Implementing Blended Learning Districtwide

District leaders looking to improve student achievement can consider a program that combines online learning with in-person teaching.

Individualized learning and flexible schedules are part of the philosophy at Falcon School District 49 (Colorado Springs, Colo.). After beginning as a fully virtual model and transitioning to a blended model, student outcomes have vastly improved at the district’s Falcon Virtual Academy. Its brick-and-mortar building facilitates collaboration and communication through open learning spaces, helping students to become more engaged and excited about learning. This web seminar addressed how the leaders at Falcon School District 49 developed their blended programs, how they balance in-person and virtual learning, and the student academic growth they have seen through blended learning.

Lindsay Smith: Our mission at K12 Inc. is to personalize and help transform the education experience by leveraging the power of technology-enabled learning. We serve over 2,000 districts and provide a wide range of solutions across grade levels. We offer everything from an award-winning pre-K program to online courses in world language, STEM, AP, electives, remediation, and so much more. We wanted to share the story of one of our partners, Falcon School District 49, and its success with a blended learning program.

David Knoche: Falcon Virtual Academy is in its fourth year; we have seen a steep incline in the road to improvement. For our brick-and-mortar building, we wanted an environment with a “Google meets Starbucks” atmosphere. We wanted a school where students could feel comfortable; to that end, our building design emphasizes collaboration and open spaces. We wanted to create learning spaces instead of traditional classrooms.

Jodi Fletcher: We grew from 59 students in our first year to 498 students, kindergarten through twelfth grade, this year. We have 13 full-time teachers and five full-time student support coaches. The support coaches play an integral part in what we do at Falcon Virtual Academy.

Knoche: For us, implementing blended learning was an easy decision. Being a fully virtual school at first was not achieving all the results we needed, and we felt there was a better model. One of the things people ask us consistently is: “At what point did you make the decision to transition to blended?” I think one of the things we struggle with in explaining that to people is that we jumped in with both feet; we did not have a long-term strategic plan. We had had a few face-to-face opportunities in the very beginning of our school, when we were fully virtual. What we saw with those kids compared to the kids who only worked in the virtual environment were astronomical changes.

We knew we had to get kids in the building in small groups. We were not looking to recreate a brick-and-mortar school, but also wanted to make sure we could work with students in a hands-on environment. As we transitioned into our new school building, our focus became centered around the fact that our students needed to be actively involved. We did not want any replication of ineffective practices, such as students in lines of chairs all facing the same direction. Our learning model is project-based and experiential. We try to get our students to come into the school at least two days a week. What we are able to accomplish in the building that we were not able to accomplish in the virtual world is a deep relational capacity that lets students feel connected to their school.

Fletcher: What we want to do is build true collaboration between students. Our students need to work together in an engaging situation and learn to problem-solve and learn to work together. We try to match the needs of our school to what our community wants. Our parents are
very vocal and we listen to that feedback and try to accommodate what they want.

The bottom line with our blended model is that we are seeing strong results. There has been 50 percent higher involvement this year, as far as the number of students taking blended classes. In addition to that, our blended students outperform non-blended students in GPA and engagement by more than 30 percent.

**Knoche:** We have an 80/20 approach to blended environments and fully virtual. Currently, 65 percent of our students take in-person classes. In our building, different things occur on different days.

**Fletcher:** On Mondays, all of our seventh through twelfth grade special education students are invited to come into the school building to get additional support. Our response to intervention (RTI) students also come in on Mondays. High school students are invited to come in on Mondays to do drop-in. Our seventh and eighth grade teachers do direct instruction for math and language arts on Mondays, as well. Tuesdays are for our K-8 students, including those who need remediation.

**Knoche:** On Wednesdays, we like students to come in, own their learning and understand where they need support. They should articulate what they need and get the necessary help. Students can travel from teacher to teacher, getting the help they need throughout the day.

Our philosophy has been that you cannot be the best if you do not employ the best. And our students, not teachers, are at the center of the equation. We surround our students with support mechanisms. Our teachers are the facilitators of knowledge and growth. The support coaches are the front line defense against failures, like not turning in work. When hiring, we typically do performance-based interviewing. We look for passionate, flexible people who want to be student advocates.

The second piece of our philosophy is that the “I feel” or “I think” model does not cut it anymore. We have developed a data-driven culture. In the beginning, we initially struggled to get our school to meet Colorado state success standards. We have been able to make gains; for 2013, we are ranked as a Performance school, which is the highest success level in the state standards.

**Fletcher:** We have made significant academic growth. Our students outscore the state in all but two grade levels for reading. For writing and math, we outperform the local district in two grade levels. Our ACT composite score has increased from 179 to 21.

**Knoche:** Our third focus that allowed us to make strong academic gains is our RTI system. We knew if we could get our hands on high-level data, we could make more informed decisions. We chose not to do a traditional seven-period school day, instead selecting a block trimester system. Assessments are aligned to the CCSS. We also use pre- and post-testing to discover learning gaps and find interventions that fit our students. We monitor behavior and grades on a weekly basis. Intervention probes are done every three to six weeks depending on how significant the interventions are. We are seeing very good results from that at this point.

Our final major focus has been around intentionality. We want teachers in our school doing things because they work. Be creative and find things that get the most bang for your buck with your students. Lesson planning and alignment to standards are there in the online world. But we need to make sure to verify those to guarantee growth with our students.

The transition to blended has been one of problem-solving on a daily basis. If you are committed to problem-solving, there is no better educational environment, from our perspective, than what we are currently doing in our blended model.

To watch this webinar in its entirety, please go to: www.districtadministration.com/ws102413