

FUEL EDUCATION PAPER

BENCHMARK STUDY 2015

Best Practices for Implementing Successful
Online Programs



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Executive Summary

A [rigorous, engaging curriculum](#) is the foremost measure of success for any online and blended learning program, according to a national survey of educators experienced in leading these types of learning programs.

This key finding is among the noteworthy results of the **fourth annual research study** commissioned by Fuel Education and conducted by MDR's EdNET Insight service, a respected K-12 information and consulting service.

With more districts and schools turning to technology-driven learning programs to help solve a wide variety of educational challenges, the purpose of the study was to gather information about the best practices and priorities in successfully establishing and running online and blended learning programs in K-12 schools.

The study, conducted this past spring, polled school leaders across the country, including superintendents, assistant superintendents, curriculum and instructional coordinators, principals, and teachers who have direct experience with online and blended learning programs.

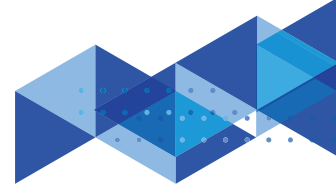
Here are the principal findings:

- 91 percent of all those surveyed cited a “rigorous and engaging curriculum” as the most important attribute for success. This edged out several other top factors, each of which also ranked highly: tracking and measuring student progress; initial and ongoing assessments; having instructors who are well-trained in delivering online courses; and providing the necessary guidance to students.
- On funding for online or blended learning programs, the vast majority of districts—92 percent—rely on their own district budget. State and federal funding came in a distant second and third, respectively, with other funding sources trailing further.

Noting that district budgets have not grown significantly since the recession, the funding for online learning programs may appear to be competing with other expenditures, according to Marci Goldberg, the principal analyst for EdNET Insight and the president of K-12 Market Advisors. However, Goldberg added, “As student demand for online and blended programs grows, it is easy to rationalize the investment in online learning as it may be critical for student retention within the district.”

- When it comes to solving immediate, near-term challenges, almost four-fifths of those surveyed said the primary reason they turned to such programs was to provide an alternative to students who are not successful in a traditional learning environment. Three other factors were tied for second: providing access to courses otherwise not available, providing flexibility for the time and place students can access courses, and offering a personalized learning experience.
- The top answer—91 percent—for how to gauge the overall quality of an online or blended program was “engaging and highly interactive curriculum.” This option edged out in-year academic growth, end of year test scores, and student participation.

Further details of these and additional results are provided in the following sections.



Key Results Additional Results & Appendix

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01

Attributes Important to Successful Implementation

The survey asked respondents to rate how important various attributes are to the success of implementing online courses and full-time programs on a seven-point scale.

The top three attributes for success are:

1. Offering a rigorous and engaging curriculum (91 percent)
2. Tracking student progress/adequate reporting tools (89 percent)
3. A tie (at 88 percent) between initial and ongoing assessments to benchmark and measure student progress, and instructors well-trained in delivering online courses.

In the next tier just below these top three, respondents gave high marks to providing students with enough training/clear expectations around their responsibilities to take courses online (87 percent), and teachers available to intervene/assist students in a timely manner when the students struggle (86 percent).

The ability to personalize or customize courses by either a third party or a teacher (79 percent); the use of tools to automate communication with students, parents, teachers, and administrators (75 percent); and having a dedicated administrator (71 percent) rounded out the group of top responses.

Success Factors: PSD Global Academy

Heather Hiebsch, the principal at PSD Global Academy—a high-performing school in Colorado that outranks many brick-and-mortar schools in state testing—agrees that a high-quality curriculum is critical for success. High-quality curricula are focused on standards and feature engaging multimedia elements, clear criteria and targets for success so students know where they stand, and the ability to be broken into units. Most importantly, the curricula must allow teachers to customize courses so they can make the curriculum their own.

The Academy uses a hybrid model where students spend 2-3 days per week working independently at home and come several days each week to a brick-and-mortar location for blended instruction. The school began seven years ago in a fully online model. It shifted to a blended approach after seeing tremendous growth in the number of students attending optional enrichment on campus. School leaders recognized the value for students of balancing at-home course work with a blended model when on campus.

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01

Attributes Important to Successful Implementation

Hiebsch also notes the strong impact on the program of ongoing assessments. Benchmark assessments have been essential to tracking student growth. Formative assessments have been critical to informing teachers on direct instructional needs when students are on campus. Student-accessible reporting tools have empowered students to take control of their learning by providing goals and showing progress. Lastly, a teaching staff that believes in the mission and power of having students in control of their learning brings it all together for success, she says.

Online Course & Full-Time Online Programs: Attributes That Are Important for Success (Rating of a 6 or 7 on a 7-point scale)

ATTRIBUTE	2015
Offering rigorous and engaging curriculum	91%
Tracking student progress/adequate reporting tools	89%
Initial and ongoing assessments to benchmark and measure student progress	88%
Instructors well trained in delivering online courses	88%
Providing students with enough training/clear expectations around their responsibilities to take courses online	87%
Teachers available to intervene/assist students in a timely manner when the students struggle	86%
Ability to personalize/customize courses with third party and teacher created content	79%
Tools to automate communication with students, parents, teachers, and administrators	75%
Dedicated administrator	71%

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01

Attributes Important to Successful Implementation

Success Factors: Bend-La Pine Schools

Meanwhile, Bend-La Pine Schools in Oregon has found the success of its online and blended programs stems from progress monitoring, clear expectations, and persistent human interaction. The district offers full-time online programs, supplemental online courses, and blended learning options.

“We cannot give enough credence to the value of human interaction,” says Tres Tyvand, the district’s student services coordinator. Its programs rely on dedicated, caring mentors or proctors who are willing to ask tough questions to ensure students are on track, she says.

One of its high schools serves a rural, high-poverty area where homes have no Internet or computers, so students depend on the school’s computer lab. The lab’s mentor has been responsible for more than 600 credits earned by the students. “She never sits down,” Tyvand says. “She is constantly asking kids how they are doing, asking to see their progress, and acts like a tutor when needed.”

Enrolling students receive clear expectations about course requirements. The district also requires pre-enrollment activities where students must demonstrate prerequisite knowledge like computer and self-management skills—litmus tests that serve as early-warning indicators of whether a student will be a good fit.

02

Funding Sources for Online and Blended Learning

The survey responses show the overwhelming majority of districts, 92 percent, use the district budget to fund their online and blended learning programs. Twenty-four percent use state funding and 21 percent turn to federal formula funding.

Funding of Online/Blended Learning Programs

FUNDING SOURCE	PERCENTAGE
District budget	92%
State funding (competitive grants, funding for online courses)	24%
Federal formula funding (Title I, eRate, Special Ed)	21%
Federal competitive grants (Race to the Top)	12%
Local funding (PTA, local foundation)	7%
Other (parents pay, students pay, tuition, Intermediate School District)	10%

Consistent with the survey results, PSD Global Academy is funded primarily through district funds. It is treated like any other school in the Poudre School District, receiving the same per pupil funding as traditional schools.

Hiebsch is quick to dispel the myth that online and blended learning programs do not require an investment in high-quality teachers.

“The myth says that fewer teachers are needed because the students learn online. However, a school still needs to invest in high-quality teachers. Even if a teacher is not physically in class with her students, she must have time to monitor and prepare a unique lesson for face-to-face time rather than relying on last year’s lesson plans,” she says.

03

Near-Term Challenges Resolved with Online and Blended Learning

On the all-important question of why districts and schools are turning to online learning for their most pressing, immediate challenges, nearly four-fifths (79 percent) of the school leaders surveyed said it’s because they need to provide an alternative for students who are not succeeding in traditional brick-and-mortar learning environments.

Three other factors tied for second at 66 percent:

- Providing access to courses otherwise not available
- Providing flexibility for the time and place students can access courses
- Offering a personalized learning experience

Rounding out the top reasons, 59 percent of respondents cited retaining students in the district, while 57 percent want to improve graduation rates.

Near-Term Challenges Resolved with Fully Online or Blended Learning Programs

CHALLENGES	PERCENTAGE
Provide an alternative to students not successful in a traditional environment	79%
Provide access to courses otherwise not available	66%
Give flexibility for the time and place courses can be accessed by students	66%
Offer a personalized learning experience	66%
Retain students in the school/district	59%
Improve graduation rates	57%

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03

Near-Term Challenges Resolved with Online and Blended Learning

Bend-La Pine Schools is driven by the goal of providing students and families with learning options and schedule flexibility. The district is dedicated to offering a the best possible learning experience personalized for each student, whether they have scheduling conflicts from athletics, travel, family, or health needs, or whether they have unique pacing needs.

PSD Global Academy initially focused on improving graduation rates and retaining students in the district when the school began seven years ago as a fully online program. Now that the program has evolved into a hybrid and blended model serving at-risk students and those interested in enrichment as well, personalization is the main challenge that blended learning resolves for the district.

04

Measuring Quality in Online Programs

A high-quality curriculum again rose to the top of school leaders' estimation when it came to the best way to measure the overall quality of an online or blended learning program, with 91 percent saying “an engaging and highly interactive curriculum” was first and foremost. Coupled with its ranking as the top attribute for program quality, these results make it clear that an interactive curriculum that engages and challenges students is a top priority.

In second place, 89 percent rated student demonstrating significant academic progress as a measure of quality, while 88 percent chose high student attendance and active participation in the course.

Measurement of Quality in an Online Program Extremely Important

(Rating of 6 or 7 on a 7-point scale)

MEASUREMENT	PERCENTAGE
The curriculum is engaging and highly interactive	91%
The student demonstrates significant academic progress in the year	89%
The student has high attendance and active participation in the course	88%
The student scores at or above the level of other similar student on end of year standardized tests	67%
The student passes the course	65%
High level of student and/or family satisfaction	63%
The student re-enrolls in other online courses after completing the current online course	49%

05

Types of Online Learning Programs

Respondents were asked what type of online learning program they offer in their district. Of those that offer some type of online program, 94% of respondents offer online courses, similar to the 2014 response of 93%. In 2015, 29% offer full-time online programs compared to the 34% that offered full-time online programs last year.

For the purposes of this survey, online courses were defined as those that offer students original credit or credit recovery courses in which curriculum is delivered primarily over the Internet in either a fully online or blended learning environment (such as a learning lab). These may include students taking a single course or 2–3 courses, but they are not full-time online programs.

Full-time online programs serve full-time students with curriculum delivered primarily over the Internet for 4 or more courses. These programs may be administered in a fully online or blended learning environment.

Online Learning Models by District Size—2015

PROGRAM TYPE	2015	DISTRICT SIZE		
	TOTAL	<1,000	1,000-10,000	10,000+
Online Courses	94%	100%	89%	100%
Full-Time Online Program	29%	8%	36%	43%

06

Blended vs. Fully Online Learning

Blended learning was the primary model for online learning programs among the districts in the survey at 63 percent, while 37 percent primarily use a fully online learning model.

Blended learning is defined as the student learns at least in part at a supervised brick-and-mortar location away from home and at least part of the curriculum is delivered online with some element of student control over time, place, path, and/or pace.

Fully online learning is the student learns outside of the brick-and-mortar location and the majority of the curriculum is delivered online with some element of student control of time, place, path and/or pace.

Online Learning Models by District Size—2015

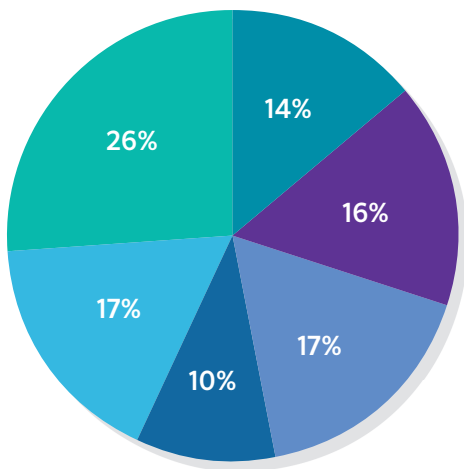
ONLINE LEARNING MODEL	2015	DISTRICT SIZE		
	TOTAL	<1,000	1,000-10,000	10,000+
Blended Learning	63%	75%	61%	62%
Fully Online Learning	37%	25%	39%	38%

Survey Methodology

Fuel Education created the 2015 survey with feedback from MDR. An invitation to respond to the survey was sent in April and May. The email solicitation was sent to educators from both MDR and Fuel Education databases. The survey screened for districts that have experience offering online or blended learning programs.

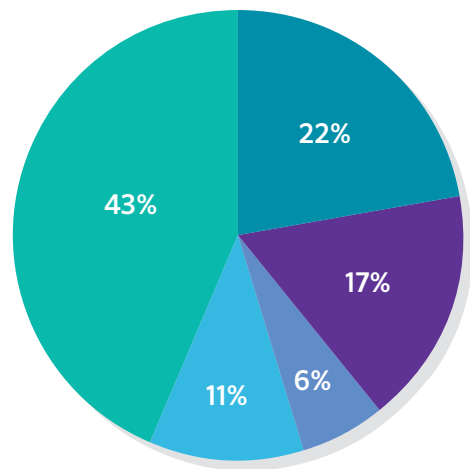
Eighty-one respondents completed the survey. The district enrollment of the final sample is:

NUMBER OF ENROLLED STUDENTS IN DISTRICT



- 499 or fewer students
- 500-999 students
- 1,000-2,499 students
- 2,500-4,999 students
- 5,000-9,999 students
- 10,000+ students

METRO STATUS



- Rural
- Suburban
- Urban
- Small Town
- Unclassified

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