REIMAGINING SOCIAL CHANGE

Raising Blended Learners® Year 1 Evaluation Report

September 2017

RAISE YOUR HAND TEXAS FOUNDATION

This report was prepared by FSG and commissioned by the Raise Your Hand Texas® Foundation.

RAISING BLENDED LEARNERS®

A RAISE YOUR HAND TEXAS® INITIATIVE

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AUTHORS

This document synthesizes FSG's evaluation findings from the first year of implementation of Raising Blended Learners (RBL), an initiative of Raise Your Hand Texas. It articulates how the RBL pilots in the five demonstration sites participating in the effort have been constructed, and traces their experiences as they launched or deepened their blended learning work. This report also includes an initial set of cross-site lessons learned, with the hope of informing and strengthening the work of other educators in Texas and across the country.

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About FSG

FSG is a mission-driven consulting firm supporting leaders in creating large-scale, lasting social change. Through strategy, evaluation, and research we help many types of actors—individually and collectively—make progress against the world's toughest problems. Learn more about FSG at www.fsg.org

All statements and conclusions, unless specifically attributed to another source, are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the other organizations or references noted in the report.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the individuals and organizations who contributed their experiences and knowledge to this report. We'd like to particularly thank staff at Raise Your Hand Texas, CA Group, and the five RBL demonstration sites. We also want to thank the teachers and students who participating in our evaluation activities during our site visits.

FUNDER LETTER

The Raise Your Hand Texas Foundation is pleased to share the Raising Blended Learners Year 1 Implementation Report, documenting the progress demonstration sites have made in the 2016-17 school year.

In August 2016, all five sites began implementation following a year-long planning process. Just as each site began with a unique problem they were trying to solve, each site also experienced a different journey along the way. We are excited about the progress they have all made and proud of their determination through the first year of innovation.

For sites, Year 1 was largely about using a data-driven process to iterate on their models and make decisions about scale. While too early in this three-year demonstration initiative to offer conclusive findings, there are several early signs of academic and nonacademic success that indicate to both Raise Your Hand and sites that they are making progress and positively impacting student learning. Some of these examples include:

- In multiple districts, STAAR exam results show higher achievement levels for students in blended learning classrooms; in one district pilot, the number of students who "Approached" grade level increased by 50 percentage points, students who "Met" grade level increased by 36 percentage points, and students who "Mastered" grade level content increased by 3 percentage points.
- In one district, six students who failed the STAAR exam the previous year passed their exam in 2017, even with a higher passing standard.
- Students in one pilot school earned the highest NWEA MAP math growth and achievement score among all students in the same grade level across the district.
- Teachers across all districts reported favorable non-academic student impacts ranging from increased student agency and ownership, to enhanced self-advocacy and self-confidence, improved behavior and attendance, and greater enthusiasm and engagement due to blended personalized learning.
- 100 percent of teachers in the demonstration site pilot classrooms said they experienced such profound mindset shifts and outcomes as a result of their first year implementation that they would never go back to their previous mode of teaching.

Year 1 has shown us shifting to a student-centered educational environment through blended learning is much more than the sum of its parts. These sites are not just implementing an instructional model; they are changing the culture of their entire district to value data and embrace innovation. As much as Raising Blended Learners is about improving student performance in the classroom, it is also about identifying and addressing systemic challenges to performance improvement. Data generated from Raising Blended Learners sites even just in Year 1 have implications for systemic changes such as: improving district-wide instructional models to increase rigor; the use of growth-based assessment to inform teaching and learning; teacher preparation on data-driven instruction; and how to budget for differentiation of

instruction based on student performance levels. Just as student performance conclusions are premature to make at the end of Year 1, so too are systemic findings, but we anticipate the next two years generating data informative to various system improvements.

Raising Blended Learners was intentionally designed as a three-year initiative to allow sites to learn from and evolve their blended learning models. The Year 1 Implementation Report details the unique stories of each demonstration site to date. Recognizing it is just as important to report on what went well as what did not, the report shares both complicated challenges and meaningful progress. We applaud the demonstration sites for their transparency in sharing their first year implementation experience. We believe their stories will help districts just beginning their blended learning journey, and expect they will resonate with others further along in blended learning implementation. However familiar you are with the challenge of achieving rigorous student-centered learning at scale, we hope you find their stories as inspiring as we do.

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INTRODUCTION

In fall 2016, five Raising Blended Learners (RBL) demonstration sites started implementation of their blended learning pilots: Birdville ISD, Cisco ISD, KIPP Houston, Pasadena, and Point Isabel ISD. These demonstration sites represent the range of public school districts in Texas: large and small, rural and urban, district, and charter. Each district had spent more than a year laying the groundwork for implementation and testing new approaches to instruction. Over the course of the 2016-17 school year, the five sites benefited from grant support from a consortium of Texas foundations along with substantial technical assistance from nationally-recognized providers. These resources were designed to advance the ambitious goals of the Raising Blended Learners initiative: to improve student achievement through blended learning across diverse demographics and geographies; to demonstrate sustainability of new learning models; and lead to scale of effective practices and new processes for rapid prototyping and innovation across school systems in Texas.

In designing Raising Blended Learners, the Raise Your Hand Texas Foundation and its partners recognized that improving and expanding blended learning across Texas would require a robust commitment to learning and continuous improvement. Raise Your Hand partnered with FSG to serve as the evaluation and learning partner for this initiative. This partnership began during the planning and selection year in 2015-16 – reflections from that year can be found in the first report from FSG's evaluation, released in summer 2016.

This document synthesizes FSG's evaluation findings from Year 1 of implementation (school year 2016-17). It articulates how the Raising Blended Learners pilots have been constructed, and traces the experiences of the five demonstration sites as they launched or deepened their pilots. We also share an initial set of cross-site observations, with the hope of informing and strengthening the work of other educators interested in blended learning and innovation in Texas and across the country.

We hope these observations will provide useful insights for other Texas educators in the early stages of personalized blended learning. We would also note that the experiences of the five districts and charters of Raising Blended Learners often mirror the experiences of other blended and personalized learning pilots nationally. We hope that these similarities and occasional differences of experience drive discussion, and contribute to the growing collective knowledge around blended, personalized, and student-centered learning.

Evaluation Purpose, Approach, and Methods

The purpose of this year's evaluation was to document experiences from early-stage, blended learning models in the five demonstration sites participating in RBL. The evaluation explored the sites' initial experiences with implementation to better understand areas of progress and challenges, as well as how sites define and track success. The evaluation was intentionally structured to fit the early, often complicated stages of implementing personalized blended learning, and to maximize learning for the broader field.

Evaluation Approach

The evaluation utilized four complementary approaches. These are reflected in the methodologies FSG used to collect data, as well as in the evaluation team's approach to communicating and reporting.

1. **Developmental:** Describing what is developing and emerging from sites' early execution.
2. **Utilization-focused:** Providing information that will be used for strategic, programmatic, and operational improvement and decision-making by the sites and Raise Your Hand.
3. **Collaborative:** Involving Raise Your Hand staff and partners, district and school leaders, teachers, parents, and students in the evaluation.
4. **Learning-oriented:** Focusing the evaluation on supporting a culture of learning among sites and partners in the initiative.

Evaluation Questions

The following questions informed this year's evaluation and will continue to guide the process over the next two years:

1. What blended / personalized learning models are being implemented? How have these models evolved over Year 1, and how have different stakeholders experienced the new models?
2. How are demonstration sites defining "success" – both for blended learning and overall?
3. What lessons did sites and implementation partners learn regarding effectively supporting blended learning implementation in schools?
4. How is the initiative's theory of scale evolving?

Evaluation Activities

In order to answer these questions, FSG engaged in the following evaluation activities:

- Review of site profiles, business plans, mid-year and year-end reflections, and several implementation documents including problem statement and root cause, design pillars, student experience, and teacher experience templates
- Review of SMART Goal results for five demonstration sites
- Review of Ecosystem of Support Monthly Status Reports developed by CA Group
- Review of YouthTruth student survey results for all sites
- Interviews with CA Group, RYHT, and select TA providers, n=20 (e.g., YouthTruth and TNTP)
- Survey of all RBL pilot teachers, n=58
- Two site visits to schools across the five demonstration sites
  - Interviews with school staff at the five demonstration sites, n=30 (roughly three interviews per site twice during the school year)
  - Interviews with district staff and site leadership, n=30 (roughly three interviews per site twice during the school year)
  - Focus groups and interviews with teachers, n=60 (different number of teachers per site, from one teacher in KIPP Houston to 12 in Birdville, twice during the school year)
  - Class observations, n=15
  - Conversations with students, n=20

Approach to Data Analysis

Qualitative and quantitative data gathered through the evaluation were analyzed using the evaluation questions as a guide.

Qualitative Data Analysis

The majority of the data analysis focused on interpreting and generating insights from qualitative data gathered through interviews, focus groups, surveys, observation, and document review.

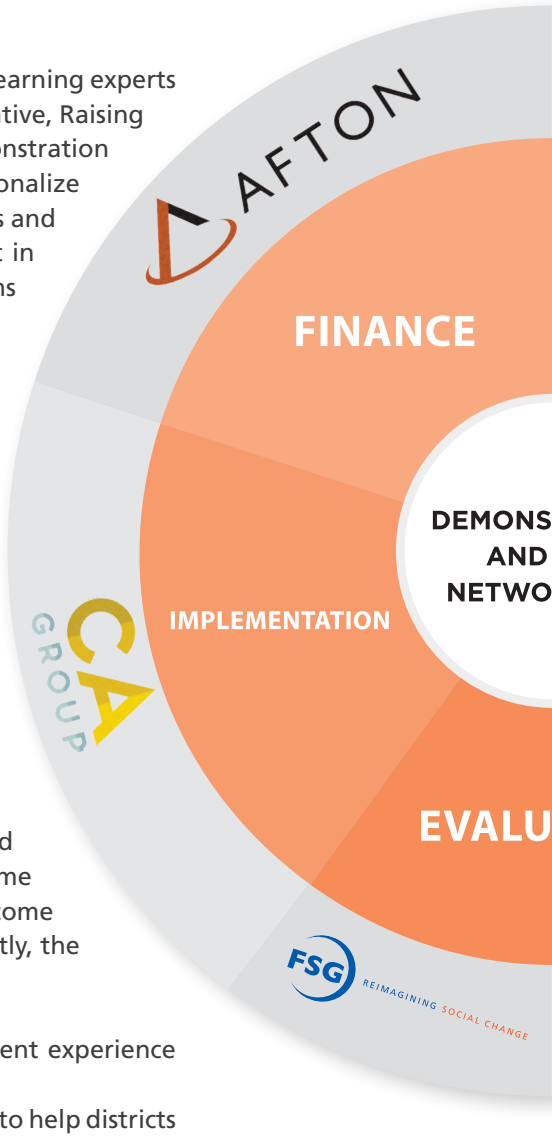
- **Interviews and focus groups:** Transcribed verbatim, interview and focus group notes were analyzed using software or a comparable qualitative analysis approach. Transcripts were coded to organize and sort themes.
- **Open-ended teacher survey questions:** Analysis of open-ended survey responses was done by identifying common themes and patterns (similar to coding of interviews and focus groups).
- **Observation:** Notes from observations during site visits were analyzed using an inductive content analysis process. Key themes from observations were summarized and integrated into the evaluation findings.
- **Document review:** Documents were summarized and relevant information was classified in relation to the evaluation questions. The content of the documents helped the FSG team better understand the context in which RBL is developing, the areas where sites have made progress or experienced challenges, and the data sites have used to define success.

Quantitative Data Analysis and Reporting

- **Definition of success framework data:** FSG integrated data gathered through SMART Goals data tracking, in addition to other indicators of success identified by sites to track the success of their pilot.
- **Teacher survey:** Frequencies and percentages were calculated for each survey item. Quantitative analyses were primarily presented using tables, charts, and figures. Survey data was analyzed using Excel.

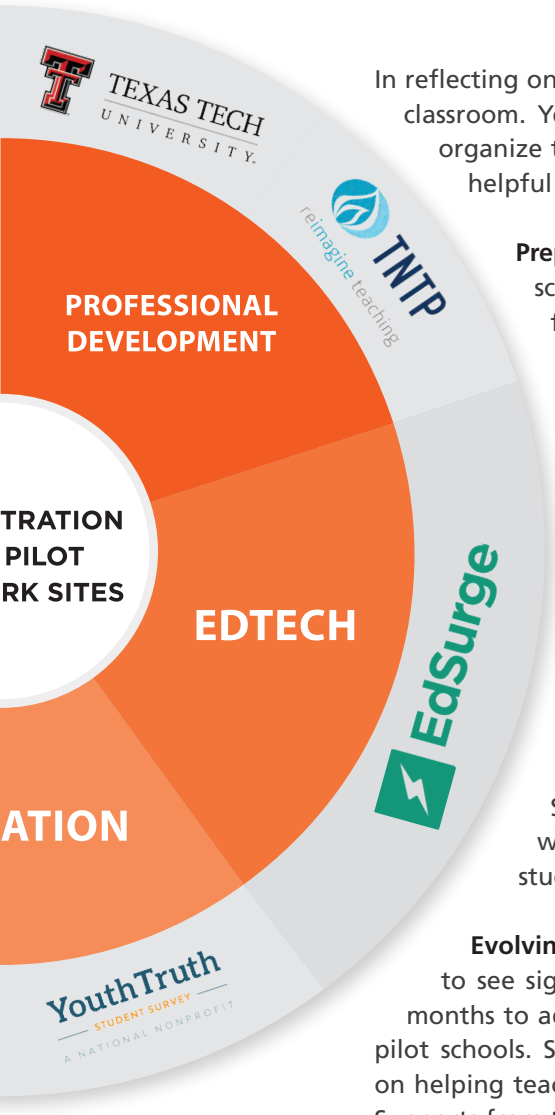
Overview of Year 1 Implementation

In 2014, Raise Your Hand leadership partnered with fellow Texans and blended learning experts Heather Staker and Cat Alexander to design a statewide blended learning initiative, Raising Blended Learners. The vision for the initiative was to "implement a demonstration initiative that showcases strategies for using blended learning to personalize instruction, thereby improving student achievement, particularly among schools and districts with persistent achievement gaps." In early 2015, every school district in Texas was invited to apply. Seventy-four district and charter public school teams submitted initial applications and participated in an introductory workshop during fall 2015. Sixty–seven of the teams attending the workshop submitted detailed business plans for implementing blended learning. Through a rigorous selection process, Raise Your Hand identified 20 districts to receive different degrees of support. Fifteen districts would participate in a "Pilot Network," receiving technical assistance but no grant funding. And five districts were chosen as demonstration sites, receiving intensive technical assistance in addition to a $500,000 grant. *(Note: This report only focuses on the experiences with implementation from the five demonstration sites.)*



To support the winning districts, Raise Your Hand assembled a group of nationally respected technical assistance (TA) providers, collectively referred to as the "Ecosystem" of supports. The composition of the Ecosystem has evolved based on the stage of the initiative – for instance, some providers offered specialized expertise as districts were designing their pilots, some have been brought in to support implementation, and others have been engaged throughout. Additionally, the five demonstration sites all started with the same baseline of supports, but over the course of Year 1 these supports have become increasingly differentiated to match each district's point of progression. Currently, the main technical assistance in the Ecosystems include:

- **CA Group** manages the overall initiative, and offers direct support on student experience design, pilot implementation, and district capacity building.
- **Afton Partners** provides school finance support, both for the grant funds and to help districts shift their long-term budgets to sustain blended learning.
- **TNTP** supports teacher professional development, and has particularly focused on rigor and high-quality instruction.
- **Texas Tech University** created a blended learning graduate certificate program, enrolling 15 RBL teachers in Year 1, and has developed a video case study library of blended and personalized learning classrooms.
- **EdSurge** advised districts on technology selection and supported districts as questions arose.
- **YouthTruth Student Survey** conducts rigorous student surveys to understand how students are experiencing the initiative.
- **FSG** is the evaluation and learning partner.



Raising Blended Learners® is funded by Educate Texas, The Meadows Foundation, Michael & Susan Dell Foundation, and Raise Your Hand Texas Foundation.

In reflecting on Year 1, the blended learning journey varied by district, or even by school and classroom. Yet some patterns did emerge from implementation that make it possible to organize the year by a set of phases. Even acknowledging variation, these phases are a helpful way to understand the overall experience of the sites.

Preparation. The summer of 2016 served as an opportunity for sites to prepare schools, teachers, and students for a fall launch. The CA Group helped sites further define their blended learning models and start moving from planning to implementation. District and school leaders designed their models based on specific student experience pillars, installed the technology required to run their pilots, designed and executed trainings for teachers, and gave teachers space and resources to start developing any new content for their classes. Although planning was in many cases more time consuming than expected, sites generally began the school year excited about blended learning.

Early efforts. Early implementation was generally more difficult than expected. Some of these challenges centered on technical issues – for instance, issues with internet connectivity, student sign-ins, and general familiarity with software continued for the first month or two of school. The greater difficulty, however, came in helping students, teachers, and leaders adjust to very different roles and expectations in blended learning settings. Shifting mindsets to support a more student-centered learning environment would occupy much of Year 1, but led to particularly acute needs for teacher and student support in the early months of implementation.

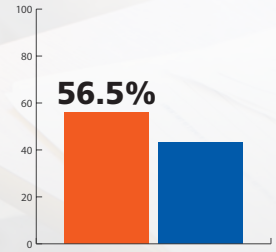
Evolving the approach. Despite early challenges, schools generally persisted and began to see signs of progress partway through the year. Sites reported that it took several months to adapt and learn and make changes that helped them gain momentum in most pilot schools. Some sites provided additional resources to support teachers, others focused on helping teachers increase use of data or gave teachers more flexibility in their classroom. Supports from the TA providers also proved important. As teachers and students began to feel more comfortable with the new learning models, sites began to deepen their understanding of blended learning, seeing it as less about technology and more a new way of teaching and learning.

Preparing for next year. Sites ended Year 1 with general enthusiasm. Participants showed substantial interest in learning from their Year 1 experiences to allow for smoother implementation in Year 2. At the same time, each of the sites is considering how best to support blended learning at a larger scale in Year 2, involving both formal mechanisms for scaling but also allowing for organic spread among interested teachers. All five demonstration sites will be continuing with the initiative in Year 2, and expanding into new schools, and serving additional students.

The following pages explore detailed profiles of each site's experience, along with chief observations from Year 1.

KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF BIRDVILLE

25,000
Approximate Total Student Enrollment



Economically Disadvantaged Students


8.5% African American
40% Hispanic
42.6% White

Ethnic Breakdown

3
Schools Piloting Blended Learning

15
Teachers Piloting Blended Learning

1,900
Approximate Number of Students in Blended Classrooms

BIRDVILLE ISD

Raising Blended Learners, FSG Year 1 Site Report

Introduction

Located northeast of Fort Worth in Tarrant County, Birdville Independent School District serves roughly 25,000 students. In 2015, as members of the district leadership team recognized literacy challenges across schools, they sought the RBL grant to redesign learning in the district while addressing a key academic priority. The district's ensuing pilot is designed to facilitate a shift from "one-size-fits-all" instruction toward student-centered, personalized learning. In addition to targeting English Language Arts and Reading (ELAR) outcomes, the program is designed to increase student ownership of learning.

To address these challenges and foster student success, Birdville's pilot has focused on 9th grade ELAR classrooms across the district's three traditional high schools. Reading proficiency is the primary focus of the personalized learning efforts underway in these settings. In the initiative's second year, "Project 2" will focus on post-secondary readiness at the district's alternative high school, where students in high-risk situations can obtain the credits they need to graduate using accelerated quarter terms.

The district's blended learning strategy is guided by the Birdville Portrait of a Graduate, a vision for student characteristics that will foster success in college and the workplace. With the goal of academic and career excellence, the Portrait of a Graduate presents a commitment to providing learning environments that produce "empowered learners, responsible citizens, global competitors, and innovative entrepreneurs." These principles are integrated into the initiative's key design pillars, which have set the foundation for innovative and responsive classrooms that provide personalized learning pathways for Birdville students.

Model

Problem Statement

During the first year of implementation the Birdville team launched the district's pilot focused on English I at three traditional high schools. The pilot targeted a pressing need in literacy across these schools. In response to this problem, Birdville designed a pilot to increase personalized instruction and cognitive rigor, while also providing students with opportunities to develop specific learning objectives, monitor their progress, and participate in more engaging experiences.

Blended Learning Model

Across its three pilot high schools Birdville is pursuing station rotations, along with other blended strategies, including flipped lessons, to personalize learning for students. Since pilot teachers are afforded autonomy with classroom implementation in accordance with the district-level student experience design pillars, each classroom looks different. Pilot classrooms are generally organized around multiple stations where students are clustered with small groups of peers. Learning modalities include individual and collaborative projects, self-directed work through online programs, reviews of flipped lessons, individual study, and direct instruction. Teachers also introduced instructional playlists and individualized learning pathways. Over the course of the year, the model expanded to include one-on-one teacher-student conferencing to foster goal setting and progress measurement. To support the new blended classrooms, pilot teachers have been equipped with access to online tools including Google Classroom, Canvas, Ed Puzzle and adaptive grammar and vocabulary content to enable students to access appropriately leveled content and learning activities.

Design Pillars and Strategies

Design pillars are used among all RBL sites to identify the essential design elements upon which each site's student experience is based. The Birdville design pillars are: **Flexible Instructional Groupings, Data-Driven Instruction (DDI), Student Agency/Data Transparency, Rigor and Relevance, and Competency-Based Learning**.

Flexible Instructional Grouping | **Data-Driven Instruction** | **Student Agency** | **Rigor and Relevance** | **Competency-Based Learning**

Through Flexible Instructional Grouping the district is using several instructional arrangements based on student mastery and progress data (e.g., small group, whole group, partner, one-on-one) to improve student performance. This approach fosters personalized instruction, enhances peer collaboration, increases engagement, and increases accountability through group learning.[▶] This has been the most fully realized of Birdville's design pillars.

The district's second pillar of Data-Driven Instruction is a systematic approach to assessing, analyzing, and acting on student progress throughout the year. This method supports flexible, personalized instruction that uses data to develop purposeful progression for students. Through professional learning communities, pilot teachers made early progress on data-driven instruction over Year 1 and began to explore the potential uses of STAR 360, the district's newly purchased growth assessment, along with other data sources that more frequently measure student progress.

[▶] https://youtu.be/ahzJ8aE6lSg


Student Agency refers to the level of control, autonomy, and power that learners have in their educational experiences. To foster choice and encourage ownership, many pilot teachers introduced classroom strategies to help students become responsible for more aspects of the learning process, monitor their progress, and set learning goals. Student agency strategies are in different stages of implementation across pilot classrooms and will continue to be a district focus for Year 2.

Birdville initiated important work around the pillar of Rigor and Relevance, which refers to students having the competence to think in complex ways and apply knowledge and skills they have acquired. This has been an area of growth for Birdville. At the beginning of the year, Birdville worked extensively with TNTP to diagnose needs around rigor, and the academic deans and digital learning specialists from the pilot campuses participated in TNTP professional development to establish norms for identifying classroom rigor and coaching teachers. Rigor and relevance will also remain a focus for Year 2. This will include more regular cycles of instructional coaching for teachers, as well as new opportunities for students to apply their lessons in real-world contexts.

The final pillar of Competency-Based Learning is in the early stages of development. This strategy includes systems of instruction, assessment, grading, and academic reporting that are based on students demonstrating that they are meeting learning expectations based on key academic milestones. Birdville began to pilot this concept through the use of adaptive grammar software and increasing the data analysis skills of pilot teachers and academic deans. Several teachers built classroom models which allowed for differently-paced approaches to the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS). Pilot teachers have plans for continued exploration of this pillar in Year 2.

Journey and Evolution

Birdville is a large, traditional district seeking to rapidly scale blended learning while also learning how to approach school improvement through innovation. Prior to the RBL initiative, Birdville had often approached new programs through directives and attempts to standardize implementation. Asking teachers to test new blended learning models and continuously change their practice required both a deeper degree of supports, as well as a substantial cultural shift at both the school and district levels. As a result, Birdville experienced early challenges with blended learning common to large systems attempting this level of transformation, and implementation looked different in different contexts across the pilot year. Still, over the course of Year 1, teachers gradually gained comfort with blended learning, while district leaders made significant progress in collaborating across departments to support implementation. Next year, the district will be leveraging lessons from Year 1 to prepare schools for pilot expansion in Year 2, which will involve more than 70 district employees from a wide range of district departments along with school personnel.

Preparation: Birdville set ambitious early plans for scale, leading both to excitement and challenges to quickly get ready for implementation.

When Birdville applied for the Raising Blended Learners grant, a small group of teachers, school leaders, and district leaders spent substantial time designing an ambitious pilot in English I across three high schools. When they won the grant in spring 2016, the team moved quickly into implementation for the coming fall. Yet they soon encountered challenges to rapidly organize support for their large pilot. This was particularly true for supporting teachers – as with other sites, the transition for teachers required more coaching and administrative support than anticipated, a challenge accentuated by Birdville's scale.

At the school level, the most significant challenge for pilot teachers across the three high schools was owning the responsibility for the redesign of their blended classrooms. Most teachers had little experience designing a new learning experience for students rather than following a set program, and hence lacked confidence in their abilities to innovate and take risks. Teachers also felt considerable pressure to deliver on State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) results and were concerned that blended learning might reduce initial scores. Furthermore, while some English I teachers were involved from the start of the grant process, others lacked a full understanding of the rationale for shifting to blended learning, or were not fully convinced that blended learning would improve their students' literacy skills.[1] Pre-launch, many teachers expressed anxiety about readiness and some were resistant, particularly in settings with traditionally stronger test performance and less urgency to change. As a district leader said, *"There was a lot of proving to be done for the teachers to convince them this was worthwhile for our kids. In a test-driven environment, the focus has been much more on exam results rather than student experience."*

Reflecting on Year 1, multiple teachers felt that their training on blended learning before launch was too short or not deep or sustained relative to the change required. This sentiment was shared by district leaders. As one district leader shared, *"What we did not match or do a good enough job of was the level of readiness of the teachers. We focused a lot on student readiness, but we did not match that preparation with the readiness for the teachers."* In response, Birdville built in more training and support throughout Year 1, and is planning for more robust training and onboarding programs for new teachers in future years.

In addition to the amount of support provided, Birdville district leaders recognized that much of the early frustration came from a change in how the district approached innovation. Like many large districts, Birdville had traditionally addressed academic improvement through specific departmental programs and directives. Programs were implemented in a set way across each classroom and school, and success was defined by accountability and the completion of standardized tasks. Blended learning, however, took a more constructivist approach. Pilot teachers were asked to create new classroom models based on their understanding of the district's design pillars and the underlying root causes of low literacy outcomes. This demanded not only new skills but a willingness to take risks and show initiative that cut against the cultural grain of standardization and directives. As one district leader shared, "[In the past], we would give people a sheet with steps one through ten, but that did not push teachers toward real change … they were so used to responding to checklists, it was surprising for them to hear they had to make changes on their own, with less structure." This linked set of challenges for Birdville – building deeper practical supports for the pilot teachers, while also shifting teacher and district leader mindsets – would frame their work and progress over the remainder of the year.

[1] https://youtu.be/1uEQp5xHGiY

Early Efforts: Initial stages of implementation proved more challenging than expected.

At the outset of implementation, students in newly blended classrooms were responsible for a large number of software platforms and logins. These took time and practice to manage effectively, and many students needed support using technology for learning purposes. As one teacher shared, *"There was a belief that [students] were digital natives, but they are not actually savvy…They do not know how to perform basic functions on the computer."* At the same time, teachers saw a similar learning curve for their new learning management system, a new assessment tool, and several new digital content tools. As was expected, the 15 participating teachers experienced varied levels of progress and comfort during these early stages; looking back, some of the less tech-savvy teachers reflected that the first semester would have been more manageable had the new technologies been adopted on a more gradual basis.

When blended learning launched, the district offered support through digital learning specialists from the Instructional Technology Department. Academic deans at pilot campuses were also asked to support teachers, though their time was limited due to other campus responsibilities. However, these early supports were limited relative to the large number of pilot teachers. Since blended learning was so new to the district, those who were supporting teachers also lacked deep blended expertise, making it harder to model what strong blended instruction actually looked like in practice. In some cases, pilot teachers and campus leaders noticed that existing district structures or initiatives already in motion for the coming school year had not been revised to support blended classrooms. As one district staff member said, *" .... [district] leaders did not completely internalize what this was going to take."* Across schools, early on teachers reported fatigue and expressed concern about potential burnout.

However, as teachers gained experience, they also began to rely on one another for support. The pilot teachers met daily as part of professional learning communities (PLCs) within each school to help one another with technology skill development. Within the first several months, the PLCs expanded to become a staging ground for exploring new ideas and troubleshooting all aspects of blended classroom implementation. Sample topics of discussion included sharing what blended learning looked like in different classrooms, developing new tools and blended content, and providing encouragement and feedback to peers as they worked to reformulate their classrooms.

The PLCs also played an important role in school culture. For some teachers, often those who were early adopters of blended learning or who brought stronger technical skills, the PLCs were an opportunity to grow as teacher leaders and to influence the beliefs of their peers. Two schools, with stronger PLCs and a collective consensus around the need for change, began to advance more quickly with blended learning implementation, while the third school experienced more challenges. Teachers and school leaders at the third site attributed these challenges to several factors – among them the degree of leader engagement, limited coaching support, and a desire to maintain existing instructional practices.

Like the pilot teachers, Birdville's district leaders adapted their approach over Year 1. To better coordinate implementation and build buy-in among senior leaders, the district formed an "RBL Leadership Team" in late fall. This included several senior district officials who had not previously been engaged as deeply, particularly around curriculum and instruction. The team met regularly, and soon identified issues raised through blended learning that affected the broader district. The pilot teachers' early work with TNTP around strengthening rigor, for example, led to the realization that rigor levels were suppressed in literacy due to the number of students

below grade level. This was confirmed by STAR 360 progress data, which was employed for the second time across the district in Year 1. These realizations spurred reflection among multiple department heads about the various contributing factors to low literacy, and, most importantly, led to more aligned district actions to support literacy and intervene for struggling students.

The increased engagement from district leadership gradually led to a more cohesive approach to implementation. At the school level, district leaders and coaches increased their work with principals to offer support for their blended learning teachers. This was particularly important in instances when school leaders had traditionally taken more of an administrative role and spent less time in classrooms; in this case teachers particularly struggled with the blended transition. Gradually, however, more hands-on instructional leadership helped to improve teacher morale and blended learning practices began to improve.

In classrooms, teachers began seeing bright spots towards the end of the first semester. Pockets of teachers developed their own approaches to implementing the project's design pillars, which generated some early successes around smaller learning clusters, station rotations, playlists, and student-teacher check-ins.[1] One teacher offered, *"As a group, we [have] also done a great job of experimentation. I would tell anyone who's trying to make this work that you have to be fearless. You have to just try a few things and see what's going to work out the best for your kids."*

Evolving the Approach: Students and teachers developed more comfort with blending as the semester continued.

Midway through the year, several pivotal moments gave momentum to the Birdville pilot. First, the district project team organized an extended session in November with all the blended learning teachers to review STAR 360 data and help teachers focus on data-driven instruction. This exercise helped many teachers identify proficiency gaps in individual students much more readily than they had before. Teachers began brainstorming how they could better target student needs using data going forward.[2]

More importantly, in response to hearing from teachers that they wanted to see examples of blended learning in action, Birdville contracted with a blended learning expert to facilitate a teacher workshop. Her February presentation was a turning point. She broke down blended learning in a practical way and gave teachers relatable examples of blended strategies to model. Pilot teacher morale and confidence improved. As one participant noted, *"She was able to shut down skeptics who pushed back because their student populations were too challenging. For some reason, when [teachers] heard from her they felt so much better. It made a lightbulb go off for them and they saw this as doable."*

Coming out of this presentation, blended learning became more widely accepted among the pilot teachers as a relatable, attainable approach to teaching. In response, teachers began showing an increased willingness to experiment and take risks. A few teachers, for instance, started to flex away from Birdville's station rotation model, developing playlists and more personalized pathways for individual students.[3] Principals, initially concerned about such variation, started to embrace flexibility across classrooms and encouraged teachers to exercise autonomy. This helped promote experimentation and improved teacher comfort with new approaches to instruction and classroom setup. One teacher shared, *"I would say there's more freedom. There's never been a feeling of 'no experimentation', but because of the word fidelity, in a sense we're made to wonder if we should be experimenting. It's not a spoken thing, but it's an inference we make."* Gradually, both tacit and explicit habits began to fall away as progress toward personalization accelerated during the second semester.

[1] https://youtu.be/ryMf7noHuco
[2] https://youtu.be/XA-bN-fNwO0

As progress improved, deeper mindset shifts began to take root among many teachers. In reflecting on the role of technology in the classroom, one English I teacher shared,

> *"A lot of people miss this by thinking it is just the tech component. It is really a philosophical shift in how you approach our classroom, from top to bottom. It's every kid, who has their own pace and preferences."*

A principal affirmed this belief, stating,

> *"It's been about understanding what personalization is, and making the work unique for every kid ... Initially teachers were doing things a lot differently with station rotations, but kids were really doing the same thing under different groupings. From the first semester into the second semester, they started to get a better understanding of that personalized piece."*

During the second semester, many teachers reported that students became increasingly independent and exhibited more agency and ownership. They also noted that students showed more confidence about sharing their ideas, and increasingly supported one another.

One teacher explained,

> *"I have seen the kids get more independent. They do not hang as close to me asking questions as they used to…. and when they're going into other classes, they're bringing this newfound confidence with them. They're not afraid to speak up."* ▶

This progress in schools was mirrored by structural and cultural changes at the district level. In order to provide more actionable instructional feedback to teachers, district coaches and school leaders began using the blended learning teacher observation rubric, provided by RBL TA provider TNTP, halfway through the year. The RBL District Leadership Team also continued to meet regularly. District leaders noted that collaboration between the technology and academics teams notably increased – starting with the blended learning pilot and leading to a more open and collaborative district leadership culture in general.

By the end of the year, there was still substantial variation in teacher excitement with blended learning, and teachers and leaders acknowledge that much work remains. But on a year-end survey, as noted previously, all of the pilot teachers reported that they would not go back to teaching in a traditional model. For Birdville, this progress was a major source of pride.

Preparing for Next Year: The district is leveraging lessons from Year 1 to prepare for expansion in Year 2.

Building on learnings from Year 1, district leaders from multiple departments worked with each of the three pilot high schools to determine their readiness for scale. This included considerations such as the unique student population at each school, campus leader capacity, and resources available to support expansion. As a result, two of the high schools will expand next year to include students in 10th grade ELAR classrooms, while one school will maintain focus on campus-level cultural readiness. School-specific plans also emphasize different areas for blended focus. For instance, the high school with the largest number of students with significant reading proficiency gaps will explore a new approach to interventions through blended learning. The district has hired two literacy intervention specialists who will lead this work. Overall, the district believes that school-level readiness planning, done in close collaboration with school leaders, will help smooth Year 2 implementation and improve each campus' ability to sustain the work over time.

▶ https://youtu.be/Tgi5XWkCSEg

At the district level, data is another significant area for growth. The district is exploring new data systems and tools to help teachers make use of rapid-cycle student data, and is planning for more extensive training on STAR 360 and other digital tools. As a district leader shared,

> *"The teachers have to know where the kids are. It sounds simple but building it is hard, especially when you are used to standardized testing. We need data in real time ... It's not just about getting the system, it's about culture change around data."*

Moreover, district leaders are building in several additional support structures to enable scale, and hopefully ease the transition for a new wave of teachers. For one, Birdville will have more experienced coaches to support blended learning teachers across the three schools. Blended learning teachers will also benefit from a shared planning period with peers, and English I teachers from the first year pilot will also help support the transition.

In several pilot schools, school and district leaders are working to develop "demonstration classrooms" to make blending feel more achievable. Two current pilot teachers, who have experienced success with blended learning and who have shown a willingness to innovate throughout the year, will work part time as teachers and part time as coaches, assisting other teachers as they shift to blended practices. These demonstration teachers will also have an extra planning period to provide time for these added responsibilities. As a district leader noted, *"It's the modeling. If [teachers] can go into a room and see others do it, it gets us past that hurdle. They know each other so it feels more accessible."*

Defining Success

As part of their Raising Blended Learners grant application, Birdville created several "SMART" Goals for Year 1 implementation. These included goals around academic achievement (measured through Texas STAAR scores), but also went beyond state tests to include goals around academic rigor and student engagement and motivation. The district created a rubric to measure growth, and partnered with the student survey organization YouthTruth to gather student perspectives on blended learning. In setting goals, Birdville and Raise Your Hand were both cognizant that blended learning, like any substantial innovation, changes quickly in its early stages, and the objective of the first year would be less about proving progress and more about learning, rapid prototyping, and improvement for future years. Still, as described earlier, the very practice of goal setting built new habits for Birdville and the other demonstration sites, seeding a culture of reflecting on data and using data for improvement.

Looking back on Year 1, Birdville's performance against SMART Goals was mixed. In some areas the district showed positive gains; in other areas scores declined. In general the degree of change was small. At the same time, the Birdville team observed a number of other signs – beyond the SMART Goals – that gave them confidence they were on the right track with blended learning. These positive indicators included: increased student ownership of learning, more peer collaboration between students, and deeper teacher knowledge of student needs. This paradox, between minimal movement on SMART Goals and other observed signs of success, prompted reflection by the district team on how to improve their own process for setting and tracking meaningful goals. Looking forward, the Birdville team is currently refining their SMART goals for 2017-2018. *Note – for a list of signs of success frequently noted across the five demonstration sites, see the Measures of Progress table.*

Year 1 Observations: Birdville

1. **Learning from experienced blended practitioners is powerful.** The professional development session with an expert blended teacher inspired Birdville's pilot teachers and gave them relatable strategies to change their own practice. As a result, teachers were better able to work through their discomfort, and gained confidence that they had what it took to successfully implement blending learning in their own classrooms. Understanding that seeing can be believing, the district is supporting two of its own blended learning teacher leaders to create demonstration classrooms in Year 2, where other teachers can observe and learn about blended practices. , in Year 2 Birdville will continue supporting pilot teachers to visit other Texas-based blended and personalized schools.

2. **Change requires commensurate support.** Many pilot teachers were initially reluctant to take risks and develop instructional design skills, or deviate from a culture rooted in compliance and test-based accountability focused on the STAAR exam. This substantial change, from district compliance-oriented instructional directives to a new approach to innovation, depends upon a commensurate amount of support. As the year progressed, increasing support and validation from the district helped more teachers embrace classroom changes. Teacher-to-teacher support also played a key role – the PLCs that developed into hubs of innovation in the three pilot schools helped teachers to take ownership of new practices, while receiving encouragement from their peers.

3. **Teacher buy-in must be built from the start.** The requirement for certain teachers to pilot blended learning, without initial robust exposure and implementation support, contributed to early challenges for the Birdville pilot team. As the year progressed, Birdville leaders gained experience and developed their capacity to provide more effective supports to pilot teachers. In planning for Year 2, the district is more carefully gauging readiness and receptivity to blended learning among prospective teachers, while also strengthening its support structures.

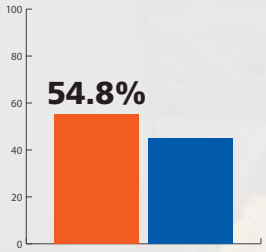
4. **"Scale" means shifting district structures to promote collaboration and alignment.** Birdville started with a much larger Year 1 pilot compared to the other RBL districts. Starting smaller may have been easier to manage in some respects, but Birdville's initial scale forced the district to grapple sooner with structural changes that might otherwise have been delayed by several years. District leaders noted how much they learned in Year 1, and how their initial challenges helped them recognize what is needed to support change at scale for Year 2 and beyond.

   At the start of Year 1, a small group of blended learning champions in Birdville had support from key leaders, including the superintendent. Yet, because blended learning was new, it was not yet top of mind or well understood among all of the department heads. The number of students, teachers, and schools involved, however, soon necessitated that blended learning become everyone's job rather than a niche innovation. The Blended Learning Leadership Team, among other structures, was critical for building buy-in, collaboration, and alignment across multiple district departments. This took substantial effort, but led to progress not only on blended learning, but also on long-standing district challenges – such as literacy – that new collaborations and innovations are helping to address.

5. **There is no single story to blended learning.** Different Birdville schools are at different places with blended learning. That's okay – in a complex change process it is unrealistic to expect every school to progress in the same way. There is also a persistent narrative in school transformation that people struggle, persist, and come out successfully on the other side. This can be true, but it doesn't always work this way, and with something as difficult as blended learning implemented across such a range of contexts, we should expect variance at the classroom, school, and district levels.

KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF CISCO

900
Approximate Total Student Enrollment



Economically Disadvantaged Students


0.8% African American
18.1% Hispanic
77% White
Ethnic Breakdown

2
Schools Piloting Blended Learning

4
Teachers Piloting Blended Learning

300
Approximate Number of Students in Blended Classrooms

CISCO ISD

Raising Blended Learners, FSG Year 1 Site Report

Introduction

Cisco, Texas is a rural community, two hours west of Dallas, with a population under 4,000. Cisco Independent School District serves 872 students, with 55% living with economic disadvantage. In recent years, Cisco has quickly transitioned from limited technology use to adopting blended learning as a core strategy for improving student performance. As Superintendent Kelly West has stated, *"Any technology that brings the big wide world into rural Texas is a benefit."*

While the district has consistently ranked highly in standardized testing, advanced achievement rates have remained stagnant among specific student populations. Through blended learning, Cisco's leaders hope to push their students to achieve at the highest levels possible. They viewed the RBL grant as a structured opportunity to raise the bar for student achievement and operationalize the use of technology in the district. Through engagement with the school board, staff, parents, and other local stakeholders, district leaders sought buy-in for their efforts by highlighting how the grant could promote deeper learning and bolster student achievement in the already-competitive district.

As stated in their pilot proposal, Cisco is deploying its Elevate blended learning initiative to *"elevate all elementary and middle school students to their own individual high levels of academic achievement in math and science."* The district's pilot is based on a set of design pillars that will enable a high-quality, student-centered learning experience.

Model

Problem Statement

Cisco seeks to boost math and science performance at the elementary and middle school levels. To begin this process, the district's Year 1 pilot started in math in grades 4–7.

Project 1 is focused on the district's stagnant math performance. Across grades 7-8, the amount of students achieving Tier 3 STAAR exam results (indicating advanced academic achievement) has stayed at 6% or less since the exam was introduced in 2012. For students in grades 4-6, this average has been less than 15%. These results place the district below State Tier 3 averages across both age groups. The district has hypothesized that the root causes of this challenge include a "one-size-fits-all" classroom, lack of challenging/advanced content, lack of time with teachers, and a lack of student motivation to progress above average expectations. While Cisco wants to raise outcomes for all students, the Elevate pilot focuses specifically on increasing Tier 3 achievement, while also enhancing student agency and engagement.

Project 2 in the initiative's second year will expand to additional math classes and focus on Tier 3 achievement in science. Cisco's 8th grade students likewise trail the statewide average in Tier 3 science achievement, with 10% scoring in Tier 3 versus 16% statewide. While the 11% rate of Tier 3 performance among 5th graders is only a percentage point shy of the state average, district leaders have also targeted this benchmark for Year 2.

Blended Learning Model

From fourth to seventh grade, Cisco pursued a station rotation blended learning model in Year 1 at the beginning of the year. Stations were assigned based on student performance data and became increasingly flexible based on individual learning needs. In middle school, stations evolved to include elements of individual rotation and flex models as teachers created playlists for students to pursue learning objectives in more personalized ways. Students engaged with new classroom technology, and while some classrooms utilized common tools, (such as Imagine Math and Dreambox) each pilot teacher was granted autonomy to select digital content for the first year of the pilot. Students also spent one-on-one time with teachers to promote goal setting and reflection.

Design Pillars and Strategies

Design pillars are used among all RBL sites to identify the essential design elements upon which each site's student experience is based. The Cisco design pillars are: **Data-Driven Instruction (DDI), Student Agency/Engagement, Personalized Learning Experiences, and Rigor/Competency Progression.**

Data-Driven Instruction

Student Agency/ Engagement

Personalized Learning Experiences

Rigor/Competency Progression

The district's first pillar of Data-Driven Instruction entails a process of reflection and action around data assessment. Cisco used the NWEA Measures of Academic Progress (NWEA MAP) for the first time this year, which in addition to data from the online programs gave teachers new streams of student data that they had never used before. Over the course of the year, tracking student growth and understanding distinctions between various assessment data led to a substantial mindset shift on the part of teachers.[1] Teachers increasingly used data to determine instructional groupings, develop learning activities, help students choose appropriate learning activities, and track student progress toward academic goals. This has been made possible through periodic data review and instructional adjustments.

[1] https://youtu.be/lF1c7tMy6lw

Student Agency/Engagement, the second pillar, is designed to give pupils ownership over learning to create a more personalized experience. This interactive process seeks to increase engagement through intellectual, physical, and behavioral participation. Student agency can be instilled through ownership over academic and non/academic processes, feedback from teachers, and reflective learning procedures. Students showed some signs of growth in Year 1, and this pillar is a core focus for Year 2.

Personalized Learning Experiences offers instructional approaches and learning experiences based on students' individual learning needs, interests and passions. Cisco has made steps toward personalization through station rotations and features of other models, where students in the same classroom have different concurrent learning experiences. Instructional offerings to facilitate this differentiation include small learning groups, one-on-one teacher time, peer collaboration, software interaction/adaptive software applications and teacher created playlists.

The final pillar of Rigor/Competency Progression builds in intellectually challenging experiences that push students to maintain high academic standards for themselves. Through challenge areas, adaptive software, mastery checks, and advance standards, students should work through instructional tasks that maximize their academic growth. This has been an area of growth for Cisco, and is a focus for Year 2.

Journey and Evolution

The RBL grant was catalytic for helping this small, rural district experiment with blended learning. Despite limited blended learning experience, the Cisco team benefited from a shared vision for blended learning as a way to elevate all students to their own individual levels of achievement. Cisco also brought a strong, pre-existing culture of trust that supported teachers to take initiative, try new ideas, and persevere through early challenges. As the year progressed teachers made substantial progress in shifting both mindsets and practice, and benefited from the resources offered as part of the RBL initiative. The district saw improvements both in learning outcomes and in student behaviors, and plans to expand its blended learning pilot in Year 2.

Preparation: Despite relatively little experience with technology, Cisco moved quickly to build the buy-in and structures for launching their blended learning pilot.

Before they were awarded the RBL grant, Cisco's leadership was enthusiastic about the vision of blended and personalized learning. Understanding the increasing importance of technology in the lives of students, the superintendent had encouraged teachers to explore ways to promote 21st century learning environments. When the opportunity to apply for the RBL grant emerged, the district leader and his colleagues saw a pathway for operationalizing this vision. The district sought to use RBL grant funds to purchase iPads, Chromebooks, and other software

and hardware for classrooms. Funds would also be used to hire support staff for teachers implementing blended learning. Cisco was well-positioned to launch implementation quickly; the district already benefited from a close-knit culture, which fed a sense of collaboration and openness to innovation within its schools. Because technology was new to Cisco, there was also a "novelty" in using it among teachers, students, and the larger community. When Cisco won the RBL grant it made the front page of the local paper, and the district found that talking about technology and innovation early on was an effective way to build excitement and buy-in across the school community.

As they prepared for Year 1, the pilot team (which included the superintendent, project manager, elementary school principal, and junior high school principal) recognized the need to address the district's limited experience with technology in the classroom. This concern led to a summer planning process that helped ensure schools were ready to start the year. To equip teachers and classrooms for the semester, the district installed the necessary technology and moved pilot math classes closer in proximity within the participating schools. As a small district, Cisco knew that its one full-time IT staff member could be challenged by competing priorities, so leadership reserved a substantial share of her time to support the blended pilots throughout the year.

Understanding that staff would be more likely to buy into the process if they were given a choice, district leaders invited teachers to participate based on their commitment to a growth mindset, willingness to experiment, and excitement about blended learning. This theme of personal choice is threaded throughout Cisco's implementation– a district leader shared,

> *"We let teachers choose what they think will work, that's the number one reason why teachers feel the pressure is off."*

In practice, this meant that teachers could experiment with their classroom models and choose among the best available technology options based on the needs in their respective classrooms. While this facilitated teacher buy-in, it also challenged those who were not familiar with the new technology. Not only were the new software choices at times overwhelming, but many were unsure how to best synchronize data and use their software effectively.

While some teachers still lacked confidence in using technology when the school year began, Cisco found that the greatest obstacle was shifting mindsets. While teachers opted into the pilot, they were initially concerned that redesigning their instruction around blended learning might reduce their ability to deliver strong STAAR results. Some teachers also felt overwhelmed at the prospect of continually shaping their instruction to individual student needs, rather than implementing a more universal, standardized program. Intentional professional development from the district and the CA Group, as well as ongoing encouragement from the Cisco project manager, helped teachers develop plans for classroom design and for approaching the initial steps of blended learning, which in turn calmed some concerns about the initial launch. Cisco teachers also benefited from a site visit to a Dallas Independent School District's personalized learning elementary school, and together completed several of Relay Graduate School of Education's Blended Learning modules, which likewise helped build pre-launch confidence.

Early Efforts: Cisco experienced early challenges with the many variables of implementation, but persisted thanks to supportive leadership and culture.

Early technology hiccups continued as students experienced issues with software not saving work and timing out sessions – this was particularly frustrating for students who work more slowly.

As teachers had limited time and were climbing the technology learning curve themselves, they felt ill-equipped early on to support students on tech issues. Fortunately, Cisco's IT staffer spent substantial time troubleshooting with teachers and helping develop more comfort with the new platforms a few months into Year 1. Although adapting to new technology created instructional and classroom setup challenges, teachers demonstrated resiliency and growth mindsets as the semester continued. At the time one teacher shared, *"There's lots of changing and frustration, but as we go on I have a better idea of what I want for my kids. I understand the software and data are important to my kids, so I have adapted as I go. Spending time with the curriculum and the data made it easier."*

The district's culture of collaboration also fostered shared learning and collaborative approaches to refining blended learning strategies. Teachers built on their personal connections to create informal learning communities amongst themselves to share ideas and topics for blended learning. School leaders also noted that a healthy sense of competition contributed to teacher persistence through early challenges. As one school leader said, *"Teachers are a competitive group of professionals, and when they see that other courses are becoming [student] favorites, they notice."* Throughout this process, school leaders remained mindful of morale and expressed attentiveness to teacher burnout.

The pilot teachers benefited from other supports as well. Cisco budgeted for paraprofessionals in each blended classroom to assist students, many of whom were first-time tech users, help monitor rotations, and facilitate movement within classrooms. As the year progressed, teacher confidence increased, and the paraprofessionals were pulled back. By the end of the year the district decided they would not need paraprofessional support in Year 2 of blended learning. Another key scaffold for teachers came from the district project manager who championed the work and provided supports ranging from instructional coaching to technology and logistics support throughout the year.

In addition to staff capacity, resources from the RBL ecosystem of support helped Cisco make progress more quickly. As the district's pilot classrooms were shifting toward personalization, for instance, the CA Group helped the district refine blended learning strategies, including student goal-setting.[1] All blended teachers also participated in the Texas Tech University certificate program. Although they reported a sometimes stressful workload, teachers found value in the coursework and reported an enhanced capacity to lead data-driven instruction in their classrooms. Additionally, TNTP provided help with identifying deficits in rigor and coaching school leaders at the beginning of the second semester. This range of supports set a foundation for success that began to unfold in the second half of the pilot year.

Evolving the Approach: Teachers began to exhibit positive shifts through blended learning instruction. They developed a deeper appreciation for student data and fostered increased personalization that students responded to well.[2]

As the year continued, teachers experimented with their classroom setups to find the best arrangements for their students. Station rotations evolved to look different in each classroom. School leaders granted teachers the freedom to test and discard less useful elements – teachers found playlists, for instance, to be less effective among students exhibiting lower levels of agency. As this prototyping continued, school and district leaders reported the highest levels of teacher energy and happiness that they had ever seen.

[1] https://youtu.be/8LGGu9wyM_o
[2] https://youtu.be/AP0RxjtoKx8

New technologies and additional data resources (e.g., NWEA MAP data) led to increased teacher use of student data. To increase teacher facility with data, district leaders organized a full-day data workshop in February. Teachers cross-walked NWEA MAP data with Texas TEKS, identifying standards gaps for each student. This comprehensive review was eye-opening.[1] For the first time teachers saw individual proficiency gaps, both at grade-level and tracing back multiple grades – and also discovered students who had already mastered the remaining year of grade-level content. When they got back to their classrooms, they began using their online programs in a more personalized way, targeting specific standard and proficiency gaps for some students, while providing other students with more accelerated content. One teacher reflected on this arc of learning:

> *"It may have taken until February or March before I could answer why I'm using the technology, and why my kids need it. I now understand what it will take to make this work. I'm comfortable with it now and understand why it's the best fit for us. This comes into play with the data collection. Knowing which data to pull and why."*

Once teachers integrated these changes during the second semester, students began demonstrating observable changes in learning behavior. Teachers reported that their deeper focus on data-driven instruction increased enthusiasm among students, whose excitement grew as they were able to make more choices in the classroom. Reflecting on her classroom, one teacher expressed pride in increased levels of student engagement: "Of the classrooms that were in Year 1, I see a big difference in student engagement as compared to our traditional methods of teachers talking, students listening, everyone doing the same thing." Teachers also shared that some students began to set goals for themselves, began leveraging their own data, and began displaying more agency in their learning.[2] This cycle of teacher and student buy-in deepened the district's own understanding of blended learning and helped Cisco teachers become more comfortable with what concepts like student agency looked like in practice. While the district's initial vision for blended learning had been focused on technology, leadership's focus began to shift toward the importance of how technology can be used to support personalization and student agency.

Cisco's implementation strides continued throughout the second half of Year 1. Cisco hosted exposure visits for other rural Texas districts who are also piloting student-centered blended learning as a part of the RBL Pilot Network, and in Year 2 will play a leadership role within a cohort of rural districts as they all scale blended learning. Although Cisco is still relatively early in its blended learning journey, this level of external engagement demonstrates that it is already being recognized as an exemplar among its peers.

Preparing for Next Year: Reflecting on this year's journey, district leadership is excited about expansion and already thinking about the sustainability of blended learning beyond the grant period.

Looking back on the challenges and growth that accompanied the pilot, Cisco's pilot team has expressed pride in their Year 1 journey. Teachers are reporting higher energy levels and are excited about the growth happening in their classrooms. In addition to noting improved outcomes for students, teachers also cited professional growth as a key benefit of blending.[3] One teacher shared that

> *"I felt stuck in the traditional model doing the same thing every period all day long. This model adds variety to my day and is not monotonous."*

[1] https://youtu.be/WpBZGLfDiPg
[2] https://youtu.be/ocKqY_aTo_U

As positive perceptions spread across the district, other Cisco teachers began implementing elements of blended learning. Some have even reached out to school and district leaders with requests for resources to shift their classroom to blended environments. In response, the project manager began working with school leaders to ensure that rollout in these other classrooms is aligned with the design pillars and implementation strategies their colleagues are pursuing. This broader interest is a testament to the observable early impact blending is starting to make in Cisco's classrooms.

In terms of formal expansion, as planned Cisco will pilot blended learning in science in 2017-18. Eventually, the district is preparing for blended implementation in science and math in grades 1-8. In Year 2, the district will focus on deepening its pillars of rigor, student growth mindset, and student agency. Most members of the Cisco team agree that increasing rigor in their instruction and allowing students increased agency are areas for growth.[▶] In preparing for next year, district leadership has recognized that some teachers remain more willing and able to implement blended learning than others. Given this variation, Cisco is working to stagger expansion across its target grades and subjects to include groups of teachers where enthusiasm is the greatest.

Working in a relatively small district with limited resources, Cisco's leadership and staff are also considering how to sustain blended learning beyond the term of the RBL grant. The superintendent has begun conversations about redirecting funds from the annual school budget (particularly the instructional materials budget) to support blended learning technology in the future. A district leader reflected on this dynamic:

> *"When you're at the same place for 10-15 years, the budget process tends to become habit. Teachers are used to being able to spend set amounts every year. [Now] teachers might be looking to order software instead of STAAR textbooks, especially since they're getting that information off the software. That mentality is what we as an administration have to convince them of."*

This willingness to adapt demonstrates district buy-in at the highest level, and suggests that leadership is willing to engage with difficult conversations to ensure the longevity of blended learning. This commitment bodes well for the future of blended personalized learning in Cisco.

Defining Success

As part of their Raising Blended Learners grant application, Cisco created several "SMART" Goals for Year 1 implementation. These included goals around academic achievement, in addition to measures related to teacher development, student engagement/persistence, and peer collaboration. In setting goals, Cisco and Raise Your Hand were both cognizant that blended learning, like any substantial innovation, changes quickly in its early stages, and the objective of the first year would be less about proving progress and more about learning, rapid prototyping, and improvement for future years. Still, as described earlier, the very practice of goal setting built new habits for Cisco and the other demonstration sites, seeding a culture of reflecting on data and using data for improvement.

At the end of Year 1, Cisco showed mixed progress on its original project goals. On some goals, such as improving STAAR performance for high achievers, Cisco's pilot classrooms displayed consistent growth. Still, several pilot teachers were disappointed that Cisco students remained below the Texas state average for high achievers. Cisco's students also showed some growth on

▶ https://youtu.be/iYtn9VqUqhw

the NWEA MAP assessment, albeit less than expected. On the YouthTruth Student Survey, Cisco's students showed improvements over a 2016 baseline in some areas related to engagement and agency, while other scores stayed constant.

Beyond Cisco's incoming goals, teachers and school leaders reported that some of the most meaningful manifestations of student progress were the evolving learning behaviors they witnessed in the classroom. Among these are: 1) students becoming more aware of their specific learning objectives;[1] 2) students demonstrating increased motivation and taking enhanced responsibility for completing assignments; 3) students increased productivity during class; 4) students demonstrating increased engagement, interest and excitement, and 5) students curbing negative or disruptive behaviors. Many of these signs were observational, but collectively they gave Cisco confidence that they are on the right track with blended learning. *Note – for a list of signs of success frequently noted across the five demonstration sites, see the Measures of Progress table.*

[1] https://youtu.be/cnEzHCflUjY

Year 1 Observations: Cisco

1. **Careful selection of pilot teachers willing and ready to innovate, leads to more rapid teacher buy-in and mindset shift.** The district balanced targeting an area of strategic need (math) with choosing teachers who were excited about blended learning. This yielded a group of teachers who were bought in relatively early in the process. This approach also attracted motivated teachers and created the conditions for teachers to exhibit growth mindsets. As the group worked through a difficult first semester and persisted together, their potentially skeptical colleagues began to appreciate the potential of blending themselves.

2. **Culture can serve as a life preserver for successful early implementation.** The closely knit nature of this rural community bolstered the potential for collaboration. Collegiality and proximity among teachers led to the organic development of a community of blended learning practitioners that helped accelerate implementation progress. As teachers developed comfort with their respective blended learning classroom models, this culture of partnership was critical for fostering shared learning and group experimentation. This dynamic meant that district and school leaders were comfortable empowering teachers to exercise autonomy throughout the process.

3. **Deeper data analysis unlocks a greater ability to implement blended learning.** Teachers were able to develop confidence with blended learning and bolster implementation progress once they dove deeper into student data. Designated time for pulling and analyzing NWEA MAP data enabled teachers to identify patterns across their students and helped them feel prepared to pursue truly data-driven instruction for the first time. Once staff members were able to assess student needs with rigor, they approached the classroom prepared for more meaningful conversations about personalizing learning.

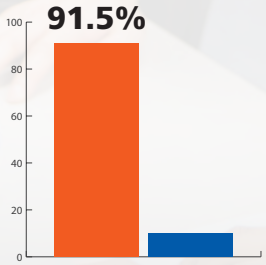
4. **Planning early can help ensure sustainability.** Given relatively scarce resources in the district, Cisco leadership thought early about how to sustain blended innovation beyond the grant period. In order to nurture and grow blended learning, district leaders have begun to allocate resources from budgetary line items that certain teachers may take for granted. Going forward, the superintendent is preparing for difficult conversations about resource constraints and the budgetary tradeoffs they create.

5. **New resources can make a big impact.** Cisco's team found the RBL grant particularly useful because of its unique size and location. With traditionally limited exposure to capacity-building partners, members of the pilot team reported that they benefited tremendously from the array of partnerships and training opportunities made available through the grant. Access to professional development, coursework, and outside experts accelerated the process— the district benefitted from the right supports at the right times.

KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF KIPP HOUSTON

14,000

Approximate Total Student Enrollment



Economically Disadvantaged Students

33.6% African American
63.3% Hispanic
0.7% White

Ethnic Breakdown

1

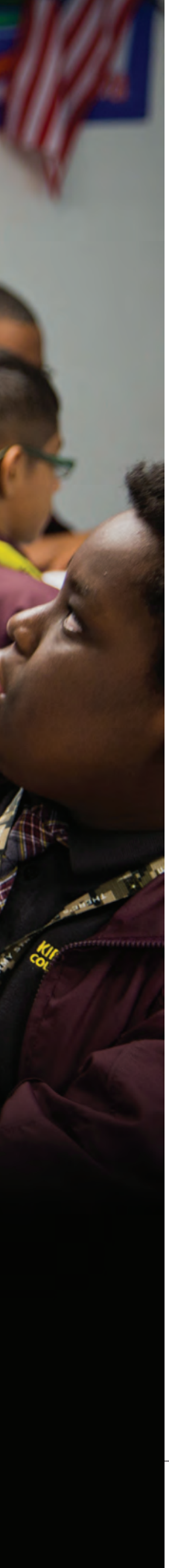
Schools Piloting Blended Learning

1

Teachers Piloting Blended Learning

100

Approximate Number of Students in Blended Classrooms



KIPP HOUSTON

Raising Blended Learners, FSG Year 1 Site Report

Introduction

KIPP Houston Public Schools enrolls nearly 14,300 students across 28 schools. Founded in 1994 as the first KIPP location in the country, KIPP Houston has always held a prominent position in the national KIPP network, and within the broader Houston education community. Since its founding, KIPP Houston has sought to provide high-quality education options for low-income minority students in the city. Reflecting on the challenges many of their high school graduates face in postsecondary education, KIPP Houston's leadership saw the Raising Blended Learners grant as an opportunity to lay a stronger foundation in math in the middle school years. Moreover, the RBL initiative aligned with KIPP's focus on developing the student agency and resilience necessary to succeed in college.

For their first blended learning pilot project, the network focused on a single flipped classroom at one school, to help more students successfully complete Algebra I in 8th grade and continue along an advanced math sequence through high school. During Year 1, KIPP Houston hosted a summer Algebra Boot Camp that utilized a flex blended learning model to prepare rising 8th graders for Algebra I.

Model

Problem Statement

Several years ago, KIPP Houston found that while 84% of its high school students matriculated into college, only 51% persisted to graduation. This data was shocking to KIPP Houston's leaders, and impelled them to do more. In studying the root causes of this attrition rate with researchers from the University of Houston, KIPP Houston learned that many graduates were not prepared for the rigors of college math coursework, and too often lacked the agency and self-direction to persist in a less-structured college setting.

In constructing their RBL pilot, the KIPP Houston team knew that setting a strong foundation for college math started in middle school. In particular, if students could master Algebra I in 8th grade, they would be on track to take the advanced math in high school required by many colleges and selective STEM majors. Likewise, instilling student ownership of learning and supporting the development of self-directed learning skills would need to start as early in a student's academic journey as possible.

Blended Learning Model

In response to this need, KIPP Houston's RBL team set out to develop a strong blended model during Year 1 that would be worthy of replicating in other sites. KIPP Houston piloted a single flipped classroom in 8th grade Algebra I at the KIPP Liberation middle school campus. In this model, the teacher prepared daily videos previewing the following day's lesson that students could navigate, at home, at their own pace. The teacher used data and student performance on the nightly videos to plan the level of conceptual rigor for the following day's lesson, and decide on student groupings, as well any interventions for particular students. KIPP Houston chose the flipped classroom model because they believed it would develop college-readiness behaviors such as time management, self-awareness, and seeking targeted help. In comparison to other potential blended learning models, KIPP Houston believed the flipped model had the potential to integrate better with their existing Eureka algebra curriculum, and could provide a bridge to a flex model or other approaches to personalization in the future. In the classroom, students used Imagine Math and other digital content to support their learning.

Design Pillars and Strategies

Design pillars are used among all RBL sites to identify the essential design elements upon which each site's student experience is based. The KIPP Houston design pillars are: **Flipped Classroom, One-on-One Sessions, Student Agency, Competency-Based Progression, and Rigor**. Based on year 1 experiences, KIPP Houston revised Year 2 pillars to include: **Student Agency, Rigorous Lessons, Data-Driven Learning, Coaching Sessions, and Blended Learning Personalized Experience.**

Flipped Classroom | **One-on-One Sessions** | **Student Agency** | **Rigor/Competency Progression**

Through the Flipped Classroom model, students have control over their pace of learning content before entering the classroom, and complete checks for understanding throughout the video. During class time, activities such as teacher-facilitated conceptually driven discourse, leveled practice with feedback loops, and teacher-led small groups are planned in response to individual student data, which indicate the appropriate instructional level and pace for that day's lesson. Flipped classroom was the most fully developed design pillar in Year 1.

One-on-One Sessions provide personalized attention to meet learners where they are in terms of emotional well-being, motivation, agency, and academic progress, and guide them along their path to being agents of their learning. During coaching sessions, students connect with teachers, review academic progress, and work on learning practices such as goal-setting, study habit, and reflection, for the purpose of elevating students' awareness of the learning process and who they are as learners.

https://youtu.be/1TnY6OjHUJo


Student Agency refers to the level of choice, autonomy, and accountability that a student experiences in their education. This pillar can be manifested in the flexibility of learning environment, approach, and/or pace. This was the most difficult pillar for KIPP Houston given the nature of the curriculum, and the team made consistent progress over Year 1 – especially related to students controlling their pace of learning through flipped content, and shifting more of the critical thinking and responsibility for conceptual learning from the teacher to students, and students practicing study habits that enabled them to take more ownership of their learning.

In order to stay true to Great Mind's Eureka Math, which emphasizes teacher-facilitated discourse for conceptual development, KIPP Houston did not implement a Competency-Based Progression for students to move at their own pace. Instead, the lessons followed the pacing calendar, and the flipped model enabled deeper understanding of each day's lesson while also identifying students who needed scaffolding that day. For year 2, this pillar was combined with "Flipped Classroom" and modified to "Blended Learning, Personalized Experience."

For the final pillar Rigor, KIPP Houston relied on TNTP's blended rubric and their own rubric to ensure rigorous lessons, defined as: throughout the entire lesson, all students engage in the work of the lesson, think critically and do heavy lifting on content that is grade-level, college-ready, or student-ready appropriate, and continually practice / receive feedback until they demonstrate mastery. Rigor was a significant focus area for Year 1, which will continue into Year 2.

Journey and Evolution

With deep support from the school's principal, district coach, and project manager, KIPP Houston's one-classroom pilot allowed the network to rapidly prototype blended learning before expanding more broadly. Starting with a flipped classroom model, the pilot has made consistent progress, and has begun to shift mindsets within the KIPP Houston network about how blended learning and greater student agency can improve student engagement and depth of learning. The KIPP Houston team is preparing to expand the pilot to other schools in Year 2, while continuing work to build support for blended learning across the network.

Preparation: KIPP Houston's leadership planned for a small, carefully-constructed pilot designed to apply blended learning to the KIPP Houston context and culture.

Through the application process, the KIPP Houston team made several deliberate choices about how a small blended learning pilot could eventually influence the broader KIPP Houston network. From the outset, this meant involving a range of stakeholders, including the network superintendent, the chief innovation officer, a project manager and a blended learning coach, and educators from the participating school. The team knew that KIPP Houston's highly-

https://youtu.be/1v9L5YlZvAQ
https://youtu.be/c4xcQZIMOUw

structured and rigorous environment – while in many ways a strength – would also make it challenging for teachers to relinquish control and stimulate student agency in a blended learning environment. For this reason, KIPP Houston decided to pilot blended learning in a single Algebra I classroom, and study it intently before expanding more broadly in subsequent years. Grant funds were used to fund hardware and software to support flipped classrooms, wireless access points, Chromebooks, and software licenses, as well as personnel salaries and professional development costs.

KIPP Liberation, the middle school chosen for the pilot, was a good fit for blended learning. As the KIPP Houston leader said, *"The ground was fertile for this to happen at Liberation because of the moves alongside this grant. The principal was working with teachers on mindfulness and restorative justice, creating an environment where agency can be fostered."* KIPP Liberation's principal, brought a reputation as a strong leader with a record of both supporting teachers and pushing for innovation. She would be a key champion for blended learning over the course of the pilot.

An 8th grade algebra teacher was asked to pilot in his classroom. He is an accomplished, respected teacher known for his growth mindset and receptivity to feedback, who fits the teacher profile necessary to support a successful classroom pilot. As a school leader shared, *"He was the right person because he has always been very helpful. He is a diligent hard worker, and uses data to make all of his decisions. He can always show us how success looks like based on data, rather than anecdotes."*

In addition to the support the pilot teacher would receive at the school level, KIPP Houston utilized part of its RBL grant to support a blended learning coach who would work closely with him to support implementation and serve as liaison between the school and the broader KIPP Houston system. Over 2016-17 the pilot at KIPP Liberation would be one of several efforts across the network to experiment with and eventually spread different approaches to blended and personalized learning. In addition to the RBL pilot, KIPP Houston has also been running Summit Learning Program implementation in 12th grade at a nearby high school, and is undertaking a middle school redesign in partnership with Transcend. All of these efforts would inform KIPP Houston's long-term vision for blended personalized learning.

Early Efforts: The initial stages of blended learning were labor intensive for the pilot teacher, but the pilot was well supported by the principal, blended learning coach and PM.

As KIPP Liberation launched its blended learning pilot, the teacher would create nightly video assignments that students would complete at home; these video lessons previewed the next day's content, and informed how he grouped students and delivered his lessons. In addition to creating videos, the pilot teacher and others worked to modify KIPP Houston's existing Eureka algebra curriculum. The curriculum had a very specific scope, sequence, and pace, so it took a substantial amount of effort to integrate the curriculum with the flipped model and allow for students to progress in different ways.

Together, video development and content creation created a very challenging initial workload, even for an experienced and capable teacher. He reflected that the planning work required for content preparation was "challenging but rewarding," and sought to organize his planning time efficiently. Despite the workload, he soon appreciated the additional in-class learning time the flipped approach gave him. As he said, *"It seems like a lot—it is a lot of prep work to make the videos, but it does make the prep process much less stressful. Even though it took more time… I was less tired during the school day because I'm not talking the whole day."*

Given the flipped model, it was important to ensure that students could easily engage with content outside of the classroom. However, early in the school year KIPP Liberation staff noted that some students faced low levels of computer literacy and low access to technology at home. This equity-oriented challenge concerned the pilot team, and they sought solutions such as letting some students watch videos at lunch or after school, or working with a local library to offer internet and device access. While helpful, some students continued struggling with access issues, and KIPP Houston would seek additional solutions over the course of the year.

In response to the challenges of workload and technology access, school leadership created time and space for the teacher to work through initial challenges with the principal, blended learning coach, and project manager. The school leader reflected, *"I let folks know that implementation dip was a real thing, but that we could make it through together. My job was to protect the time and space. I made sure the KIPP Houston project manager and the teacher had the space to do what they needed to do."* This cover allowed the pilot teacher to experiment and develop his confidence in blended learning through the sometimes difficult first semester. In turn, the blended learning coach provided more day-to-day support over the year.

The blended pilot also began to instill a culture that was based more on individual student agency than compliance and routine. These changes, small in their early stages, would spread throughout the year. Through the lens of KIPP Houston's organizational stance on character development, a concept like agency may be viewed as conceptually positive, but something that must be earned and proven by students rather than assumed and given. In practice, KIPP Houston aspired toward student agency in service of rigor and achievement, rather than agency at the expense of rigor and achievement.[▶] As the year unfolded, school leadership asserted that the campus' culture was on a new path:

> *"The year has been great—it has been a real push. It has forced us to change a lot of our practices, and our mindset. When you are asking people to lesson plan a different way, that is a shift… We are now being more flexible with our approach."*

Evolving the Approach: As the year progressed the pilot teacher developed more comfort with blending, and signs of progress began to appear among students and across the broader 8th grade cohort.

With the flexibility to experiment and lessons learned from one semester of iteration, the teacher began adjusting his approach to blending halfway through the school year. While he initially approached blended learning with an emphasis on "flipping" homework, he began incorporating more flexibility into his efforts to personalize learning in the second semester. For instance, after reviewing the nightly video content the teacher began to vary both the rigor and length of the teacher-led conceptual development portion of class. Over time he noticed students engaging more independently with their work and taking more responsibility for the thinking and learning. Some students would engage more frequently in direct instruction while others would choose to work through the math curriculum independently or with peers. KIPP Houston also saw progress on using data to inform instruction. While KIPP

▶ https://youtu.be/y2ggp1fQQ94

Houston had a strong data focus, and the pilot teacher had used data in prior years, the blended learning pilot helped the KIPP Houston team build on this strength, and see how multiple measures of student data could be used to adapt instruction on a more frequent, often daily basis.

As the pilot teacher gained experience with blended learning, he reported that lesson planning became less onerous for him: *"The more I do it, the easier it gets. You just modify as you go along to make the system work for you."* Although content preparation became less of a challenge, other challenges remained. One-on-one student coaching had been one of KIPP Houston's original design pillars, but the teacher could simply not find time to incorporate it into his already heavy workload during the first semester. In the second semester, however, he began referring six of his highest-need algebra students to the blended learning coach for more intensive mentoring.

The coach was able to step in and meet individually with these students once a week. This approach to student mentoring, which included deep dives on student data and feedback sessions, drew on learnings from the Texas Tech University blended learning certification program that was offered to Year 1 teachers and leaders as part of the RBL ecosystem of supports. KIPP Houston also utilized the TNTP blended learning rubric for coaching and improvement with teaching staff. At the end of the year, five of the six students referred for coaching exceeded their targeted annual growth rates on MAP, whereas none of those students had been on-trajectory when the coaching sessions started mid-year.

The pilot team was also proactive in addressing the ongoing concerns about student access to technology. They sought out a local nonprofit that donated 113 recycled desktop computers to Liberation families lacking device access. A new library also opened two blocks from school, and the pilot team worked with the librarians to help them understand the suite of blended learning programs that students should spend their time on after school.

The Liberation team experienced encouraging signs of student success throughout the second semester. Even with limited coaching capacity, the teacher reported that his teacher-student relationships have never been as strong. Taking advantage of online program data and exit tickets, he felt that he was able to develop a more comprehensive picture of student progress.[1] Academic progress monitoring on STAAR and MAP benchmarks indicated that pilot students outperformed their peers in Algebra 1 taught by the same teacher last year. Just as importantly, he observed that students have become more reflective, and seemed to better understand the context for their academic performance. Reflecting on their classroom behavior, he shared,

> *"Kids feel safer asking and answering questions because they do not feel as much pressure from their peers. And if they understand how self-pacing works and are self-motivated, that independent learning can push them to higher heights."* [2]

The pilot has also taken affirmative strides toward expansion within the 8th grade hallway at KIPP Liberation. Science, ELA and history teachers have borrowed from the pilot teacher's strategies, in some cases based on demands from students who wanted a blended approach in all of their classes. As this interest increased, the pilot teacher has spent time coaching colleagues to adopt elements of blended and personalized learning, and will formally shift to this role as the KIPP Liberation Math Instructional Coach next year. The team's project manager and blended learning coach have also provided optional professional development days on blended learning for teachers at KIPP Liberation and across the KIPP Houston network. As

[1] https://youtu.be/nwSqIE26Xhs
[2] https://youtu.be/tzwzoI6PFxw

blended learning has begun to spread within the system, the pilot team has emphasized how blending aligns with KIPP's mission to get students "to and through college." The project manager reported that support from the CA Group and other TA partners helped his team make this case and continue to build network-wide buy in: *"I could not have spoken in that language if it were not for RYHT and the ecosystem of support and other districts that are piloting this stuff. All of that has allowed me to articulate why we should do this pilot."*

Preparing for Next Year: Understanding some of the unique conditions that led to early success, the small pilot team is developing capacity and processes to bring new classrooms on board in Year 2.

In February of Year 1, the KIPP Houston project manager completed a comprehensive Year 2 growth readiness assessment that included an assessment to Year 1 progress, collaboration with the central office academics team about how expansion would affect other aspects of teaching and learning, and conversations with other KIPP Houston school leaders to understand willingness and readiness to pilot blended learning in Year 2. As part of the Year 2 expansion, the RBL pilot is expanding to math in 5th, 6th and 7th grades. In addition to the official expansion, all 8th grade classrooms at the school will be blending to varying degrees. As noted previously, the pilot teacher will become a math coach for Year 2 teachers. Under the pilot teacher's guidance, new blended learning teachers will also convene for a week to co-create lessons, practice using their new technology, and structure their rooms together.

Across the KIPP Houston network, the pilot is expanding beyond Liberation to include Algebra I classes at three additional middle schools and one high school. In Year 3 the district plans to expand to additional schools and also plans to pilot blending more advanced math classes, moving next to Geometry. These efforts will draw primarily on the experience of KIPP Liberation, but also will be informed by the network's middle school redesign work with Transcend, and its high school pilot with the Summit Learning Program. The project manager and the blended coach, as the primary district leaders managing blended learning, will build out a train-the-trainer program to reach coaches in other schools. The coaching supports will not be as intensive as the coaching offered to the pilot teacher in Year 1, so the team is hoping it will meet the needs of the new cohort of teachers.

Additionally, the team is working to address concerns about the scalability of the intensive workload related to developing flipped content, that avoid having every teacher generate all of their own videos and lessons. This includes plans to centrally produce some flipped content, create a process for sharing high-quality content, and provide opportunities for pilot teachers to work together on content development. According to school leadership, *"The video creation and content creation regimen [for Eureka math] does not feel scalable. So over the summer, they will be trying to get ahead. We are talking about goals for Q1 and Q2. We are knocking out one or two videos a week for Q1. We will scale it up slowly."*

Looking forward, school leadership also emphasized the importance of continuing to change mindsets across the KIPP Houston system. From their own experience, the Liberation team saw how student learning behaviors changed over Year 1, and came to believe that greater agency and motivation led to deeper and more engaged learning. For the KIPP Houston system, blended learning has become much more than bringing technology into the classroom, though leaders recognize this viewpoint still exists in some places, and are working to shift mindsets across the network. To effectively elevate blended and personalized learning throughout the KIPP Houston network, it will be critical for district officials, school leaders, teachers, and pilot teams to appreciate the depth of this work and the commitment required to implement it successfully.

Defining Success

As part of their Raising Blended Learners grant application, KIPP Houston created several "SMART" Goals for Year 1 implementation. These included goals around academic rigor, student agency, and school culture. In setting goals, KIPP Houston and Raise Your Hand were both cognizant that blended learning, like any substantial innovation, changes quickly in its early stages, and the objective of the first year would be less about proving progress and more about learning, rapid prototyping, and improvement for future years. Still, as described earlier, the very practice of goal setting built new habits for KIPP and the other demonstration sites, seeding a culture of reflecting on data and using data for improvement.

Looking back on Year 1, KIPP Houston's progress against its original goals was mostly positive. In the majority of academic areas related to STAAR testing, the district showed modest gains, with larger improvements shown on NWEA MAP. Across student-reported measures of agency and school culture, results mostly stayed the same. However, KIPP Houston's teachers observed improvements in student agency and behavior that gave them confidence their work was on the right track. These signs of progress included increases in student engagement (as demonstrated by decreases in disciplinary issues and referrals), improvements in homework completion rates, students working more independently, and students showing greater self-awareness of their progress and needs. *Note – for a list of signs of success frequently noted across the five demonstration sites, see the Measures of Progress table.*

Year 1 Observations: KIPP Houston

1. **The one-classroom pilot has been conducive for rapid prototyping.** Thanks to the small pilot size and the support of the project manager, blended learning coach, and principal, the pilot teacher has been able to experiment with different approaches to blending in a relatively quick period of time. This allowed for iteration that yielded positive results throughout Year 1.

2. **Principal and central district team buy-in from the outset was critical for success.** The principal had a deep appreciation for blended learning early in the process, and was willing to give her pilot teacher time and space to experiment. Beyond updating processes and procedures to support implementation, she has also focused on changing mindsets. Further, because of the small pilot size, the teacher, blended learning coach, and project manager had time to collaborate frequently to reflect on what was and was not working, and continuously make improvements.

3. **The pilot teacher's growth mindset and data literacy made him the right teacher for the role.** The pilot teacher's receptivity to feedback and commitment to continuous improvement served him well during the pilot year. He was already competent with data and committed to using analytics to inform classroom decisions, yet the degree of data-driven instruction RBL required was even more extensive than what he was accustomed to. His ability to push through this learning curve was critical for the pilot team's success in Year 1.

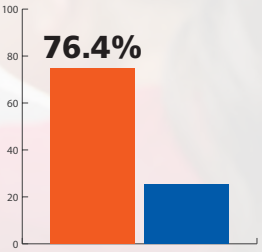
4. **Partnerships can help address equity concerns about student access to technology.** By the end of the school year, students without computers at home were better able to access technology outside of the classroom through partnerships with a neighborhood library and an organization that donates used computers. This helped reduce the access challenges that arose during the first semester.

5. **Maintaining rigor while introducing flexibility.** Instructional rigor is core to everything that KIPP Houston does. When the KIPP Houston team piloted blended learning, they wanted to ensure that concepts like student choice and agency did not dilute their focus on rigor for each student. For much of the year, KIPP Houston held these ideals of rigor and flexibility in creative tension, switching between concepts to design their blended classroom experience. By the year's end, however, they began to see signs that students making decisions about when, how, and what they learned – in the context of appropriate support – actually led to deeper mastery of content, and higher scores on summative and interim assessments. Gradually, blended learning and greater agency have become viewed as pathways to increasing rigor at KIPP Houston, rather than a tradeoff.

KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF PASADENA

56,000

Approximate Total Student Enrollment



Economically Disadvantaged Students

7.2% African American
82.7% Hispanic
6.2% White

Ethnic Breakdown

4

Schools Piloting Blended Learning

23

Teachers Piloting Blended Learning

600

Approximate Number of Students in Blended Classrooms

PASADENA ISD

Raising Blended Learners, FSG Year 1 Site Report

Introduction

Located southeast of Houston, Pasadena Independent School District is the largest of the RBL pilots— with over 55,000 students enrolled, the school district is one of the 15 largest in Texas. Ninety-two percent of the district's youth are students of color, and almost 30% are Limited English Proficient (LEP). Nearly 80% of district students qualify for free or reduced lunch, and 58% are considered academically at-risk. Responding to disparate student outcomes, district leadership developed an interest in blended and personalized learning as a means of better serving the academic needs of all students.

Unlike other demonstration sites, Pasadena had embarked on a robust personalized learning pilot before beginning the RBL grant. In the 2015-2016 school year, the district began implementing its Connect Personalized Learning Program, a personalized learning initiative and part of the Summit Learning Program (then called Summit Basecamp). This ongoing effort was mutually reinforcing with Raising Blended Learners, which helped expand Connect into additional schools across the district.

Pasadena's Connect Program is targeting academic success measures, noncognitive skills, and ultimately increasing the number of district graduates who complete college within six years of high school graduation. The model includes personalized learning time, project-based learning, one-on-one mentoring, and Socratic seminars.

Model

Problem Statement

Although a majority of Pasadena students graduate from high school, most students do not leave the district prepared for postsecondary education. Only 54% of graduating seniors enter college the fall immediately following graduation, and just shy of one-third of students obtain a postsecondary degree within six years of completing high school. This data told Pasadena that while their students have the academic competency to complete their high school studies, they may have lacked key skills such as student agency and self-management to persevere through college. Data also indicated that while pre-K through 4th graders have achieved success on state assessments, scores decline among students in grades 5 through graduation.

Blended Learning Model

Pasadena Connect is part of the Summit Learning Program, and uses a version of a flex model to personalize learning. The Summit Learning Program involves three core elements: students spend part of the day learning content at their own pace through an online platform, teachers facilitate project-based learning and grade students on a cognitive skills rubric, and teachers hold one-on-one mentoring sessions with students to set goals and support progress. Each Connect student has a Personalized Learning Plan (PLP) where students set goats, track their progression, receive immediate feedback, and are able to access learning resources at any time. Pasadena believes that the Connect model will improve student's academic skills, and also enable students to become self-directed learners to succeed in college and beyond.[1]

Design Pillars and Strategies

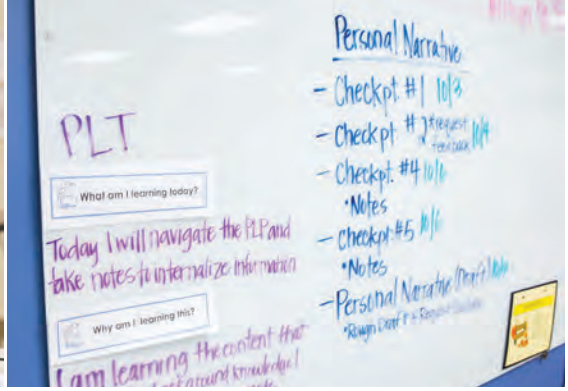
Design pillars are used among all RBL sites to identify the essential design elements upon which each site's student experience is based. The Pasadena design pillars reflect the key tenets of the Summit Learning Program approach to personalized learning: **Self-Directed Learning, Personalized Learning Time (PLT), Project-Based Learning (PBL), Mentoring, and Content Progression.**

Self-Directed Learning is intended to provide students with choices along their learning pathways and allow them to set a more individualized pace.

During Personalized Learning Time (PLT), students work through online content in the Summit Learning Platform. Students move at their own pace through content-based focus areas, taking on-demand assessments when they believe they have mastered one focus area and are ready to move to the next one. The content knowledge students learn during PLT time is also applied to student projects.

These sessions provide students with access to actionable data and rapid feedback to guide their next lessons. Project-Based Learning (PBL) entails deeper learning experiences that challenge students to develop and apply cognitive skills. Teachers design projects to be authentic representations of projects and challenges found in the workplace. Students are graded based on cognitive skill development.[2]

[1] https://youtu.be/5xnp0IrMdpI
[2] https://youtu.be/5drlKS1uano



Weekly Mentoring sessions support in setting goals and developing strategies to accomplish them. These 10-minute, one-on-one sessions are driven by students and designed to develop agency and self-directed learning, while making sure each student is known by a caring adult.

Finally, Content Progression is reached when students achieve 80% mastery of their focus areas.

The final pillar of Rigor/Competency Progression builds in intellectually challenging experiences that push students to maintain high academic standards for themselves. Through challenge areas, adaptive software, mastery checks, and advance standards, students are equipped to work through instructional rigor that can maximize their academic growth.

Journey and Evolution

2016-17 was a year of transitioning from pilot to beginning of scale for Pasadena. With a district enrolling over 55,000 students, Pasadena faced a unique set of challenges and a wide variety of school contexts. Using the Summit Learning Program as a model for their work, Pasadena initially piloted personalized blended learning in four schools in 2015-16, and expanded to seven schools in 2016-17. While teachers faced similar challenges around technology and data that most first-year blended teachers do, their learning curves were minimized due to comfort with the Summit Learning Platform and the district's growing experience. This allowed some schools to focus more deeply on depth of learning and fine-tuning their models. At the same time, as the work expanded across the district, Pasadena's leaders worked to align multiple departments to support new ways of teaching and learning. Along the way the Pasadena team has sought to keep the pilot nimble enough to support early adopters, but also to integrate the work into district-wide systems needed for broader transformation. These dynamics of innovation and scale will continue as Pasadena plans to expand the work significantly across the district next year.

Building Pasadena Connect

Pasadena is distinct from other demonstration sites in that RBL support came at Year 2 of the district's multi-year journey to personalized blended learning, rather than at Year 1. To understand Pasadena's experience in the 2016-17 school year, it is important to understand the groundwork that had been laid over several years, as district leadership generated support to launch and implement Summit Learning as Pasadena Connect.

Pasadena has spent several years working toward a vision of how technology can improve student learning and instill 21st Century skills. This included purchasing devices, installing Wi-Fi towers, and stimulating internal buy in. Between 2013 and 2015, Pasadena built a relationship with Summit Public Schools. Initially a small group of teachers and district leaders visited Summit to learn more about its personalized learning approach. After building additional internal interest a larger group of 60 from Pasadena visited Summit as well.

In 2015, Pasadena was accepted as part of the pilot cohort of Summit Learning, referred to as Pasadena Connect. The district applied for the RBL grant at the same time they piloted the Connect model in three schools during 2015-16 school year. Winning the RBL grant let Pasadena build on the early signs of progress they had experienced with Connect, and helped scale this experience across the district.

Prior to the fall semester launch in four schools, the district modified components of Summit's curriculum to match Texas state standards. This modification of curriculum has been an ongoing process that continued throughout Year 2. The district granted Connect schools some structural exemptions – for example, waivers from interim benchmark assessments that were not aligned with the learning pathways built into the Summit Learning model.

In the beginning of 2015-16, students experienced challenges taking more ownership over their learning. Teachers also experienced challenged shifting from traditional instructional roles to facilitating more personalized learning. As the first year progressed, however, teachers reported seeing more agency and self-awareness among students in their classrooms.[1] Academic performance also improved among Connect students. Based on this progress, Pasadena's leadership decided to expand the Connect program in Year 2 – each pilot school would roll up one grade level, and overall seven schools would participate in Connect in the second year.

Year Two Preparation: Between Year 1 and Year 2 the district provided extensive onboarding for Connect teachers, though some bought in more than others.

Once Pasadena was named an RBL demonstration site, the district team had the resources to introduce the ongoing Connect initiative into additional schools. Grant funds from Raise Your Hand Texas enabled the district to scale faster than anticipated while increasing coaching and TA support for the RBL pilot schools. In addition to supporting new personnel, these new resources were spent on classroom redesign, teacher extra duty pay, student learning devices, and online subscriptions to instructional content. Four Connect schools are formally a part of the RBL initiative, but the Connect model was largely the same across all seven Connect schools in 2016-17. Stakeholders in Pasadena described a comfortable but "blurry" distinction between RBL and the overall Connect implementation.

To staff the initiative, the district selected pilot teachers based on their readiness and experience in blended classrooms. Following successes in Year 1, the district provided firsthand exposure for new pilot teachers through a trip to Summit – over 100 Pasadena staff attended. Teachers also had opportunities to learn from other teachers in the district with experience in blended learning.[2]

Pasadena focused significant energy on onboarding Connect teachers for Year 2. While this was beneficial for those teachers, in some schools it created feelings of skepticism or disinvestment among teachers who were not part of the pilot. In retrospect, district leadership realized that only onboarding and focusing on the Connect teachers created some divides among faculty. As one principal reflected, *"If I could go back, I would tell myself to onboard my staff as a whole, way better than just the Connect team…. We realized that we needed to inform people pretty early on, as we started to hear those grumblings [from non-Connect teachers.]"* This tension eased during the year as non-pilot teachers observed the student growth happening in Connect classrooms over time.

[1] https://youtu.be/BeJcVPbfX2E
[2] https://youtu.be/hfnjal-twN4

Outside of the school, preparations for Year 2 included extensive parent outreach across several schools leading up to the launch. For example, school leaders at Bondy Elementary were intentional about informing parents about upcoming changes in the classroom. Their principal shared, *"We need to see more parents on board. I have never talked to so many parents in my teaching career. The parent involvement is important, and some parents were fighting it."*

Approaching Year 2, integrating the Summit Learning curriculum with Texas standards remained a challenge. To foster alignment, the district developed curriculum over the summer (particularly in science and history) that met Texas standards, and new courses were created on the Summit Learning Platform to deliver this content. This curriculum building continued throughout the year; teachers met every six weeks to discuss curriculum modifications, and developed a collaborative online method to propose and agree to Connect-wide curriculum changes.

Early Efforts: Although Pasadena's RBL classrooms experienced several challenges consistent with other pilot sites, Year 1 of the district's Connect pilot provided helpful infrastructure and baseline of support for managing implementation challenges during Year 2.

Among the benefits of the RBL grant was funding for a coach to support the four RBL pilot schools. This support proved to be critical in providing implementation guidance, and was especially useful as Summit had decreased the intensity of its coaching support between Years 1 and 2 of the Connect initiative. In addition to coaching support, Pasadena moved some principals and teachers in the Year 1 pilot to other schools to help with the Connect transition. This accelerated implementation progress—for instance, the principal at one middle school had previously worked at one of the schools piloting Connect in Year 1. Due to her experience with blending, she was able to identify potential implementation challenges early on and help the school avoid some of the pitfalls she experienced in Year 1.

Students with Connect experience from Year 1 also helped new Connect teachers implement blended learning in their classrooms. They shared their experience with their teachers, their expectations, and explained what they liked about the new model. Describing students from Bondy Elementary, the project manager shared, *"While the teachers were new, the students had exposure already. That made for a smooth start … Having kids or teachers who have done it in the cycle is very helpful as you launch."*

One of the benefits that Pasadena saw during Year 2 implementation was fewer logistical hiccups with technology. While some challenges remained, obstacles such as establishing internet access and helping students sign in to new platforms were less prevalent in Year 2. Still, the second year brought new challenges as well. As one middle school teacher shared:

> *"Implementing the second year was a lot scarier than the first year. First year we had no idea what we were doing, but we feel that we were successful. We were extremely proud of the work they had done. Starting this year, we were wondering how we were going to re-create what we did last year."*

While Pasadena as a district brought valuable experience into Year 2, many students and teachers were new to Connect as the program expanded, and encountered some familiar challenges from Year 1. For instance, Pasadena's Year 2 teachers observed that it was difficult keeping students engaged with new technology at the start of the year. As a middle school teacher shared, *"Keeping them focused is definitely a challenge. They have the whole world at their fingertips and it is hard to keep a 10-year-old from getting on other websites or playing games."* Beyond student attention, teachers reported initial challenges shifting effectively from

whole group to small group instruction. The Summit Learning Program called for one-on-one mentoring sessions, which required practice to master and were hard to schedule regularly. Staff also reported that pulling and analyzing data in support of instructional decision-making was a new and time intensive process. Despite these challenges, teachers still expressed appreciation for the value of this personalized student attention. As one teacher shared:

"I have sometimes small group workshops, and sometimes individual workshops, because it's something that will help each student. Although I feel very busy as a teacher because I have to change my thought process from one moment to the next, I feel like my energy and time are so much more effective. It's not something where students are being taught content they're not ready to receive yet."

In addition to adapting to the mechanics of Connect, teachers found that the instructional content in the Summit Learning Platform was not sufficiently differentiated or flexible to meet the needs of special education and English language learner populations. For instance, in some schools, principals decided that the Connect program was not ready to serve ELL students who needed intensive dual-language instruction. However, as the year evolved teachers reported that greater use of data and student-teacher mentoring proved helpful in supporting students with complex learning needs.

Given Pasadena's point of progression with blended learning and its close partnership with Summit, the district found that its technical assistance needs differed from those of the other RBL districts. Over the course of the year, RYHT, CA Group, and other TA providers shifted how they engaged with Pasadena to better meet its needs. Specifically, the ecosystem has provided more support on scaling strategy and student experience design and less support on technology implementation or instructional coaching.

Evolving the Approach: As blended learning took hold in classrooms, teachers, school leaders, and district leaders aligned so changes could move from the periphery to the center of the district's vision.

Teachers began changing their mindsets and developed a deeper understanding of blended learning as the year continued. Many reported increased comfort shifting from their role as a "sage on the stage" to more of a learning coach in the classroom. Reflecting on her growth, one teacher shared,

"I feel responsibility has shifted; I feel like more of a facilitator than a teacher."

Early signs of student success also helped convince teachers of blended learning's value. For one, students opted into the Connect program at high rates, and largely chose to stay. Within the Summit Learning Platform, teachers can see real-time data on each of their students; several teachers reported that they could see individual students progress more quickly through their playlists and content assessments as the year went on. Teachers also noticed students being able to articulate their own strengths and weaknesses as learners, and make plans accordingly. One middle school teacher shared,

"They are not focused on a specific answer, but focused on skills of thinking and problem solving so they feel free to go through that productive struggle." ▶

Finally, multiple teachers reported that the one-on-one mentoring time gave them a closer connection with their students than they had ever experienced before. Mentoring conversations, about both academic and personal issues, helped teachers take the live data they received about

▶ https://youtu.be/Objmao5Q_uA

every student, and translate that data into a more individualized set of supports. As a principal described, *"Our mentors dive deep with kids to know how they are doing academically, but also with personal and socioemotional development. The mentors are able to take that information and determine how to develop academic goals."*

The staff response to this progress was clear— in a teacher survey conducted by FSG, the 18 respondents from Pasadena unanimously reported a preference for blended / personalized learning over traditional teaching methods. This receptivity was captured by one teacher who shared,

> *"Students have taken control of their learning and can truly see the benefits of the approach By setting their own goals, they take pride and value the work that they are accomplishing much more than if I had assigned the task."* ▶

With seven schools implementing the Connect program, Pasadena saw variation both in the details of implementation and in how students and teachers have experienced the pilot. Some of this was expected variation by context. For instance, while all the schools implement teacher-student mentoring as one of the three pillars of the model, schools have structured mentoring differently, and fit it into their schedules in different ways. At a more macro level, Pasadena found that implementation for high school students and teachers has been more challenging than in middle school. Pasadena hypothesized this may be due to the more specialized course structure of high school, or the fact that the older students have spent more time in traditional instructional environments. Regardless, Pasadena is adjusting its future scale plan to include fewer teams from high schools and more from middle and elementary schools, including the introduction of Connect with two 4th grade teams next year.

As the Connect work has grown over the course of Year 2, the Pasadena team has needed to build alliances with new departments inside the district. While Pasadena Connect has always enjoyed support from senior leadership, it originally received relatively little attention as a small pilot in a large district. But as Connect expanded to seven schools in Year 2, with 23 schools planned for Year 3, personalized blended learning is quickly becoming "everyone's job." At times, moving this innovation from the periphery to the center of the district's focus has meant working through differences. Connect's approach to student self-direction through online content plus grading students on cognitive skills expressed through projects, for example, is very different from how Pasadena's academics team has typically approached curriculum and assessment. Pasadena's content and curriculum specialists bring important skills that can strengthen Connect in the long run, but both sides are still acclimating to how to support one another on the new model.

Preparing for Next Year: Reflecting on this year's implementation challenges, the district is being more intentional to develop its onboarding process to effectively integrate new schools and teachers.

In 2017-18 Connect will expand to 23 schools. With a focus on middle schools, almost half of the district's schools will be blending next year. The district is also scaling based on the feeder patterns, ensuring that Connect is available to all intermediate level students transitioning to high school in the next few years. However, at most schools Connect will not be a total campus model, but a partial grade level implementation so that students can choose traditional learning pathways alongside personalized blended learning. Schools will have the flexibility to determine how far and fast they want to pursue implementation.

▶ https://youtu.be/ntHyDZRpxuA

To facilitate cross-pollination, some schools will be dividing students with previous Connect experience into different classrooms next year. As many experienced early in Year 2, school leaders are hoping that these students will ease the learning curve for peers and teachers newer to Connect. In addition to ongoing curriculum development, the district's biggest priority will be developing a coaching staff. Next year Pasadena will be adding four new staff members as coaches for Connect. Building on earlier successes in select schools, school leaders and teachers are also prioritizing parent outreach leading up to Year 2.

Based on different experience levels across the district, school readiness has become a key consideration as Pasadena evaluates which schools to support with a Connect transition. The process of onboarding new schools has evolved to include readiness testing a year early, training and curriculum development in the spring semester, and planning time in the summer. Questions adopted from the Summit onboarding process in Year 1 are being used to determine which district schools are ready for piloting next year. District leaders have interviewed each principal who is interested in Connect to understand if piloting will be logistically feasible and if school leadership has planned sufficiently. Most schools have continued forward with Connect, but a few have been counseled away from implementation.

As Pasadena looks to the future, school and district leaders observed that despite their earlier start on blended learning, there is always a need for continuous improvement, especially with regard to curriculum design and change management. As a district leader shared,

> *"In our traditional system, we create something and we do not tweak as often as we probably should. Now, in our second year we realize it is never going to be perfect—it is going to be constant tweaking work… I am realizing that the need to course correct will never go away."* ▶

Defining Success

As part of their Raising Blended Learners grant application, Pasadena created several "SMART" Goals for Year 1 implementation. These included goals around academic rigor and achievement derived from STAAR exam results, MAP data, and student surveys, along with survey-based metrics on student engagement and teacher engagement. The district created a rubric to measure growth, and worked with the student survey organization YouthTruth to gather student perspectives on blended learning. In setting goals, Pasadena and Raise Your Hand were both cognizant that blended learning, like any substantial innovation, changes quickly in its early stages, and the objective of the initial years would be less about proving progress and more about learning, rapid prototyping, and improvement for the future. Still, as described earlier, the very practice of goal setting strengthened positive habits for Pasadena and the other demonstration sites, seeding a culture of reflecting on data and using data for improvement.

Looking back on Year 1, Pasadena's SMART Goal performance was mixed. STAAR performance by Connect students generally outpaced results from non-Connect students, with some variation across grades, schools, and subgroups. On the NWEA MAP assessment, scores fell short of district targets. However, student-reported metrics related to academic rigor mostly trended in a positive direction. Student reporting on relationships with teachers were varied, while there was modest improvement in student relationships among peers. While these results were mixed, teachers, schools leaders, and district leaders observed improvement in many nonacademic and behavioral indicators. These include increased student confidence, more student ownership of learning, and increased peer collaboration. Moreover, Connect teachers

▶ https://youtu.be/UG-ndbMnJnk

report that their perspectives on the classroom have been transformed as they shift from traditional instruction to more of a facilitative role for students. Together, these positive signs have given Connect teachers confidence that they are moving in the right direction. *Note – for a list of signs of success frequently noted across the five demonstration sites, see the Measures of Progress table.*

Year 2 Observations: Pasadena

1. **Experience in blending has eased the learning curve for teachers.** Pasadena's RBL pilot effort has benefitted from being embedded in a district-wide effort. Although Connect classrooms have experienced some challenges consistent with other RBL sites, the Basecamp learning infrastructure, along with school leaders and teachers experienced with blending, helped ease the implementation learning curve.

2. **Year 2: What's old is new.** Even though the district had experience in Year 2, many individuals were still experiencing personalized blended learning for the first time. This was an important reminder for Pasadena that change management is less a linear process and more of a continuous loop; there will always be a need to bring new participants up to speed, even while deepening the district's work and supports.

3. **The RBL grant helped this ongoing effort accelerate scale.** In practice, Pasadena's RBL pilot classrooms have been indistinguishable from its Connect classrooms. Nesting the pilot in this larger effort has allowed for quicker growth and the grant has helped finance this phase of relatively rapid scaling.

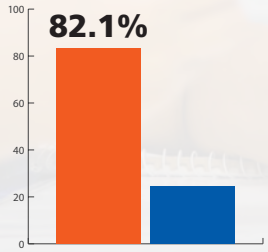
4. **Committed district leadership from the outset made a difference.** Pasadena's district leadership appreciated the value of blended learning and actively promoted the approach before the Connect and RBL applications were submitted. Their commitment to this vision has been critical in helping schools shift structures, realign district curriculum, invest in technology, and seek financial resources to continue scaling up. Their subsequent efforts to coordinate across schools helped foster alignment within schools— the process of enlisting teacher buy-in has been parallel to getting district schools and staff on board.

5. **Continuous improvement is key to personalized blended learning.** As they gained experience with personalized learning, Pasadena's leadership began understanding that constant iteration would be necessary for implementation success. These could be changes large or small, and would depend as much on a mindset of improvement as any specific action or intervention. The pilot team has realized they will never be "done," but rather success is a process of continuous improvement.

KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF POINT ISABEL

2,500

Approximate Total Student Enrollment



Economically Disadvantaged Students

0.6% African American
91.6% Hispanic
6.9% White

Ethnic Breakdown

3

Schools Piloting Blended Learning

6

Teachers Piloting Blended Learning

200

Approximate Number of Students in Blended Classrooms

POINT ISABEL ISD

Raising Blended Learners, FSG Year 1 Site Report

Introduction

Point Isabel ISD, located at the southernmost tip of Texas in the Rio Grande Valley, enrolls approximately 2,500 students. Eighty-two percent of students served by the district are economically disadvantaged, and over 60% are considered academically at-risk. District leaders saw the RBL grant as an opportunity to transform teaching and learning practices and increase student motivation, with the goal of better preparing students for postsecondary education. The superintendent has encouraged risk-taking and innovation in Point Isabel; the Raising Blended Learners work has played an important role in operationalizing her vision.

Point Isabel named its initiative Project S.A.I.L. (Student Achievement via Individualized Learning). Dubbed by the district as "a grassroots approach to personalized learning," the first-year pilot included a station rotation model in two elementary school math classrooms at separate schools, and a flex model in four core courses of 7th grade. The district plans on expanding the pilot to high school in Year 2.

Prior to RBL, the district has outlined six "compasses" to navigate student learning experiences:

1. Increase student achievement, engagement and motivation
2. Provide self-paced learning opportunities
3. Establish a positive school culture
4. Achieve personalized learning for each student
5. Access to actionable data and rapid feedback
6. Improve mentoring experiences

Model

Problem Statement

Across Point Isabel's two elementary campuses (Garriga and Derry Elementary) and at Port Isabel Junior High School (the district's only junior high school), district leaders have observed low math achievement and a persistent achievement gap especially among English Language Learners. Campus and district leaders are also concerned about student disengagement in the classroom. In response to indicators of low student engagement, district leaders sought to better meet the needs and aspirations of individual students through personalized blended learning.

Blended Learning Model

At the elementary school level, Point Isabel piloted station rotations for one math classroom in 3rd grade at Derry Elementary and another in 4th grade at Garriga Elementary. Students generally spend class periods rotating among several stations involving individual work, collaborative tasks, small group sessions with the teacher, and self-directed work on digital online content. Additionally, teachers have begun using a learning management system to create flipped videos that students watch at home to preview the following day's content. Through these different modalities, Point Isabel has sought to give students increasingly personalized learning

opportunities, more time for in-depth learning and peer collaboration, while equipping teachers with multiple data sources with which to plan student learning activities.

In 7th grade at the Port Isabel Junior High (PIJH), Point Isabel has adopted the Summit Learning Program approach to personalized learning. As a Year 1 pilot, Point Isabel is pursuing a partial grade level implementation involving four teachers in four core academic subjects in 7th grade (ELA, math, history, science). The Summit Learning Program involves three core elements: students spend part of the day learning content at their own pace through an online platform, teachers facilitate project-based learning and grade students on a cognitive skills rubric, and teachers hold one-on-one mentoring sessions with students to set goals and support progress. Point Isabel has modified aspects of Summit Learning to match its local context, but has retained core elements. As part of the Summit Learning model, Point Isabel teachers and students have relied on real-time data on student progress in order to help students set goals, make plans, and track their own progress against learning objectives.

Design Pillars and Strategies

Design pillars are used among all RBL sites to identify the essential design elements upon which each site's student experience is based. The Point Isabel design pillars are: **Collaborative Relationships (Teachers & Students; Peer to Peer), Student Agency, Rigor and Relevance, Personalized Pathways, and Data-Driven Instruction (DDI)**. The vision for these student experiences are aligned, but differentiated across the elementary and junior high level. Because PIJH is following the Summit Learning model, pilot classrooms are structured similarly in the four content areas. In contrast, elementary pilot teachers were provided autonomy to interpret and implement blended strategies in accordance with the district design pillars based on students' needs and the teachers' interpretations of blended learning in action. They took a more incremental approach to classroom transformation.

Collaborative Relationships

Student Agency

Rigor and Relevance

Personalized Pathways

Data-Driven Instruction (DDI)

In both elementary and junior high settings, Collaborative Relationships entailed peer collaboration in addition to mentoring from teachers. As part of the Summit Learning model, junior high teacher mentors have met with assigned students weekly throughout the year, and developed relationships they believe are key to the success of the Year 1 implementation. In elementary school, teachers began student goal setting and coaching at mid-year and found this strategy equally compelling for enhancing student–teacher relationships, helping teachers better understand each student's learning needs and supporting students to develop agency. Collaborative relationships will remain a significant priority for Year 2.

Student Agency involves supporting students to develop the capacity and propensity to take purposeful initiative. For elementary students, Year 1 steps toward agency included students monitoring their own progress on adaptive content, and setting goals and meeting with


teachers for weekly mentor sessions. At the junior high school level, students use personalized learning plans to help chart their progress, meet weekly with a teacher mentor to set goals and make plans for meeting them, and take on-demand mastery assessments in the Summit Learning Platform.[▶] Both elementary and junior high teams will continue to expand student agency strategies in Year 2.

Rigor and Relevance aspires to provide intellectually challenging experiences that push students to maintain high academic standards, and that provide relevant and relatable experiences for students to encourage engagement and passion for learning. At PIJH, pilot students were exposed to more rigorous and relevant learning through playlists, relevant projects, challenge areas, adaptive software, mastery checks, and advanced standards. Elementary pilots have focused on providing rigorous learning opportunities within each of their stations.

Personalized Pathways. These include teacher-led small groups, direct individual instruction, peer collaboration, adaptive digital content, flipped content, and playlists. Both rigor and personalized pathways have been growth areas for Point Isabel over Year 1 and will continue as a Year 2 focus. The district will continue investing in the development of strong instructional coaches to support both areas, which begin during Year 1 at the three pilot campuses.

Data-Driven Instruction (DDI) has been a significant area of growth at Point Isabel, especially with the introduction of the NWEA MAP assessment for all Year 1 pilot students. Over the course of the pilot year, teachers and school leaders gained confidence in using multiple forms of assessment to guide instruction. At the elementary level, this included MAP, Imagine Math, formative assessments, and other digital content reports. MAP in particular was influential in helping teachers shift their mindsets toward student growth over the course of the year, and in identifying the specific standards with which individuals students needed assistance. For junior high students, data-driven instruction was likewise supported by MAP, along with student progress in the Summit Learning Platform and student mastery of cognitive skills. As the year went on, PIJH teachers began using data on a daily or near-daily basis to support students in the Summit Learning model.

Journey and Evolution

Point Isabel has started to implement a bold vision established by district leaders in collaboration with school leaders. During Year 1 of the RBL initiative, district and school staff made progress toward building out both elementary and junior high school pilots, and, most importantly, made considerable progress aligning school leaders' and pilot teachers' mindsets with the larger district vision for personalization and innovation. While each Year 1 pilot campus was on a different trajectory, they all made contributions toward beginning to shift the broader district culture from a highly traditional, STAAR assessment-oriented culture to a culture that embraces opportunities to innovate.

[▶] https://youtu.be/IfCvJM0vMPw

Preparation: Building on an ambitious vision, a district team of school leaders and teachers sought to move from little experience with blended learning to fully embracing a personalized approach.

Point Isabel's district team was led by the superintendent, who has been a strong champion for innovation and next generation learning in the district. Before the RBL grant, the superintendent and her team took several steps that set the groundwork for future transformation. This included a major effort in 2013-14 to build teacher capacity around continual reflection and coaching. By 2015-16, a few classrooms started experimenting with elements of station rotations and flipped classrooms. Teachers saw changes in student behavior that generated excitement for expanding new instructional models.

To support implementation from the district level, a Blended Learning Coach position was created and filled by an instructional dean from an elementary campus. Together, the coach, the RBL project manager, and the superintendent became the key forces driving Year 1 implementation. Under their guidance, the district has moved forward with implementing two different blended learning models—a station rotation in two elementary school classrooms, and a Summit Learning Program (formerly known as Basecamp) implementation in four core 7th grade classes. Across both settings, teachers were invited to opt-in to participate in the pilot. While common themes and a shared vision of personalized learning connect these two approaches, there are separate arcs and experiences related to each elementary campus and the junior high school.

During the preparation process, elementary leaders and teachers were excited about diving more deeply into blended learning. However, as they began to plan for launch, concerns about negative impacts on STAAR results during the early years of innovation led to considerable apprehension among school leaders and teachers. District administrators emphasized that STAAR would not be the only metric of success and would not affect anyone's job security, but the concern persisted, and would remain a challenge for Point Isabel throughout the year. Despite this reality, elementary pilot teams persisted, and developed two blended classroom models from which Year 2 teams would learn and build.

In junior high, the four teachers, the principal, the blended learning coach, and RBL project manager participated in Summit Learning training the summer before implementation. While they had initially just planned on blending in math, the team was impressed by the Summit model, and made a last-minute decision to implement Summit Learning across four core classes (math, science, history, and ELA). To prepare for this broader scope, the team spent substantial time during the summer modifying schedules and adapting Summit's Base Curriculum to align with Texas state standards, particularly in history and science. Leading up to the beginning of the semester, 125 students were selected for the program based on whether the principal though that they were ready to succeed. Apprehension about the impact of the Summit Learning model on STAAR scores was also prevalent in the minds of the PIJH pilot team. However, like the elementary school teachers, they were sufficiently excited to move forward.

Early Efforts: At the beginning of the pilot year, Point Isabel grappled with supporting teachers to change their classroom roles while shifting traditional mindsets and school cultures.

Elementary School Experience

Elementary school teachers reported that, while blended learning felt exciting and promising at the beginning of the year, the first steps of implementation were intimidating. The teachers spent a tremendous amount of time developing new classroom structures and content, and soon felt exhausted. More significantly, teachers recognized that blended learning required risk-taking and letting go of being "in charge" of a classroom, but living into these ideas cut against all of their previous habits and training as a teacher.

This fear of letting go was compounded by ongoing concerns that blended learning might jeopardize STAAR scores. The superintendent and other district staff sought to reassure teachers and school leaders that the exam would not be the most important indicator of student success and teacher performance during the early pilot years. This helped to a degree, but a deep cultural focus on state testing outcomes was so ingrained that the concern stayed lodged in the back of teachers' minds throughout Year 1. As one school leader said, "We are telling [teachers] not to worry about STAAR, but it will never go away." To further ease concerns, the schools carefully compared the Texas teacher evaluation standards against the district's blended learning pillars to show that excelling as a blended learning teacher was fully aligned with expectations for great teaching in general. Still, anxiety about state tests would linger throughout the year. Despite concerns, and with strong encouragement and support from the district team and the blended learning coach, elementary pilot teachers began introducing blended strategies aligned with the district pillars. For example, early on, both teachers launched small group instruction and created stations where students could learn collaboratively.

From a campus leadership perspective, principals were conceptually supportive, but with an already busy workload, the small pilot size (one classroom in each school) and limited knowledge of how to support campus level blended learning, they were not heavily involved during the first semester. Instead, principals relied on district staff to support the two pilot teachers. This gradually shifted partway through the year, particularly when the principals began to emphasize NWEA MAP as a tool for identifying students' mastery levels and supporting individualized intervention. As one principal reflected, *"At the beginning I did not jump in as much because of everything else I was doing, but at some point I decided I needed to jump in and support my teachers."*

Finally, early in the implementation process, teachers noticed issues related to equity, particularly around student access to technology outside of the classroom. To address this challenge, teachers invited students lacking internet access at home to a school-based computer lab during mornings before class.

Junior High School Experience

In junior high school, Point Isabel's pilot site launched the fourth week of school due to the district's need to work through technology logistics. Teachers used this time to orient students to new classroom devices, introduce the Summit Learning Program, establish cultural norms, and begin instruction on Summit Learning content in a whole group format. During the first semester, junior high school teachers experienced a significant practice and mindset shift. Part of this was the very different mechanics of teaching in a self-directed and project-based learning environment. In terms of mindset, one teacher characterized the shift in role from *"teaching*

https://youtu.be/nmOXSfHesi4

students math" to *"teaching students how to learn math."* Some teachers also experienced challenges shifting their mindsets away from accustomed modes of instruction. As a school leader shared, *"Getting teachers to let go has been the biggest struggle with Basecamp [Summit Learning]… They still wanted to put their traditional ways into the classroom."*

Students also needed time to adjust to the new learning paradigm. Some students were initially resistant to the new model, a common response in schools launching personalized learning. These students were not accustomed to guiding their own learning — some simply disengaged while others struggled to use their time on devices productively. One teacher reflected, *"Kids did not like it at first. We had to talk a lot of them out of leaving the program. They were not used to figuring out what they need to learn. They had to transition from a 'sit and feed me' to 'I'm going to the icebox."* This rocky start gave way to progress later in the semester. As the junior high principal noted, *"Students did not like it at the beginning, they wanted their teacher back, they wanted to be told what to do. But they came around and now they love it."*

Evolving the Approach: Teachers moved beyond "tech-rich" instruction to blended classrooms with deeper personalization.

Elementary School Experience

Elementary school teachers experienced important progress in the second half of the school year. As teachers gained comfort with the mechanics of a station rotation, they began experimenting with how many days in a week they should incorporate station rotations, and how to group students within stations based on data. Both elementary school teachers also began rolling out student goal setting early in the second semester. By the end of the year, students were regularly setting goals for progress on their learning software and meeting weekly with pilot teachers to discuss their progress. One teacher reflected, *"I thought I was going to be more targeted and individualized at the beginning, but I had to make changes to really be able to target each student in my individualized session."*

One of Point Isabel's biggest shifts came around rigor. Thanks to coaching from TNTP (one of the RBL technical assistance providers), elementary teachers and principals came to realize that their blended learning lessons needed to be much more challenging for each and every student. In particular, students using online computer stations had been pursuing content that was topically aligned to what they should be learning, but was not necessarily up to the depth of the grade-level standard. The role of the instructional deans on each campus also shifted as a result of the TNTP coaching. The deans became much more engaged as instructional coaches, with explicit training and capacity to provide feedback to the pilot teachers. Overall, teachers described TNTP's coaching as "eye opening," and began more closely examining online and teacher-developed content, direct instruction, and student assignments for alignment with standards.

Thinking carefully about rigor for each student also contributed to greater use of data for instructional decision-making. Pilot teachers became increasingly familiar with NWEA MAP data, and began using MAP alongside STAAR practice tests, programmatic data, and teacher-created formative assessments to inform student grouping and plan appropriate instruction. For instance, pilot teachers created a daily quiz to quickly gauge each student's mastery of standards, and then created groupings at each station based on student levels.[1] Students who demonstrated mastery on the daily assessments were permitted to access more advanced content through an adaptive math program.

[1] https://youtu.be/d2lIG2BV6aA

While early, teachers also observed signs of progress among English Language Learners in the elementary school pilot. Point Isabel's elementary pilot teachers are bilingual and bicultural, and they often grouped students with limited language proficiency together, switching seamlessly between English and Spanish during teacher-led stations. In addition to bilingual language proficiency among staff, adaptive software and dictionaries have been made available to translate content for Spanish-speaking students. While teachers and coaches underline that progress is still in its early stages, they report that English Language Learners are mastering content more quickly in blended learning classrooms in comparison to past years.

Outside of the two RBL classrooms, non-pilot teachers at both elementary schools expressed interest in blended learning. The two principals have organized monthly sessions for other teachers to observe the blended learning classrooms, and many teachers began experimenting with various elements of station rotations. By the end of the year, both principals estimated that the majority of their teachers are experimenting with at least some aspects of blended learning.

Junior High School Experience

Midway through the school year, the 7th grade teachers began developing more comfort with Summit Learning's online platform, and started incorporating more data into their classroom discussions. Through an analysis of MAP data (which was new to Point Isabel), teachers were able to identify gaps in student proficiency that they had not been able to clearly identify or respond to in the past. One teacher, for example, found 11 different instructional levels within a single 7th grade math class. As a result, teachers began acting in more targeted ways to close residual proficiency gaps, using both the Summit Learning Program as well as other programs such as Imagine Math to build skills for students far below grade level.

At the same time, the 7th grade teachers continued to make strides with teacher-student mentoring. As teachers met one-on-one with each student weekly, they gained a deeper understanding of students' needs in a way that complemented the quantitative data. In turn, students began to rely on mentoring sessions for support, consultation and problem solving. As teachers gained facility with mentoring and data-driven instruction, they began noticing a difference among their students. Rather than hanging back or waiting for direction, teachers observed students actively directing their own learning, and exhibiting increased motivation to achieve their goals and improve.[▶▶] One junior high school teacher shared,

> *"Students know now that we have to meet weekly, now kids are setting goals. At the beginning it was even difficult for me to write the goals, now they are always excited to see their progress."*

By the end of the year, teachers observed marked differences between the 7th graders who were part of the Summit Learning pilot and those who were not. In particular teachers noticed fewer classroom disruptions by students, and improvements in the ways that students could articulate their own strengths and weaknesses as learners, and take responsibility for what they were working on in school. Teachers were particularly encouraged to observe English Language Learners show skills around self-direction and navigating different curricular resources, which teachers had not seen demonstrated in prior years. In reflecting on the year, the junior high principal shared,

> *"The kids just say I don't want to go back to learning the old way. Kids who have struggled are just doing great. There's always something going on."*

▶▶ https://youtu.be/UgNWfnLTOSg
▶▶ https://youtu.be/Qw3VfNivxJk

Preparing for Next Year: Year 1 teachers who have experienced initial success with blending are helping bring on board a larger cohort of teachers for Year 2, while the pilot team is adjusting scale plans to reflect Year 1 experiences.

Building on the positive learnings from Year 1, Point Isabel is laying the groundwork for considerable expansion in Year 2. In Derry Elementary, blended math will include 3rd and 5th grades, as well as selected classrooms of 1st and 2nd grade students (to help prevent proficiency gaps from forming). In Garriga Elementary, the 4th grade pilot is expanding to two classrooms in 3rd, two in 4th, and two in 5th as envisioned in the original scale plan. Principals noted that these classrooms account for Year 2 of the formal RBL initiative, but that organic spread has already begun beyond these classrooms. At Port Isabel Junior High, Summit Learning will expand to a whole school model in grades 6-8 well ahead of the original district plan. This will include all four core content areas for all students (as opposed to the partial grade pilot in Year 1). The decision to broaden to whole school was driven by teachers who wanted to move forward sooner with the Summit model. In addition, Point Isabel will launch Summit Learning for 9th grade students attending the one district high school, Port Isabel High School.

To onboard new Summit Learning pilot teachers, all Year 2 grade-level teams and campus leaders will attend intensive training on the campus of Summit Learning's regional partner, Pasadena, another RBL demonstration site. The training will roughly mirror what the Year 1 teachers received at Summit Public Schools the prior summer. In addition, district and campus leaders will travel to California for administrative training on supporting launch and adoption of the model. The district will also add a new blended learning coach at the secondary level.

In elementary school, as the pilot expands to full grade levels, the district is planning to support different teachers who are at different stages of readiness for blended learning. The district coach began meeting with the new cohort of teachers in spring 2017 to test elements of blended learning and prepare for a smoother start in the fall. Principals and instructional deans likewise participated in a campus readiness process and will work together other the summer for further planning. Their work will include building out campus-specific tools and delineating new processes and procedures to support the continued development of a culture of innovation. Finally, across grades, the district will focus even more strongly next year on developing comprehensive data skills that will hopefully shift mindsets towards supporting student growth and continuous improvement in Year 2.

https://youtu.be/_ZyziHwYpwo

Defining Success

As part of their Raising Blended Learners grant application, Point Isabel created several "SMART" Goals for Year 1 implementation. At the elementary level, the team tracked STAAR results and student critical thinking skills. By mid-year, the pilot team changed an elementary goal related to tutoring, as they determined the measure would not be effective due to the manner in which students are assigned and released for tutoring. At the junior high school level, academic rigor and achievement were measured using STAAR and NWEA MAP results in addition to local assessment data. The junior high school assessment also included YouthTruth Student Survey data regarding student engagement and relationships with teachers. In setting goals, Point Isabel and Raise Your Hand were both cognizant that blended learning, like any substantial innovation, changes quickly in its early stages, and the objective of the initial years would be less about proving progress and more about learning, rapid prototyping, and improvement for the future. Still, as described earlier, the very practice of goal setting strengthened positive habits for Point Isabel and the other demonstration sites, seeding a culture of reflecting on data and using data for improvement.

While STAAR measures trended in a positive direction, YouthTruth survey results were largely mixed. In particular, 7th grade student responses were more positive than those from their peers in traditional classrooms; however, their reflections on engagement and relationships with teachers mostly declined compared to their 2016 end-of-year survey results. This suggests that blended learned may have mitigated some of the decline in student engagement from 6th to 7th grade, but did not completely eliminate these challenges. Despite these mixed results, teachers and school leaders reported observing progress on a number of nonacademic outcomes. This includes increased self-direction in learning, improved student goal setting, and more willingness to express opinions in the classroom. These signs have given teachers and school leaders confidence moving into Year 2. *Note – for a list of signs of success frequently noted across the five demonstration sites, see the Measures of Progress table.*

Year 1 Observations: Point Isabel

1. **Principal engagement is crucial.** Teachers and RBL coaches noted that perceived levels of buy-in and ownership among principals and other campus leaders may have contributed to variation in mindset shifts and beliefs in blended learning. In some cases, campus leaders engaged fully in blended learning early in implementation, while others' mindsets shifted later in the year. As principals increased their engagement levels and began prioritizing more support for teachers, staff reported boosts in morale and an increased focus on data-driven instruction. By the end of the year, all the campus leaders were fully bought-in to the value of blended learning, and are helping lead efforts to expand, support, and sustain blended learning in Year 2.

2. **Moving from a STAAR-focused culture to a culture valuing multiple measures is challenging, but can be a powerful lever for shifting to personalization.** Despite reassurances from leaders, teacher anxiety surrounding STAAR testing caused interruptions in the implementation process. This was particularly challenging as the pilot teachers were pushing toward multiple measures of success as they implemented blended learning, while their surrounding colleagues were still focused on the year-end standardized test. School leaders and instructional deans played important roles in the shift toward multiple measures, working closely with teachers to illustrate how more frequently accessible, granular data (particularly from NWEA MAP) revealed new insights on student needs and potential instructional supports. Gradually, by supporting teachers with MAP growth measures and other data sources, Point Isabel has shifted toward a more data-oriented culture.

3. **Teacher readiness and enthusiasm can sustain early implementation.** Point Isabel started implementing blended learning with teachers who showed interest and readiness to implement the pilot. This selection process yielded teachers who were willing to persist even after they felt daunted by the demands of implementation, or needed to make significant changes to their practice. This was particularly prevalent in junior high, where a team of four teachers journeyed through the pilot year together, supported one another, and ended the year with powerful personal connections that the team is carrying forward to Year 2.

4. **Key role of the Blended Learning Coach.** Early on, Point Isabel recognized the need to develop district-level blended expertise to support full district scale. In Year 1 the blended learning coach played a particularly important in translating the district's vision for student-centered learning into practical implementation steps, and coaching teachers through a process of change.

5. **Knowing how to draw on outside assistance can accelerate progress.** As a small district with fewer resources compared to its larger peers, Point Isabel has been adept at diagnosing needs and drawing in external experts for assistance. This has started with honest reflection about the district's existing assets and challenges. Over the course of Year 1, Point Isabel worked effectively with a number of the RBL ecosystem TA providers (as well as other partners) to address specific needs around instructional rigor, school finance, change management, and more. Point Isabel has found that the right external support at the right point in time can help to build internal capacity.

WHAT IS NEXT FOR RAISING BLENDED LEARNERS

Next year will be an exciting one for Raising Blended Learners. Leaders in the five demonstration sites have learned tremendously over Year 1 and are using their experience to deepen and begin scaling their work in Year 2. All sites are expanding according to plan or beyond what was originally planned with the support of the technical assistance provided by Raise Your Hand. The table below details sites' expansion plans for Year 2, including the additional schools, teachers, and students that will be reached during the 2017-18 school year.

2017-18 Plans	2016-17 New Pilot Sites	2017-18 New Pilot Sites	Total Pilot Scale
Birdville ISD ✓ Expansion to 10th grade ELA classrooms in two schools and developing campus level culture readiness in another. ✓ The district's alternative high school will pilot blended learning for the first time. ✓ The district will incorporate RBL student experience pillars and strategy to district-wide ELA and RtI learning guides.	**Schools:** 3 **Teachers:** 15 **Students:** 1,900	**Schools:** 1 **Teachers:** 21 **Students:** 1,500	**Schools:** 4 **Teachers:** 36 **Students:** 3,400
Cisco ISD ✓ Expansion to science in 3rd-8th grade, and adding two grade levels to existing math pilots, 3rd and 8th to mirror science. ✓ Focus on deepening the pillars of rigor, student growth mindset, and student goal setting.	**Schools:** 2 **Teachers:** 4 **Students:** 300	**Schools:** 0 **Teachers:** 8 **Students:** 300	**Schools:** 2 **Teachers:** 12 **Students:** 600
KIPP Houston ✓ Expanding to all 8th grade classrooms at the year 1 pilot school, in addition to math in the 5th, 6th and 7th grades. ✓ Expanding to all Algebra I classes at three additional middle schools and one high school.	**Schools:** 1 **Teachers:** 1 **Students:** 100	**Schools:** 4 **Teachers:** 9 **Students:** 700	**Schools:** 5 **Teachers:** 10 **Students:** 800
Pasadena ✓ The Connect program will scale to almost half the district next year, with a focus on middle schools. ✓ One RBL school will implement Connect across an entire grade level for the first time in the district and will onboard additional teachers and students in existing grade levels.	**Schools:** 4 **Teachers:** 23 **Students:** 600	**Schools:** 0 **Teachers:** 35 **Students:** 1,000	**Schools:** 4 **Teachers:** 58 **Students:** 1,600
Point Isabel ISD ✓ In Derry Elementary, Math will be expanded through grades 3–4 next year. ✓ In Garriga Elementary, the 4th grade pilot is expanding to two classrooms in 3rd, two in 4th, and two in 5th. ✓ At Port Isabel Junior High, Summit Learning will expand to 8 classrooms total in 7th and 8th grade. ✓ Port Isabel High School will pilot blended learning in the 9th grade next year.	**Schools:** 3 **Teachers:** 6 **Students:** 200	**Schools:** 1 **Teachers:** 24 **Students:** 1,000	**Schools:** 4 **Teachers:** 30 **Students:** 1,200

*Note, scale numbers are approximations.

CROSS-SITE OBSERVATIONS FROM YEAR 1

This year was rich in learning for Raising Blended Learners. Sites experienced a range of successes and challenges, disappointments and discoveries. In keeping with the learning-focused orientation of this report, this section includes a set of lessons that emerged across the five demonstration sites. These complement the site-specific reflections highlighted at the end of each site report. At this early stage of innovation, we believe it is critical to view each site individually, highlighting their unique journey toward student-centered learning. However, there were some observations consistent across all sites that hold broader relevance for the field. We expect that each of the topics raised here will continue to evolve in future year of the initiative, but taken together with the individual journeys of each site, they provide valuable insights for other Texas educators in the early stages of personalized blended learning.

Districts took different paths to blended learning.

Through the 10-month RBL application process, the five demonstration sites were given the flexibility to design plans that matched their district context. As a result, they all began Year 1 in different places and have used different strategies to advance their work. Some intentionally started with a small pilot, such as KIPP Houston, while Birdville and Pasadena moved quickly to relatively broad implementation. While creating its instructional model, Pasadena chose to adopt and build on the Summit Learning Program, while Cisco and Birdville tested different tools and models over the first year. Point Isabel combined multiple approaches.

Taken alone, none of these choices seem to predict success or failure, but rather they paint the picture of a field still early in its development, with a need for continued experimentation and learning. This also suggests that there is no single "right" way to pilot and expand blended learning. It is crucial for districts to define for themselves their appropriate pathway based on their context, needs, and vision for students. This approach, where districts start at different points and take a variety of paths, also necessitates a customized set of supports, such as those provided by the RBL Ecosystem in Year 1.

However, as the RBL sites have progressed through Year 1 using different approaches, there do seem to be sets of practices that support successful implementation, regardless of path. These are explored in greater depth within the site reports, but include: 1) the ability of teachers and leaders to maintain an adaptive mindset, 2) the importance of collaboration among district departments, 3) the need to establish new cultural routines and processes to allow innovation to take root across different parts of a traditional school system, and 4) the need to provide teachers with a combination of supports and freedom to help them evolve their instructional approaches to meet the needs of students.

Sites found implementation more challenging than expected, especially in the first few months, but the effort seemed worth it.

The five demonstration sites expected additional work while implementing their pilots, but the actual amount – and type – of effort required exceeded their expectations. Conversations with teachers and administrators revealed several common pain points in implementation. For instance, technology logistics such as rostering students and managing single sign-ons caused early delays in multiple districts. It also took more time than expected for teachers and students to learn to use the new programs proficiently. These challenges with technology, while time consuming, proved relatively straightforward. Yet other obstacles, particularly around individual readiness and mindset change, were more complex, and persisted much longer than the purely technical difficulties. Sites found that supporting teachers in a deep enough way for them to feel comfortable changing their mindsets and classroom practice was less of a linear fix over the course of the year, and more a constant process of support and encouragement, made all the more challenging by the often traditional confines of a school system.

While the work required to meet these challenges was more intensive than expected, most participants ended the year feeling like it was worth the effort. **In a teacher survey conducted by FSG, 100% of the 47 teachers surveyed said that they would not go back to traditional instruction if given the opportunity.** Teachers frequently cited that their students are more engaged in learning, and that the pilot has allowed them to meet the needs of their students

more directly. Additionally, district and school leaders have begun to apply what they've learned to ease the transition in Year 2. Specifically, some districts are giving teachers more time to prepare during the summer, providing extra pilot teachers planning time during the upcoming school year, better aligning professional development to meet teacher needs, assigning experienced blended learning teachers as tutors, and developing communities of practice where experienced and new teachers can learn from each other.

Alignment among districts, principals, and teachers was a key success factor for implementation.

As part of their RBL application, every district was required to create a cross-departmental team to help align systems and procedures in support of personalized blended learning. These "vertical" teams included teachers, school leaders, district staff from multiple departments, and the district superintendent or their designee. Winning teams also designated a project manager who would devote at least 50 percent of their time to the RBL pilot, and help coordinate all aspects of the work.

In general, fostering greater vertical alignment among these different levels led to more successful implementation. Teachers, school leaders, project managers and district staff all played crucial and differentiated roles at the five sites based on their unique contexts. When one level was missing, it impaired a district's ability to coordinate systemic changes, or took significant effort from the other levels to compensate. Some districts also evolved their team composition as their pilots expanded. Along the way, the project managers played a key role coordinating aligned action, and helping each part of the system operate in a complementary way. In Year 1 of RBL, the need for alignment manifested in three particular areas.

- **Shared Vision –** Ideally, district leaders, principals, and teachers all understand the benefits of personalized blended learning and the rationale for evolving past traditional instruction and school structures. If teachers are not fully supported and committed, as occurred in some sites, they are more likely to return to traditional instruction. When school leaders are not bought in, teachers receive mixed signals about the value of blended learning and often lack for needed instructional support. And finally, in some sites it took time for district leaders (across departments) to understand the value of blended learning and ease structural impediments and provide the support resources required. Yet when teachers, principals, and district leaders did operate from a shared vision, implementation seemed to proceed more successfully.
- **Coordinating key structural changes –** Coordination between levels of a system is just as important as the roles played by each level. Practically speaking, this might start with a teacher facing challenges with the district's grading policies in a classroom that is moving toward competency-based progression. The school leader needs to hear and understand these challenges, and district staff need to make decisions and provide supports. Faced with challenges like this one, the five demonstration sites used different methods to improve coordination and communication within their systems. These included different cross-functional teams, developing senior-level blended learning champions, and more. Additionally, the role of the RBL project manager was critical in all five sites for championing blended learning, and coordinating support and decision-making among all the stakeholders involved in the blended learning pilots.

- **Changing culture and mindset around data –** One area that required particular alignment and coordination in Year 1 has been shifting districts beyond STAAR tests as the primary data source for improving practice. From the outset, multiple superintendents emphasized that the value of blended learning extended beyond annual test scores and reaffirmed that teachers would not be solely evaluated based on STAAR results. Over the course of the year, several school leaders worked with their staff to emphasize student growth over time and changes in student agency, while de-emphasizing year-end tests. As teachers went deeper into blended learning, they also began to notice a need for more frequent and more detailed student data than they could derive from standardized tests exams. Together, these evolutions over Year 1 did not eliminate a focus on standardized tests, but they helped districts to balance them with other implementation measures, while supporting a movement from a culture of assessment to a culture that valued data and improvement.

Sites prepared for scale and allowed for spread.

During the RBL planning period, each team defined pilot parameters and selected the number of schools, teachers, and students who would participate in the pilot based on the unique problem they sought solve through blended learning. This included a defined but flexible plan for how they would pilot, evolve, and eventually scale blended learning. Each site has made adjustments from the past year of work, and is moving forward with various types of formal expansion of the RBL pilot in Year 2. At the same time, in most schools blended learning has begun to spread in less formal ways as well, often organically classroom-to-classroom. Much of this has been driven by curiosity on the part of teachers. During Year 1 non-pilot teachers in RBL schools would often stop in their colleagues' classrooms, or become intrigued about the new uses of technology. In some cases, students liked the blended approach of one or more classes, and pressed their other teachers to adopt it.

School and district leaders at times were cautious about the piecemeal nature of organic spread, or worried how they could support so many classrooms. Yet some sites have also set specific policies and structures that encourage cross-pollination. For example, one site began talking about "non-negotiables" for anyone wanting to do blended learning well. Some schools have encouraged peer observations among teachers, or have found opportunities for students to speak up about how they have changed as learners with the new approaches. Going forward, sites are continuing to think deliberately about scale and spread using data from their pilots, recognizing that both will be necessary for long-term success.

Sites found it difficult to fully measure the progress of their pilots, but also improved in using data.

Together with the field, RBL sites are still learning how to measure the progress and success of personalized blended learning in a way that paints a full picture of implementation. At the start of the RBL initiative, each demonstration developed a set of "SMART" goals (Specific, Measurable, Assignable, Realistic, and Time-related – originally derived from business theory). These goals varied based on each district's priorities, but generally included a combination of academic goals based on STAAR test scores and NWEA MAP growth data, as well as nonacademic goals based on student feedback from the YouthTruth Student Survey, covering topics such as student engagement, motivation, and agency.

As implementation progressed, sites came to two broad realizations. First, their initial goals were useful and necessary, but did not fully reflect their evolving models, or the signs of success that teachers were observing day-to-day. Second, while the goals were imperfect, the very process of setting goals, examining data, and reflecting with colleagues was tremendously valuable for building a data-driven culture focused on improvement. At the end of Year 1, sites spent substantial time reflecting on this practice of goal setting, including which goals will be carried forward to future years, which goals need adjustment based on early implementation, and which goals can be strengthened with new measures of success that emerged from the pilot year experience.

To capture the signs of success that sites experienced in Year 1, FSG conducted interviews and surveys of RBL pilot teachers, asking them what signs they were seeing that gave them confidence they were on the right track. We would stress that these are not the only measures that matter when it comes to blended learning, nor are they definitive proof that blended learning "works" – rather, these reflect the perspectives of the RBL pilot teachers in Year 1, and what is giving them hope and confidence as they move forward in their work.

Measures of Progress Frequently Reported by RBL Demonstration Sites

The following signs of success were mentioned most frequently by RBL teachers across interviews, focus groups, and teacher surveys.

Academic Rigor and Achievement

- ✓ Improved grades in academic subjects
- ✓ Gains in STAAR results
- ✓ More students achieving content mastery

Student Agency, Engagement, and Behavior

- ✓ Improved student confidence
- ✓ Increased student engagement
- ✓ Increased student ownership
- ✓ Increased student responsibility for learning
- ✓ Increased nightly homework completion rates
- ✓ Students holding themselves to higher academic standards
- ✓ Increased peer collaboration
- ✓ Increased student agency

Teacher Practices

- ✓ Increased ability to differentiate learning
- ✓ Better relationships with students
- ✓ Deeper understanding of student needs
- ✓ Increased learning time
- ✓ Increased teacher collaboration
- ✓ More comfort with data

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