still not seeing those leaders making leaps into action and shifting things around in their schedules and in their use of time,” Woulfin said.

Providing effective learning recovery also requires a mix of instructional and managerial leadership—whether it’s adding a new tutoring program or adjusting the pacing of the curriculum—and some of it is brand new terrain for principals.

“There isn’t a roadmap for it,” Woulfin said.

“[School leaders] haven’t been in this scenario before to figure how we would shift the 7th grade curriculum to accelerate in a certain way, or what are the tradeoffs of pulling kids from certain classes to do math tutoring in certain grade levels, or how do we ensure that the right kids sign up for online tutoring that restores equitable outcomes—because certain things could even end up getting exacerbated through these tutoring or accelerated learning efforts.”

And despite millions of dollars from the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (or ESSER) still available to spend in districts, school systems have not always given local principals the flexibility to create tailor-made programs that would work for their specific schools and communities.

But some districts and principals have found ways to carve out dedicated time on school days to help students recoup learning—or keep them from falling further behind. Here are ideas from three of them.

Paying for transportation

Larry Haynes, the principal of Oak Mountain Middle School in Shelby County, Ala., got a $7,500 state grant to overcome a frequent roadblock to tackling academic recovery programs at the end of the school day: transportation.

The grant allowed Haynes to cover a stipend for the school bus driver to pick up students attending a 90-minute after-school tutoring program and pay two teachers to help students meet state math and English/language arts standards.

Academic gaps existed before the pandemic, but they widened during the pandemic as the number of home-schooled students ballooned and the level of attention and support students received at home varied, Haynes said.

Finding time during the school day can be a struggle, Haynes said, with leaders having to weigh whether to remove students from lunch, physical education, or other classes to get extra academic support in core subjects.

The school first expanded its advisory period from 30 to 55 minutes to help students focus more on standards recovery in math and reading. Subject-area teachers work with students in the areas in which they need help.

The school later added the 90-minute after-school tutoring program, with 45 minutes devoted to math support and 45 minutes for reading and English/language arts.

The three-day-a-week program is offered to students who test below their grade level on an i-Ready diagnostic or the state assessment. Attendance varies, from eight or nine students per session to 30, Haynes said.

Getting young learners up to speed

In Gray Court, S.C., Principal Farrell C. Thomas used federal COVID relief money to target academic recovery.

While leading Waterloo Elementary School, a K-5 school, Thomas set up a grade-level-based after-school tutoring program for students. Over six-week periods, students identified as needing help attended the twice-a-week program heavily focused on phonics and reading.

It was staffed by teachers in the school.

Early-childhood education is not mandatory in South Carolina, so students have always entered schools with different levels of preparedness, Thomas said. But the pandemic exacerbated the learning gaps among the youngest students, who had to start their K-12 journey online.

The program was small, with no more than 10 or more students per grade and two grade-level teachers per grade. The goal was to keep the program as close to a one-to-one ratio as possible as students worked toward strengthening or developing critical skills, Thomas said.

Now a principal at a middle school, Thomas set up a similar 90-minute tutoring session targeted at older students who consistently scored below the 20th percentile on assessments.
A student struggling in 6th grade math, for example, would be referred to the program by their teacher, while the school’s instructional coach reaches out to the child’s parents to inform them that their child has been identified as needing additional help. Assistance is offered primarily in math and English.

Teachers keep track of the student’s progress on assignments and assessments. While the program is six weeks long, some students stay longer. Haynes said he’d increase the number of days students can get help if he had more money to do so.

When the program first started in the 2020-21 school year, teachers received $60 an hour to participate. Now it’s about $20—not enough to entice a lot of teachers who are already overworked, Thomas said.

“Teachers are burnt out,” he said. “If I had multiple teachers who wanted to do it, Monday through Thursday, we would to it. But we can’t get them. Some are reluctant. Some say one day. So you don’t have the continuity of the kid having the same person.”

School leaders and teachers don’t necessarily have to tack on additional programs in the school day to help students regain the ground they’ve lost, Thomas said. Good teaching practices—along with professional-development support for teachers on how to help students who are behind—can go a long way.

**Scaling up a lunchtime program**

Principal Mary Fulp used a $20,000 allocation from the Matanuska-Susitna Borough school district in Palmer, Alaska, to set up a 45-minute lunchtime academic support program for students who had been flagged as needing assistance.

The district developed an early-warning system, where teachers reported grades and other evidence of student progress on days following a graded assignment. That allowed principals to develop just-in-time academic assistance for students to help them complete assignments and move from incomplete grades to C grades or higher.

A color-coded system indicated to principals, like Fulp, who led Colony Middle School last year, which students should be flagged for extra help. A student coded red, with a grade of D or below, for example, was pulled aside for the lunchtime support.

“We made it a very positive thing as much as possible because we knew that they are losing valuable social time,” Fulp said. “We knew it was working when kids started to choose it.”

The school-family relationship was part of what made the program successful, Fulp said.

School officials sent a message to parents on Fridays letting them know that their child needed to earn a C or higher in a class and that they could get extra help in the lunchtime program. School officials also gave parents other academic support options, including online tutoring, that they could use at home to help their children, Fulp said.

Students also played a huge role. They sent a weekly Friday email to their parents about their goals for the week, what they’d accomplished, and their plans to address any issues with their grades.

“Everyone had a different need,” Fulp said. “It was almost like every student was on an individualized learning plan in order to help them move forward. They were all at different places with hardships, and learning, and mental health concerns that led to where they were.”

The lunchroom program was staffed by one person, but other teachers gave up their lunch period to pitch in. Teachers got a $175 honorarium when the number of hours they devoted to the program reached the equivalent of a full day’s worth of work.

Lindsay Jack, the librarian at Colony Middle School, who oversaw the program, said it was successful, helping students finish, on average, about four missing assignments they would not have otherwise completed.

But there were drawbacks. The first was that only a few students were able to attend—about 60 students, or 20 or so per grade level, Fulp said. The teachers staffing the program were not always experts in the areas where students were struggling. And with 10 minutes devoted to lunch, students had only about half an hour to work with the teacher and complete their assignments, she said.

The school took all of that to heart and improved the program this year, increasing the amount of time students spend with a teacher and ensuring that that time is spent with the subject expert in the area in which the students were struggling.

In the new iteration, students spend 55 minutes during designated “focus” time with the teacher. (That means that a child who is having trouble in multiple subjects could potentially get an additional 55 minutes a week of academic support in each subject.)

Jack monitors the grades of the students who had been recommended to the program. The school has also started an after-school math tutoring program for students who need extra help, Jack said.
Over 30 years ago, I took my first job in public education as a high school biology teacher, and instantly knew this was the career path for me. What solidified my passion for education were the “ah-ha” moments, or those moments when at first a student struggled, and then, after teaching them in a way they could relate to, seeing their eyes light up from the excitement of learning.

After, I worked in a variety of roles in Miami-Dade County Public Schools, from dean of students to principal to now overseeing the strategy and vision of one of the largest online public schools in the nation. No matter my position, my priority has and will always be making sure we are doing what is best for students.

The past several years have challenged us all, and we’ve all felt the effects of the pandemic. As a former brick-and-mortar principal, my heart went out to educators and families who were struggling with emergency remote learning, especially knowing that with the right tools, resources, and support, students can thrive in the online learning environment.

While it has been a difficult time, the pandemic has also allowed K-12 educators to reimagine and rebuild a system that has remained unchanged for decades. I think one of the most important lessons we learned is the key role that technology plays in improving the student learning journey, and the future of education overall.

The Right Online Tools & Resources Make All The Difference

There has been a lot of attention placed on online learning over the past several years, but what the majority of students experienced during the pandemic was emergency remote learning, which is not what true online learning is.

True online learning has been around for more than two decades and focuses on teacher training and support, personalized learning for students, digital curriculum specifically created for asynchronous learning, and constant communication between teachers and families. In contrast, remote emergency learning was a quick solution to ensure students kept learning during COVID-19, and therefore these key pillars of online learning were not necessarily in place.

Even though schools and educators had to learn how to incorporate new digital tools quickly, when done right they saw the benefits by the end of the year. For example, engaging digital curriculum and tools allow teachers to have more one-on-one interaction with students, providing teachers with better insights on how their students are doing.

Digital tools have also allowed teachers to save time, as well as give them access to more actionable and immediate information. For example, at FlexPoint, our curriculum includes a pre-test results dashboard that allows teachers to see where students need additional support in their courses, and what they have mastered. This enables teachers to reach out to students and families when additional support is needed.

Looking Into a Magic Crystal Ball

In the future, I see teachers becoming brain surgeons. What I mean by that is that they will be able to immediately pinpoint where students are struggling in a course through innovative technology such as artificial intelligence and data mining. While there isn’t an exact timeline as to when this will happen, I know that when it does, new technology will further help teachers understand what individual students need to comprehend the material and master the content.

Ultimately with tools like AI, educators will be able to develop lessons in a way that can predict the best way students learn, and therefore, will do an effective job in increasing learning outcomes.

By tailoring to their interests, students will be more engaged in their learning which leads to greater comprehension. For example, in a math lesson, personalization would look like including baseball stats for a student who loves the sport, or if a student loves fashion design, displaying math problems through how much fabric is needed to make a shirt. Plus, with AI we can learn what student’s interests are before they even enter the classroom, which reduces the trial and error that teachers go through when figuring out what resonates best with their individual students.

And remember, we’re here to help. Visit flexpointeducation.com/contact.
After taking a break from teaching in a traditional school setting to spend time with my daughter 20 years ago, I decided I was ready to come back to education. But I wanted to do something that was new and innovative to move learning forward for students. My colleagues recommended Florida Virtual School (FLVS), which at the time was in its infancy. And, once I learned the organization’s dedication to meeting students where they are, I was sold.

During the first few months of teaching at FLVS, I saw how intentional the instructors were when serving our students’ individual needs, and I knew online education was the place for me. I remember being nervous that I may not be able to make as strong of connections with my students in the online setting as I did in the brick-and-mortar classroom, but what I found was the opposite due to the amount one-on-one time I had with my students and families.

Throughout the years, I have learned what works and doesn’t work to engage students online. I have found the best way is through personalized learning. By getting to know your students, you can help them feel comfortable so that they share their thoughts with you, building that rapport and connection. Here are a few ways to personalize learning for your students to build even stronger relationships:

1. **Show that you aren’t perfect, and mistakes are a part of life.**

   I don’t know about you, but I’ve made many mistakes throughout my life. But every mistake I’ve made has been a great learning experience, teaching me valuable lessons. It’s important to show your students that everyone makes mistakes because then they may not be as scared to make their own. One way to do this is by making a mistake when you are working with them one-on-one. Make a mistake and then shake it off! Laugh with your students when errors happen to show them it’s no big deal. It’s also a great way to break the ice.

2. **You’re a human — remind your students of that!**

   I am a mom, a wife, and I love the beach. But my students wouldn’t know that if I didn’t tell them. Rather than having them think that I am just someone “on the screen,” I change that perception by telling them about myself. Then, no matter what you tell your students, see if they can relate to what you’re sharing. For example, I told one of my students I loved the beach and from that comment, she mentioned her dream to surf competitively one day.

3. **Build confidence by encouraging one-on-one conversations.**

   Remember being in high school and not understanding something, but being afraid to raise your hand because you didn’t want to embarrass yourself in front of classmates? This still happens. Which is why I encourage students to send an email or text with their questions after the lesson. That way, I’m able to help them better understand the lesson without the added pressure.

That simple mention encouraged her to talk about her hobbies and interests, which leads to comfortability together.

**PERSONALIZED LEARNING**

Builds Rapport with Students & Families

By Robin Winder, Senior Director of Instruction, FlexPoint Education Cloud and Florida Virtual School
Although it’s been around since the late 1990s, blended learning has made a resurgence due to its ability to help support student learning in a rapidly changing world. The National Education Association (NAE) defines blended learning as “an educational program that integrates a virtual and face-to-face environment for students.”

Students learn in different ways, so it is important to recognize the unique benefits of blended learning and its potential to support teachers in meeting the needs of a diverse group of learners. These benefits include students having control over the place, path, and pace of their learning, student ownership, and the flexibility families and educators are looking for.

Additionally, by utilizing different blended learning models, student engagement drastically increases. In fact, a report from Education and Information Technologies revealed that, when compared to traditional learning, 73% of educators believe blended learning has improved student engagement.

Knowing that personalized and blended learning leads to increased student engagement, we recommend starting with deciding which blended learning classroom model works best for your students depending on your technological capabilities and availability.

To help you decide, we’ve highlighted the seven different blended learning classroom models so that you can discover what will work best for your school or district:

1. **A La Carte Model**: Allows students to take supplemental courses online – whether they want to accelerate their learning, catch up, or take unique courses that their traditional school may not offer.

2. **Enriched Virtual Model**: Requires students to attend in-person one or two days a week for in-person learning, with the majority of learning taking place outside of a physical school building. It allows for group-based work and teacher-led instruction, while also holding students accountable for their online work.

3. **Flipped Classroom Model**: This “flips” the traditional model of class time and homework. When students attend the daily in-person class time, they practice what they learned, do homework, and work on projects that enhance and enrich their learning.

4. **Station Rotation Model**: Students rotate to different learning activity stations, with one of the stations using student-led online learning. This provides a higher-level of personalized instruction from teachers, and more individualized time with students resulting in stronger teacher-student relationships.

5. **Lab Rotation Model**: Students move through stations on a fixed schedule in a dedicated computer lab.

6. **Individual Rotation Model**: This model works around the teacher’s schedule or time block and students don’t necessarily rotate to every station. Instead, they only rotate to the stations tailored to their individual learning needs.

7. **Flex Model**: Students work through their online courses at their own pace, based on their individual learning needs. This flexibility is what differentiates the flex model from the rotational models. Teachers will monitor their status and check-in with students, allowing them time to ask questions and receive assistance when needed.

No matter which classroom model you choose, the goal should always be finding what works best for your students’ needs, allowing instructors to personalize each student’s learning to engage and support them.

If you’re interested in learning more about how online learning can engage your students or in how blended learning can help personalize learning, visit flexpointeducation.com/contact.
Personalizing instruction to the needs of individual students is hard. It takes a lot of planning, a commitment to understanding each student’s academic and social needs, and smart use of ed-tech tools. That is probably why most K-12 students still learn the same material, at relatively the same pace, for the same subjects.

To understand why it is difficult (but possible) to tailor instruction to each student’s individual needs, Education Week asked teacher Tricia Proffitt to outline what her teaching looks like for three students with very different learning needs in her dual-language English classes at Belvidere Central Middle School in Illinois. Proffitt has been developing personalized teaching approaches for years and has continued to do so during the pandemic. Belvidere is currently all-remote.

The bottom line: Three students learning the same subject are having completely different experiences with the same teacher.

Here’s a look at the experiences of three of her students:

#1: English-Language Skills

This middle school student arrived in the United States from South America less than a year ago. She can’t read English and has “very little” English-speaking skill, Proffitt said.

The Plan: Each week, Proffitt creates a separate work plan for Student 1. Proffitt mimics the standards she’s setting for her class that week for an assignment that’s manageable and worthwhile for Student 1. For instance, if the class is reading a short story that week, Proffitt assigns her a separate short story on her level, in her language. The online vocabulary platform Learn That Word allows Proffitt to select specific English skills for her to work on while other students are doing different exercises in the same program. The weekly work plan includes direct hyperlinks to online assignments so the student doesn’t have to dig through files on her Chromebook to find the right links.

The Result: Proffitt had to do a lot of “trial and error” before she landed on methods for communicating clear expectations to the student and ensuring that she understood those expectations. The student was quickly getting overwhelmed when Proffitt sent her daily instructions in the early weeks of the school year.

Now, Proffitt is taking a more personalized approach: “I send her the work plan on Monday. Via Google Translate and emails and chats, we get the kinks worked out to what the expectations are [for the week],” Proffitt said. “She’s working on the skills that she can handle, and she’s doing great.”

#2: Ahead of the Class

One of Proffitt’s students demonstrated early in the new school year that she was operating well above grade level. Her vocabulary and grammar usage stood out, as did her enthusiasm for the class and eagerness to help her classmates.

The Plan: Several of the online programs Proffitt uses in her class allow her to tailor assignments to each student’s progress, and for students to move through the material at their own pace. Upon seeing this student produce high-quality work, Proffitt quickly organized
advanced modules and additional assignments for the student to work through while other students were a bit further behind.

Sometimes during a class session, Proffitt tells the class, “If you know what you’re doing and you want to move ahead, you can.” Student 2 “knows that means her,” Proffitt said. She also pulls high-achieving students into separate videoconference sessions for more in-depth discussions.

The Result: Instead of having to wait weeks or months for other students to catch up to her level, the student can engage in meaningful work that challenges her and prepares her for future classes as well. In addition to the more advanced modules, Proffitt set up a website where the student can privately publish her written work, add graphics, and supplement the text with a read-aloud. As of mid-October, the student was working on tasks that most of the rest of the class will catch up with in the next quarter of the school year.

#3: Engagement Challenge

One male student was “very disengaged” during the early weeks of the school year. He participated to an extent, but once Proffitt began assigning work, the student dropped off.

The Plan: Proffitt asked another one of this student’s teachers whether his lack of engagement was consistent across all of his classes. Proffitt’s colleague confirmed that it was. She arranged a meeting with the student’s parents, and quickly discovered that he and his family were overwhelmed by school responsibilities. “He felt that he had already dug such a big hole, so what was the point?” Proffitt said.

She reassured him that the most important thing for him to do was make progress, even at a slower pace than other students in the class. Proffitt picked out a couple of important assignments from the material he had missed, emphasized those as essential for the student to learn before he could move on, and told him to ignore the rest of the practice exercises on the list. Then she sat with him on a video call while they worked through some of the material together.

The Result: About a month and a half into the school year, the student had started to request meetings with Proffitt, participate during live sessions, and even email Proffitt during nonschool days to ask about work he still needed to make up. Proffitt no longer has to send him messages to remind him to stay on task. “He knows how to check for missing work, understands it’s okay to ask for help, and to speak up if he is confused,” Proffitt said.
Personalizing learning to students individual academic strengths and weaknesses and personal interests was hard to do during the pandemic, especially in remote or hybrid learning environments. Social distancing in physical classrooms added to the difficulties.

But now that most students are back in classrooms, schools running personalized learning programs that struggled during the pandemic are trying to get them back on track, and other schools are in the beginning stages of putting personalized learning strategies in place.

No matter what stage they are at in putting such programs in place, one big worry is how such efforts will affect test scores. The reality is that changing up instruction and integrating more digital tools into learning could jeopardize everything from teachers’ relationships with their students to the school’s state standardized test scores.

So what does personalized learning look like in schools that perform well on standardized tests versus those that perform poorly? What factors are at play that educators should know about?

To answer those and other questions about personalized learning, Education Week spoke to Dabae Lee, an assistant professor at Kennesaw State University in Georgia, who studies project-based learning, personalized learning, and online learning. Lee is an author of a recent study, “Differences in Personalized Learning Practice and Technology Use in High- and Low-Performing Learner-Centered Schools in the United States.”

Here’s what she had to say:

You were the lead author on a recent study showing that teachers in high-performing schools tend to implement personalized learning strategies more effectively than those who work in lower-performing schools. Can you tell us briefly how you conducted that study and what your number one takeaway was?

We wanted to see how personalized learning was practiced in K-12 schools that had already transformed their practice from teacher-centered to learner-centered. So, we identified those “learner-centered” schools in the U.S. and asked the teachers various questions about what they did to create personalized learning experiences for students and how they used technology to support them. Then, we wondered if there were differences between high- and low-performing schools in terms of practice and technology use. So, we gathered the students’ data from state standardized tests and compared the teachers’ practices and technology use between high- and low-performing schools.

Our number one takeaway was that personalized learning, when implemented thoroughly, was effective for increasing academic achievement measured by standardized tests. One of the greatest fears of teachers and administrators is seeing a drop in their test scores. This makes them reluctant to transform their traditional practice to personalized learning. We hope this finding will assure them that personalized learning is effective if implemented well.

You found that teachers in high-performing schools were more likely to include students’ own career goals and interests in developing personalized learning plans. Why do you see that strategy as effective, and why might higher-performing schools be in a better position to implement it?

Motivation is powerful in learning. Every student has unique interests. Tailoring learning to individual students’ career goals and interests makes learning personally relevant and keeps students engaged in their learning processes. We found evidence that tailoring learning to their unique interests helped motivate the students to learn more in those schools. So, I would not say higher-performing schools were in a better position to use students’ interests.

Teachers in higher performing schools were more likely to say they formed close relationships with their students. Why do you think that is and how might it have contributed to student success?

Yes, we found that teachers in high-performing schools formed close relationships with more students than those in low-performing schools. Other findings of the study help answer why that was the case. Teachers in high-performing schools considered more characteristics of students in developing personalized learning plans, stayed more years with the same students, and assessed more non-academic competencies such as social
skills and work ethic, than those in low-performing schools. In other words, they had more opportunities to interact with each student and get to know each. These opportunities allowed them to form closer relationships with their students.

There are several ways that close relationships between teachers and students improve student success. When teachers know more about each student, they know what works for the student. So, they can create more effective learning experiences for the student. Also, students tend to feel safe and cared for when they think that their teachers know them well. They can more easily share their difficulties, struggles, and failures. A safe and caring environment encourages them to be adventurous and proactive when it comes to learning instead of being afraid of failure.

Teachers in high-performing schools were more likely to use technology collaboratively than those in lower-performing schools. Was that a key factor in the success of personalized learning?

Yes, high-performing schools had more powerful technology systems that integrated more functions that support learning than did low-performing schools. Technology alone is not a key factor in the success of personalized learning, but it is an essential enabler, especially for personalized learning in a classroom with a large number of students. Using powerful technology systems will not guarantee the success of personalized learning. However, it is a must-have tool that helps teachers implement personalized learning.

Your study touches on the role that standardized testing may play in keeping low-performing schools from going as deeply into personalized learning as they would like. Can you talk about the reasons for that?

Implementing personalized learning takes a paradigm shift in beliefs about teaching and learning and a dramatic change in instructional practice. The punitive nature of the [federal education law] No Child Left Behind left educators fearful about trying new teaching methods. While the law has been replaced by the less punitive Every Student Succeeds Act, some still feel pressure to get good test scores. This prevents many educators from taking risks to innovate their practice.

As the study findings suggest, personalized learning should be implemented faithfully to be effective. But it takes a great deal of time and effort to reach that level of implementation fidelity. Therefore, pushing educators to adopt personalized learning while maintaining the negative consequences of a temporary drop in test scores may lead them to adopt it at the very surface level, which will not result in an increase in academic outcomes.

What lessons from your study can we apply to the COVID-era of schooling in which learning virtually is more common than before the pandemic?

Learning virtually without physical interactions can be challenging, especially for younger learners. On the other hand, online learning can be designed in a way to bring multiple benefits that are difficult to realize in face-to-face learning. Actually, online learning environments can be more flexible environments for implementing personalized learning than traditional brick-and-mortar schools. Students can take as much time as they need to master content without being restricted by class time. Learning can take place anywhere, allowing students to engage in real-world projects. Student data can be recorded and processed instantly to inform teachers. Our study findings shed light on how we can tap into the distinctive benefits of online learning environments.

Also, during COVID some students, especially those who are disadvantaged, have learned a lot less than they otherwise would have. Therefore, when COVID is over, different students are going to have different gaps in their learning, and the only way to effectively fill those gaps is to personalize student learning. Our study sheds some light on how to do that.
To Combat Learning Loss, Schools Need to Overhaul The Industrial-Age Paradigm

By Rick Hess

The devastating picture presented by the National Assessment of Educational Progress has occasioned a lot of discussion about what it’ll take to overcome two years of pandemic disruption, which followed a decade of stagnant academic achievement. Well, Joel Rose, the CEO and co-founder of New Classrooms, argues that the most important thing we can do is overhaul the “industrial paradigm” of schooling. I’ve known Joel for close to 15 years and have long found him an interesting thinker and New Classrooms an intriguing model. When he offered to share some thoughts on what schools need to do, I decided to take him up on it. Here’s what he had to say.

—Rick

The headlines were hard to read: NAEP’s assessment of the nation’s 4th and 8th graders revealed that the pandemic wiped out years of learning gains.

Troubling as that may be, the news still largely ignores what was true before the pandemic, when only 11 out of 25 students in a nationally representative 4th grade classroom would have been deemed “proficient” in math—and when only six would remain proficient by graduation.

Learning loss may be more severe, but it is certainly not new.

Addressing what to do about that requires reckoning with the larger question: Why did movements over the last two decades to raise standards, improve educator quality, upgrade curriculum, enable choice, leverage assessment, instill accountability, and increase funding appear to have such a limited impact on college and career readiness?

One potential answer: Nearly all of these reforms left the basic tenets of the industrial-paradigm classroom intact.

That approach, where groups of same-aged students all learn the same thing at the same time with a teacher and (usually) a textbook, was advanced more than a century ago as a means to rank and sort students into different life pathways—effectively a timed, academic obstacle course with real-life implications.

It’s a paradigm that has at least two fatal flaws.

First, it’s unforgiving to those who fall behind. What’s taught is based on one’s age, not what they know. Stumble for any reason, like a pandemic, and it can be hard to catch back up—especially in cumulative subjects like math.

Second, what a student experiences in school is limited by the capacity of the teacher. Like many teachers, I tried to meet each of my students’ unique needs, to design and deliver engaging lessons, to thoughtfully review their classroom and homework, to stay in close communication with parents, and more. That’s what students, families, and taxpayers deserve. But I simply didn’t have the time or resources to sustainably do that.

If meaningful improvement in our overall educational system could be achieved without tinkering with the industrial paradigm itself, we probably would have seen it by now. Yes, the reforms that animated the last two decades can all make a difference. But if national pre-pandemic proficiency gains of 2 percentage points per decade is the best one could hope for, it will take at least a century before the vast majority of students graduate college-and career-ready.

The K-12 sector needs another path that breaks free from these constraints.

There are undoubtedly better ways of “doing school” in the 21st century than what the 19th century architects of the industrial paradigm classroom conceived. Learning today can be more personalized, more reflective of the science of learning, more sustaining for educators, more reflective of what local communities are seeking, and—most importantly—more impactful for students. But those new approaches need to be designed and scaled.

How exactly can that kind of future be brought to life?

To help lay out a path forward, New Classrooms (the organization I lead) partnered with Transcend, an organization that supports schools in implementing new learning models, to release a new report called Out of the Box: How Innovative Learning Models Can Transform K-12 Education. The report centers on the role of model providers: organizations
that design more modern approaches to teaching and learning and then support the adoption of those approaches in partnership with like-minded local school communities.

Model providers do not run schools. They are more akin to curriculum organizations that reimagine what students experience when they come to school. But because the models these organizations create can so deeply shape what students experience, both model providers and school operators can share in the responsibility for student outcomes.

Several organizations have been working to bring about the model provider sector. Our own work has centered on developing Teach to One 360, a proof point for what an innovative learning model can be. It uses a diagnostic assessment to generate a precise, personalized math curriculum for middle and high school students that adapts throughout the school year based on individual progress. Most uniquely, 360 then integrates a combination of teacher-led, collaborative, and independent lessons as well as a first-of-its-kind scheduling algorithm so that each day, students access the lessons and peer groups that will best support their progress. (Note: 360 will relaunch in 2023, but an all-digital version called Teach to One Roadmaps is being used in schools today.)

Our experience has helped us understand the conditions required for schools to transition to a student-centered paradigm. It also illuminated the acute barriers that make it harder for more schools to get there. These include underinvestment in educational research and development, inertia within schools and districts that limits innovation, and education policies—most notably around assessment and accountability—that incentivize keeping the industrial paradigm intact.

The industrial paradigm classroom has reached its limits. While policymakers, systems, and school leaders must do all they can to address today’s crisis in learning, they must also begin to develop a vision for a future of schooling that gets out of this box and moves to something better.

Joel Rose holds a B.A. in political science from Tufts University and a J.D. from the University of Miami School of Law. Rick Hess is a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute and the director of the think tank’s Education Policy Studies.
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