



BLENDED LEARNING COMES TO A CATHOLIC DIOCESE

A HOW-TO GUIDE BASED ON THE SAN JOSE EXPERIENCE

In an historic first, a Catholic diocese is launching a “blended learning” program at seven elementary schools this fall. California’s Diocese of San Jose schools will introduce a blended learning model, integrating computers and technology to guide personalized instruction, to 100 classrooms beginning at the start of the 2013-14 school year. The simultaneous launch is part of Diocese schools’ efforts to strengthen educational outcomes and the sustainability of their model through the St. Katharine Drexel Initiative.

Important lessons and examples from the initiative’s implementation are discussed below, so that others may benefit from this example.

WHY BLEND YOUR CATHOLIC SCHOOL?

The Initiative’s purpose is:

“To make our schools more effective, efficient, and sustainable. It builds on what we do well educationally and helps us use the power of available technology in ways that increase student engagement, academic learning, and higher level thinking skills. The Initiative will meet the challenges of maintaining a vigorous Catholic identity, improve academic performance and position us for a financially secure future.”

CHOOSING THE BLENDED INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN WITH THE BEST FIT

The seven San Jose schools will use a [rotational model](#), similar to one employed by San Francisco’s Mission Dolores Academy, where students rotate in groups between sessions of online content instruction and assessments to small group and one-on-one tutoring sessions with classroom teachers at strategic intervals throughout the day.

In the primary grades (K-4), the model calls for three students alternating use of each computer, with a stated goal of one student per computer in junior high (grades 5-8). Depending on available resources, this ratio may change to 2:1. In one of the schools, there will be a beginning ratio of one iPad computer for each student, since the school had already purchased the machines prior to the Initiative.

FACTORS LEADING TO THE CHANGE

Two years ago, Diocese schools Superintendent Kathy Almazol and Assistant Superintendent Nancy Doyle identified five schools – all in middle to lower-middle class neighborhoods – that were consistently declining in enrollment. According to Almazol and Doyle, competition from charters and other private schools was drawing pupils away from the diocese’s Catholic schools ([a national phenomenon Lexington has explored in depth](#)).

For Catholic schools that are considering an instructional design change like blended learning, the purpose of the program has to be clear – to sustain schools financially and improve student learning. With the first objective in mind, San Jose Diocese leaders recognized the current governance model for most diocesan schools, responsible directly to the parish priest, would not work.

These priests are rarely trained educators, and often view the parish school as a distraction that takes away from the primary role of ministering to the community through mass and other parish services. Financially troubled schools exacerbate this problem, since in the words of Nancy Doyle, “priests go to bed worrying about the survival of the school and wake up to the challenge of keeping it running every morning.” She and her team decided it was time for a significant change.

GOVERNANCE FIRST

To compete, the financially fragile schools required a “facelift” including finance and governance reforms. To achieve the desired classroom results, the program’s leaders felt it was necessary for educators, rather than pastors, to be put directly in charge of the schools.

A key component of the model San Jose adopted was divorcing the school administration from the pastor’s duties – with each school leader directly responsible to the consortium director and Diocese schools officials. San Jose’s leaders studied the experiences of San Francisco’s Mission Dolores Academy with its own adoption of a blended learning model, a process which served to inform this important step in particular. That once struggling K-8 Catholic elementary school re-launched as a fully blended school in fall 2011. Subsequently, enrollment has grown and costs have fallen by 20% as test scores have risen, and the school is now thriving.

Diocese officials met with school leaders and the bishop, PJ McGrath, to identify commonalities between the campuses and build consensus for a federal model of finance and changes to school governance. The reaction has been mixed, as some pastors resist ceding control over the school. With Bishop McGrath’s help and cajoling, the diocese succeeded in instituting the governance changes.

The finances at the Initiative schools will also be brought under a central comptroller – according to exacting standards to ensure that the schools are maximizing the efficiency of the model – with higher enrollments and lower personnel costs. The purpose is clear: to offer students more scholarships and to bring skyrocketing tuition rates under control to expand access to Catholic education.

SOFTWARE AND INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS

For software, the Initiative will use 70 different applications (“apps”) pre-loaded on iPads for students and teachers. The teachers, according to Superintendent Almazol, “should be open-minded and collaborate between grade levels and cohorts on what they choose to use. We didn’t want to be prescriptive like some other school models.”

For Doyle and Almazol, both former classroom teachers, “we want to empower the classroom teacher to be the designer of the curriculum. It’s disingenuous if we say you know your students best but the diocese dictates what

you use. We want our professional staff to feel valued and we want the community to explore and engage with differentiated models and software tools.”

Initiative leaders have provided broad flexibility for teachers to choose instructional programs and materials. Many of the teachers are using Learning A-Z products, including Reading A-Z, Vocab A-Z and RazKids for the language arts in the primary grades. Mathletics has been used sporadically prior to the Initiative, and the Diocese will encourage teachers to make better use of that tool.

The Initiative schools will also be moving to a fully blended math curriculum using Dreambox and ST Math for most coursework, to allow for assessments and instruction delivery in real-time, allowing teachers to differentiate based on student outcomes. All seven schools, K-8, will be fully blended in math by September, easing into a blended language arts program over the course of the year.

The schools will also be tracking progress through data by taking the MAP assessment on a semi-annual basis. These assessments serve both as critical indicators of academic growth by each student as well as sources of data to guide targeted instruction to individual students’ strengths and weaknesses.

HOW TO PAY FOR THE MODEL?

Funding blended learning start-up costs is a critical concern for most school leaders considering the change. For Catholic schools in financial straits, raising the hundreds of thousands, if not millions, needed for technology upgrades and professional development is an intimidating task.

But Superintendent Almazol recommends others not “overthink the decision to do something that’s bold that would benefit student learning and sustain your schools. So many say, ‘this is a good idea but we don’t have any money.’ San Jose didn’t have any money. We just told our story and the Holy Spirit sat with us.”

The San Jose diocese team visited San Francisco’s Mission Dolores site with investors and began to assess how integrating technology into the classroom would figure into the “facelift” efforts.

The Silicon Valley-based Sobrato Family Foundation agreed to support the project in February 2013. The foundation provided \$1 million for year one and start-up costs, and another \$500,000 for two subsequent years if the Diocese could raise and match the initial million dollar grant. As of this report, the diocese is extremely close and will likely reach its goal soon.

To help solidify the plan, the Initiative was expanded to two more schools on sounder financial footing and with stronger enrollment numbers.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR BLENDED LEARNING IS ESSENTIAL

Teachers are the heart of successful blended learning implementation. The blended learning process itself – a closed data feedback loop – is only as effective as the instructional decisions and interventions teachers themselves make based upon the information it provides. Real-time and actionable data is a tool to help teachers personalize accurately and frequently for each child. For this reason, professional development is one of the most crucial components of a blended learning design plan.

For Catholic schools like those in San Jose, a professional development program must ensure that teachers understand and buy in to the program – a process which requires work and patience. To accomplish this, San Jose partnered with nearby Jesuit Santa Clara University Professor Steve Johnson to design and execute an “Academy of Blended Learning” this summer.

For Johnson, the Academy was designed on a blended basis itself – pre-testing the skills and aptitudes of the participants so that each received the professional development program tailored to their needs. Not only is it a practical and effective way to introduce the concept of blended learning to the teachers, according to Johnson, “it’s a matter of respect for the professionalism and competence of these career educators.”

The program consisted of six days over the summer – covering the basic theory and practice of blended learning as well as acclimating instructors to the tools themselves.

Even with the dedicated professional development plan, San Jose did have to overcome challenges. Some teachers, especially the most experienced and established teachers, expressed resentment to the changes, and even resisted attending the blended learning academy. The diocese was able to convince most teachers, by asking them to sign a participation contract, to attend the sessions. A handful of veterans retired early instead of changing their approach.

Doyle and Almazol report that it was the “irreconcilables” who are now the most eager practitioners and students of blended learning. Of those who were only required to attend the first two-day session, the vast majority opted to attend additional optional exercises – to build on their skills and gain more practice in the blended learning space.

SUSTAIN AND REPLICATE

The Diocese of San Jose hopes this model can be “replicable for other Catholic schools, to be a system of efficiency and efficacy,” according to Almazol.

If the new model proves sustainable, the diocese believes it can provide a valuable model for Catholic schools facing similar challenges around the country to emulate. Catholic educators who have embraced blended learning models in other jurisdictions have noted that the new instructional efficiencies and effectiveness in promoting achievement, when documented clearly, have registered positively with funders. Operating in an education marketplace where successful charter schools have made regular documentation of academic gains the new norm, donors have become accustomed to seeing regular, quantitative markers of progress toward outcomes that Catholic schools often must compete with.

Nancy Doyle acknowledges, “We are only slightly ahead of the curve, it is very exciting and we know we need to keep our eyes wide open about the pitfalls but we are ready for the challenge.”

If the San Jose Diocese succeeds with its St. Katherine Drexel Initiative, it will be, in the words of Nancy Doyle, “re-inventing Catholic education in the 21st Century.”

Also by the Lexington Institute:

Why Blended Learning Can’t Stand Still: A Commitment to Constant Innovation is Needed to Realize the Potential of Individualized Learning, April 2013.

Building 21st Century Catholic Learning Communities: Enhancing the Catholic Mission with Data, Blended Learning, and Other Best Practices from Top Charter Schools, July 2012.