Rhode Island’s Blended Approach to Blended Learning

Sometimes, educational innovations are top-down affairs—policymakers at the federal or state level adopt regulations that eventually filter down to local schools. Other times, innovations that start in school buildings gradually work their way up to the level of policy.

But as the Rhode Island Board of Education and the state’s education department have moved to implement blended learning, they have combined both approaches. In effect, they have taken a blended approach to blended learning.

At the state level, the impetus for blended learning grew out of a commitment to personalized learning. “The Board of Regents [which has since become the Board of Education] had been working with the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) toward a goal of personalizing learning for all students,” says Patrick Guida, a member of the Rhode Island board and a former president of NASBE. The board saw blended learning as another step toward this goal.

While those conversations were going on at the state level, teachers and principals in local schools were seeing the benefits of incorporating technology to improve student achievement. These school-based activities, which RIDE describes as an “organic movement,” were posted on Twitter and discussed in faculty lounges, but there was no state mechanism for sharing what teachers were learning.

In 2012, the two initiatives met. RIDE sponsored an “Innovation Powered by Technology” conference, which brought together more than 300 people. At the conference, which has become an annual event attended by more than 700 educators and other participants, Education Commissioner Deborah A. Gist said, “I am very enthusiastic about some of the possibilities technology offers for improving instruction and advancing student achievement, and I believe we have a great opportunity before us to move forward toward these innovations.”

At the same time, the Board of Regents began the process of adopting regulations to govern virtual learning in the state, engaging policymakers, educators, and other stakeholders in transforming teaching and learning.

Rhode Island defines blended learning as a “formal education program in which a student learns at least in part through online delivery of content and instruction with some element of student control over time, place, path, and/or pace.” It differs from online learning because it takes place “at least in part at a supervised brick-and-mortar location away from home.”

The 2012 regulations “promote and support customized learning experiences for all learners through quality and engaging online content and programs.” Virtual education “allows learners some element of control over the time, place, pace, and path of their learning” (emphasis added).

The regulations outline four principles that govern online learning:

- All learners in Rhode Island will have access to high-quality, rigorous, and relevant online learning opportunities;
- Virtual learning education in Rhode Island will support all learners in meeting academic and career goals;
- Rhode Island will support reliable access to the Internet and technology tools necessary for virtual learning; and
- The Rhode Island Department of Education will coordinate these Virtual Learning Education Regulations with policies developed by higher education institutions and other state agencies.

As the board considered the regulations, the state moved quickly to develop “proof points”—model schools that could illustrate best practices in this new approach to learning.

“We recognized the cultural shift that would be necessary to fully implement blended learning,” says Gist. “We wanted to show other schools and districts what blended learning could look like here in Rhode Island.”

As the state was developing model schools, local principals started a professional learning opportunity on their own. They created the Twitter handle #edchatRI, a weekly conversation that now brings together hundreds of educators to share knowledge, ask questions, and support each other.

But policymakers also knew they had a fundamental responsibility to see that educators and students across the state all had the necessary technology available to them.

*This definition of blended learning was developed by the Clayton Christensen Institute, a nonprofit think tank that promotes improving the world through “disruptive innovation.”
The State Role in Ensuring Access to Technology

From the first, Rhode Island was committed to ensuring that all students would have access to the technology that makes blended learning possible. That this required a concerted effort was evident from a 2012 survey which found that:

- Only 23.8 percent of classrooms in the state had 100-percent wireless access;
- Wired access to the Internet in classrooms was usually limited to one computer—the teacher’s;
- Student access to computers through labs and laptops covered less than 7 percent of classrooms at any given moment; and
- Just 80 percent of the students in Providence (91 percent statewide) reported having access to the Internet at home.

This information led to a technology program that RIDE describes as a “three-legged stool” including wireless infrastructure, broadband access, and the devices themselves. State resources have been dedicated to ensure that all three of the “legs” are funded:

- **Wireless Infrastructure.** The state passed a Technology Infrastructure Bond to provide funding for wireless access, and by the end of the next school year, every classroom in the state will have successfully been wired. The bond is also funding the necessary switches, wiring, and network controllers to bring wireless access to every school and every classroom.

- **Broadband Access.** The Rhode Island Telecommunications Access Fund (RITEAF) is a legislative commitment to ensure that Internet access is available and affordable for all private and public K-12 schools and all public libraries. The RITEAF program supplements the federal E-Rate program and is designed to support the investments in the infrastructure and number of devices competing for bandwidth to the Internet.

- **Devices.** Rhode Island schools and districts are free to purchase any device, although the goal is to move to a 1:1 ratio. “We don’t tell schools what to do,” Guida says. Some schools use Macs, others use Chromebooks, and still others use tablets.

But to help districts secure the lowest prices on whatever device they select, the state negotiated a master price agreement to make the procurement process easier. This “bundled solution” includes not only the purchase of the device, but also professional development for teachers and tech support as the districts are rolling out the devices for all students.

The Role of Local Schools

While the state has developed the physical infrastructure, local schools have worked on supporting teachers as they make the transition to blended learning. Recognizing the critical nature of professional development in implementing blended learning, the schools that receive Model Schools grants are required to submit a plan for professional learning. To expand the impact of this professional learning, model blended learning schools welcome visitors (one school had more than 300 visits in a single year) to see what digital learning looks like in person.

The Highlander Institute, a leader in blended learning, has also provided assistance for local schools. With support from The Learning Accelerator (TLA), the institute launched the FUSE RI Project, which offers educators an opportunity to take a leadership role and become FUSE Fellows for two years. These fellows will provide that technology support to districts. They are also creating online resources for educators.

Results

It is still very early in the implementation of blended learning. But the state has a strong accountability program already in place, and initial results are promising. For example, Pleasant View Elementary School, one of the schools that received a model school grant, has shown positive trends in student achievement, attendance, discipline, and teacher engagement and efficacy.

Working with TLA and its Framework for Catalyzing and Accelerating Blended Learning at the State Level, the department and the state board have launched an ambitious initiative that will make Rhode Island the first fully blended learning state in the nation. In three to five years, all Rhode Island students will learn through personalized, student-centered pathways that will ensure college and career readiness.

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