

The Rogers Family Foundation is excited to share an update to our Oakland Blended Learning [Case Study](#) published in October 2012. Part 3 is [here](#).

*Written by Greg Klein and Carrie McPherson Douglass, January 2013*

## **I. Updates from our existing 4 pilot schools**

***What is high-quality personalized blended learning?*** Through implementation, we have become increasingly clear about what high-quality blended learning means to us. Here are a few thoughts:

- In order to have maximum impact, schools must optimize the way they use time/schedules, staff/student configurations (and therefore space), content/curriculum, student ownership, and data. The blending in of technology is really just the enabler that allows schools to truly optimize those other things. We are becoming increasingly clear when we talk to schools who say they are doing “blended learning” but are actually just layering on tech tools to their current structure, that they likely won’t see dramatic change until they optimize other levers as well. The good news is that taking the first step of adding technology within current structures seems to quickly lead schools to want to explore changing structures they never before considered. The bad news is that district schools in Oakland do not currently have the necessary autonomies over budget, schedule and staffing that are needed to optimize all of the levers we’ve mentioned.
- Blending traditional and online instruction is the means, not the end. The end goal is students progressing and achieving mastery at their own pace while receiving immediate personalized feedback, and teachers who have the tools and data they need to differentiate for all students while having a sustainable workload themselves.
- Part of what is so exciting about implementing high-quality blended learning is that it seems to encourage and enable experimentation and iteration by teachers and schools. Traditionally, any iteration that occurs in schools happens in 12 month cycles, which is much too slow for such a complex endeavour like teaching & learning. With blended learning, teachers have the initial data and space to try something for a few days or with a small group, see if it actually works (based on the data), and then throw it out if it didn’t work and improve it if it did. We see teachers dramatically changing their schedules, grouping structures and habits more frequently and with more excitement and openness than ever before.
- The most important role we can play as a foundation is continuing to push innovation and high-quality implementation. It is easy for schools and districts to revert to using technology to solve problems the same way they would have using paper. For example, if a teacher used to have equally sized groups rotate through stations for equal amount of time, it is easiest to maintain that routine but substitute in computers for a rotation. Instead, our Director of Blended Learning is in classrooms pushing teachers to be truly flexible, personalized and mastery based - changing groupings more often and having students on technology for longer or shorter periods of time based on their individual path to mastery. Greg Klein says his role is “to be there when a blended teacher is problem solving in order to push them to find a dramatically better, tech-enabled solution rather than reverting back to what they know.” The Rogers Family Foundation would prefer not to be funding infrastructure, hardware and software in the future and to focus our resources on design, innovation, training and support.

### ***Infrastructure - Network, Devices, Online Content & Data***

Across our four pilot schools, the infrastructure we planned for and implemented is now working consistently. Approximately 350 student computers work day in and day out, with little to no maintenance. We accessed the warranty for one Lenovo laptop so far. Bandwidth suffices at all four schools with no hangs or slow downloads. The wireless access points that were purchased and installed provide both the coverage and density required of large numbers of simultaneous connections. Teachers and students are now beginning to take for granted that the computers and internet “just work,” and they focus more on teaching and learning.

One specific major success we had with device support was using student helpers at Madison Middle School. Students refurbished over 300 netbook computers over the course of a few weeks. Those netbooks were previously known as the “paper weights” on campus and were simply not used. Now they are throughout the school, in pilot and non-pilot classrooms, consistently used with little further support needed. We brought these machines back to life using boot-able USB thumbdrives with a clean, efficient image of the OS, and then used DeepFreeze to keep them working day in and day out.

From a teacher’s perspective, the usability of online content and other web-based tools has improved, particularly at our two schools partnering with Education Elements, Madison and Korematsu. Whereas in October there were daily help desk tickets submitted around data integration issues and problems with online content, now there are practically zero. At Madison and Korematsu, Education Elements delivered the SSO and data integrations promised during the planning phase and continues to develop and improve their HLMS, including taking pilot teacher feedback. Similarly, individual content vendors worked to improve the reliability of their product, such as Mastery Connect and Revolution K12. Overall, our pilot teachers are very pleased with all the online content they selected, both paid and free.

There are now pilot teachers who see their varied data sets all in one place in the Ed Elements HLMS in order to check how a student or class is performing on a particular standard. For example, a 6th grade math teacher can now determine how her morning class performed on a particular standard as measured by a series of Mastery Connect quizzes, iLearn progress and DreamBox progress, all in combination. Teachers with HLMS access are able to view their assessment and digital content data side by side in the HLMS, while other teachers must still go into each content provider and look at their student data separately. This is due in large part to teachers initially selecting content that was not integrated with HLMS and the broader need to have more integrated content provider options. Students see their data only within individual content providers at this time.

In the case of Elmhurst and Encompass, formerly Junyo schools, we have not yet implemented a new data integration solution. We are working to pilot Clever and Schoolzilla, and are also intrigued by what KickBoard may have to offer. Unfortunately, no platforms currently provide recommendations on what students might work on next (assignability) based on their performance on assessments and digital content, but this is something we are actively looking for from future partners.

These two schools definitely experienced implementation delays when Junyo “pivoted.” The Rogers Family Foundation knowingly took a risk partnering with a startup that didn’t have a product yet. We

would do it again, and it is critical that schools and investors take risks on promising new startups in order to bring innovation to the space; however, before schools consider working with a startup, they need to be aware of the risks and benefits. Start ups often require more of your time and the product typically has a lot of bugs in the beginning. The flip side is that startups are often willing to provide their first customers with a more customized and personal experience and you are able to help shape their product as it is developed. Before getting into bed with a start up\*, determine what your risk tolerance is, how much time you have to help them and deal with bugs, and think about the impact on your teachers and students if the product doesn't succeed and you have to make a switch. The impact on the Oakland schools would have been far more negative if RFF wasn't there to buffer them and quickly figure out alternatives. RFF will likely continue to play the role of buffer so that we can experiment and support new innovative products while minimizing the potential negative impact to schools.

*\*also see this [blog](#) from Alex Hernandez on "dating" startups*

### **Teacher Entrepreneurs**

Across the pilot schools, teachers worked through initial feelings of being overwhelmed by so many online content tools and web sites. Much of the late Fall was filled with teachers going back for their second and third trainings on particular tools, hungry for a more rigorous implementation now that they had had a few months under their belt with students. We saw a clear pattern across the four schools: Summer PD on (too many) tools --> Sept/Oct using tools with students in a superficial implementation --> additional training and support --> deeper, more rigorous implementation with students --> teacher eagerness for training on new additional tools. Our best implementations of online content are where the teacher has now had multiple "touches" of PD on the tool and has since reframed expectations with students. Also, across the pilot, teachers started the process of getting better by focusing on fewer tools at one time, letting themselves and students dive deeper into how a particular tool works and how it is best used. We highly recommend teachers and students start with fewer tools, and build up from there.

In two of our schools Ed Elements collaborated with school leaders in July to design a week-long summer PD preparing teachers for launch in August. The bulk of the training, which consisted of ten to twelve blended learning PD modules, focused on promising practices of BL classrooms, including routines, assessment, planning, using data, preparing lessons on digital citizenship, and creating a BL classroom culture. Teachers also set goals for implementing BL teaching practices over the course of the year that they would revisit in ongoing PD. In addition, full content provider trainings were shortened to quick jumpstarts to prevent overwhelming teachers with new digital tools. (Ed Elements also helped a few interested teachers planning over the summer to get additional license time in order to have more time to preview and plan with their digital content).

In October, Ed Elements introduced their Blended Learning Rubric toolkit, which lays out the range of teaching practices critical to a successful blended classroom. Teachers at Madison have been piloting the rubric and supporting tools for several months. Teachers first self-assessed their strengths and weaknesses on the rubric reflection tool, which was followed by an observation and consultation by their BL coach, Klein. Klein and Ed Elements then used these self-assessments and observation notes to design rubric-driven follow-up PD. The response has been positive, and teachers have felt that the

rubric gives them clarity on what it means to be a blended learning teacher.

The increased rigor of online-content implementation predictably led to the virtuous cycle of accessing better student data, which then enabled teachers to customize the online experience for kids and to change how they work in their small groups. At Madison, for example, one teacher started to electronically poll her students near the beginning of the class period as part of diagnosing them on that day's lesson. Students then opt to take the assessment right away if they believe they are ready, move to a computer for additional online practice, or join the teacher-led group for further instruction. Armed with relevant training on their specific online programs, teachers are able to efficiently customize how individual students work through content on the computer. Most significantly, more and more teachers are finding time during the week for a 1:1 flexible model, allowing them to pull highly-targeted small groups for both remediation and extension lessons. Teachers are beginning to feel more efficacious and sustained at the same time.

In addition to opening up grouping options and increased student choice, the rate at which teachers and students "try out" new tools increased dramatically. Teacher colleagues share their favorite tools and try them out the next day with kids. Lessons learned from one tool are applied to the next, greatly decreasing the "implementation dip" of the next tool, whatever it may be. Beyond building fluency with a particular tool, teachers and students are building their fluency in learning new tools in general.

Three other patterns, though not necessarily surprising, are worth noting. First, those teachers with experience in small-group instruction and rotation models have been the quickest to leverage online content and incorporate new tools into their pedagogy. Second, Special Education teachers grasp the power of customized learning and individualized goals much faster, and tend to be more open about allowing students to use computers differently or for different purposes. Traditional teachers still gravitate towards "equality" - for example, all students being on the computer for the same amount of time each day, even though their needs might be different. Lastly, schools that have regularly-scheduled time for teacher reflection show a much higher degree of iteration and experimentation. In schools where PD time has been more sporadic, there has been some growth, but teachers have made less progress with a more surface-level implementation.

SRI will continue their evaluation of the pilot schools throughout the year, with the primary goal of documenting and learning from changes in practice and behavior during the first year and moving to more student data analysis in the second and third years. SRI is using teacher surveys, deep-dive observations in select classrooms, student focus groups and interviews with various stakeholders. We look forward to their first report at the end of this school year.

### ***Phase 2 Planning***

All four pilot principals will submit an Interim Report by the end of January, in which they will reflect on their blended implementations so far, highlight successes and obstacles overcome, and identify next steps and Phase 2 goals. Site-based teams will convene throughout the spring semester to plan for how their school both broadens and deepens their implementation beginning in Fall 2013 - optimizing more of the levers we discussed at the beginning of this report. In the meantime, at two current pilot schools we identified and supported additional teachers to start blended rotational models this school year -- seizing the opportunity to learn what it takes to get a colleague up and running mid year and

greatly leveraging lessons learned from the early Fall.

## **II. Central Office Support for a District-Wide Strategy**

While our “on the ground” pilot school work makes an immediate and dramatic impact on teachers and students in classrooms, the proof points generated more broadly serve to push District-level thinking and action here in Oakland. To reach scale quickly, Oakland kids need central office leadership to move schools to blended models. Oakland voters recently passed Measure J in November, funding an additional \$475 million for facilities. Rogers Foundation is working to ensure that a 1/4-1/5 of those funds go to updating technology infrastructure and putting a device in the hands of every kid in the city. After a series of research visits and project planning, Oakland is well positioned to follow San Diego USD’s lead in this endeavor; SDUSD is 4 years and 4/5 complete with a 5 year plan to be 100% one-to-one. RFF has twice supported Oakland central office staff and leadership to visit and tour San Diego schools, including one Board member and the Assistant Superintendent for Instruction. We forged working relationships between Oakland and San Diego counterparts so that plans can be shared and staff get experienced feedback on ideas and implementation practices.

Along the way, we have introduced and deepened relationships between OUSD central and a variety of best-in-class entrepreneurial ed tech firms and organizations, including Ed Elements, Clever, LearnSprout, Schoolzilla, Achieve3000, EverFi, Common Sense Media, & Google. In many cases, legal agreements have been in put in place to speed-up adoption, for example, of Clever’s account provisioning services across the district and across 3rd-party tools. Altogether, the San Diego visits and new relationships, along with the implementation lessons learned from our pilots, position a newly-forming central office team to lead this work and “flip” the District over the next few years, beginning as soon as Fall 2013.

### **III. Looking to the future and Cohort II**

Based on early successes, we know that Oakland kids have much to gain from growing our portfolio of pilot schools. Expanded proof points help keep central office staff learning about what it takes to be in service of schools and students academic needs. Additionally, we believe our district pilot schools have yet to land on a truly breakthrough model of instruction that will dramatically change and improve learning outcomes for students. Our district pilot schools have optimized many aspects of instruction, but without autonomy over budget, scheduling and staffing, they are limited in their ability to fully optimize learning for all students.

Twelve Oakland schools, both district and charter, applied to join Cohort II and receive funding for Fall 2013 implementations. From these twelve, we will choose seven to receive planning grants and enter into a three-month planning process to more thoughtfully develop meaningful plans for “going blended” in the Fall. These design processes will culminate in a final presentation, from which we expect to fully-fund 2-3 schools over three years as they move to blended school-wide. While we are committed to seeing this work through in District schools, we are particularly excited and curious about supporting local area charter schools to implement and model new innovations that may be less easily adopted in traditional schools given current restraints. It will be interesting to compare the results in successful district implementations with successful charter implementations that are *also* able to play with more of the levers we’ve mentioned.

Our two-phase investment approach comes from learnings from cohort 1. We found that school teams all had really good intentions about how much they were going to be willing to change and innovate, but that until we actually worked side-by-side with them to design and implement, it wasn’t clear what their full commitment would be. For example, one school really needed to switch to a block schedule in order to make blended-learning rotations work, but they decided not to make that change due to other implications. We have chosen to make an initial investment in more schools and after working with them for 2-3 months we will have a better idea of where we want to make larger implementation investments. Schools that do not receive implementation grants from Rogers will still have solid design plans that they can move forward implementing themselves or pursue other grant opportunities.

Our cohort 2 grants will be smaller than our cohort 1 grants for several reasons. First, we are hopeful about more investment from the district/CMO level and from measure J funds, which will decrease the investment we have to make in infrastructure and hardware. Second, the cost of computers has decreased over the past year and we are confident that cheaper computers such as chromebooks, or refurbished computers from OTX-West, when configured correctly, work just as well as more expensive computers. Third, we believe that each school/classroom should start with fewer online content providers, and especially fewer paid content providers - using free content to fill in gaps. Finally, a variety of launchpad, account provisioning and data integration providers are coming into the space at free or lower cost-points than previously available.

The Rogers Foundation continues to believe that blended learning is the highest leverage investment we can make. We believe that it can (1) increase student mastery and achievement, (2) increase student ownership and agency, (3) increase teacher satisfaction and efficacy, (4) attract middle and upper-income families back into Oakland public schools, and (5) increase innovation and continuous learning at the district level. Technology has changed dramatically in the year since we started

planning these pilots, and yet online software and data integration is still nowhere near where it needs to be. Schools who jump into blended learning will feel immediate “wins” but still need to be prepared for frustration and complexity and workarounds. We hope that additional local foundations consider investing in high-quality blended learning.

- A strong network of local foundations working to promote high-quality blended learning can be found at [www.education-cities.org/](http://www.education-cities.org/).

- [The Learning Accelerator](#) was recently started to support districts who are considering blended learning as a core strategy.

Please contact us with feedback and ideas!

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