

Thinking of Flipping?

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Policy Considerations for School Leaders

Educators interested in ways to use technology to improve student learning are exploring the idea of a “flipped” classroom. Sometimes classified as a type of “blended learning,” student work in flipped classrooms reverses the traditional order of instruction. Teacher presentations are recorded on video or presentations that students watch outside of the classroom on a computer, while homework assignments are completed in the classroom where students interact with the teacher and their peers.

The flipped classroom is a fairly new educational idea, and there is not a lot of research to indicate its success, but its supporters predict several possible benefits:

- Greater differentiation, allowing students to move at their own pace.
- Improved student attendance and engagement.
- More productive interaction between teachers and students.

Flipped instruction is not a magic bullet to improve student learning, but it is an idea with promise. Careful consideration of policy issues can help leaders make decisions that support a school’s mission to help all students learn to their potential.

Staffing

In the current atmosphere of ever shrinking budget, districts are looking for ways to hire fewer teachers and may see flipping as a solution since teachers are spending less time in front of the classroom. If students are to benefit from the teacher-student interaction during the in-classroom experiences, however, they must have access to a licensed, expert teacher, just as students do in a traditional classroom. Once presentations have been created for students to view at home, theoretically, teachers may have more time to meet with students in the classroom. But reflective teachers in flipped environments, just like traditional teachers who redo student activities each year to improve them, are likely use each teaching experience to make their demonstrations more focused, interesting, or useful. Teachers of flipped classrooms would still have the responsibilities of grading student work, designing student activities, and communicating with parents, so it doesn’t seem likely that the flipped model would result in the need for fewer teachers.

Instructional Methods

Flipped classrooms are student-centered classrooms. Some teachers may enjoy creating presentations for online viewing while others will miss the “audience” of a classroom full of students. While an argument can be made that more effective teachers are less concerned about what they do than what their students do, the fact remains that not all teachers will warm to a flipped environment. A careful selection of participants will certainly increase the chances for success.

Access to Technology

Naturally, if students do not watch teacher or other types of presentations in the classroom, they need access to technology outside of school. A stable Internet connection is critical for participation in flipped classrooms. A survey of the availability of broadband access is a critical early step when considering this approach to blended learning.

Whether students have the access they need to participate in flipped learning is a concern of equity, as well as of funding. Certainly, if flipping is a good thing, students without home broadband computer access deserve a flipped classroom experience as much as their more affluent peers. In some cases, schools may set up computer labs or provide individual laptops for students in flipped classrooms to use on the days they don't physically attend class. More computers and increased online traffic also requires upgraded infrastructure and support, which, naturally, cost money.

Technology for teachers is also an issue when considering a flipped learning environment. Inexpensive software and equipment can be used to create presentations that replace teacher lectures and demonstrations. Additional out-of-classroom experiences also may be added over time. Some expense may be necessary for technology purchases and training to prepare teachers for their new role.

“Seat Time” Regulations

Flipped classrooms may place schools in conflict with state and federal regulations regarding attendance. Traditionally, concepts such as “seat time” or time spent in a physical classroom have often figured into funding formulas and the awarding of credit. A flipped classroom where students spend a significant amount of time doing relevant schoolwork outside of the physical classroom demands a different way of evaluating progress. Most educators recognize the shortcomings of the seat-time approach and adopting regulations for flipped classrooms could be a step toward a more authentic approach throughout education.

One of the greatest advantages of a flipped classroom is the ability of students to proceed through content at their own pace. Unfortunately, the current Carnegie unit organization of secondary schools makes it difficult for students to receive official recognition of their progress outside of the traditional, semester-bound sequence of courses and exams, a practice that enables practices such as social promotions, as well as keeping more able students from advancing. Policymakers need better ways of documenting proficiency in content knowledge if flipped classrooms are to realize their potential benefit for differentiation.

What and When to Flip

Is flipping right for all grade levels? Does it work equally well in all subjects? Elementary grades are less governed by the traditional method of awarding credits, and, therefore, have more flexibility. Although some programs exist in primary grades, most educators believe that younger students make better progress with more time with their teachers and less time online. The majority of flipped classrooms are at the middle or high school level where students have developed more independent learning habits and are more proficient with technology.

In general, although certainly not exclusively, world language, science, and math are the subject areas most often flipped. This could be because the content in these courses is more linear, making differentiated progress easier. Unlike language arts and the social sciences, language, math, and science students are more likely to learn skills and content that depends on previous learning. Math, in particular, lends itself well to the presentation/homework paradigm that can be easily modified into a flipped format.

Open Questions

Since flipping is still in its early days, many questions about the practice still remain unanswered.

- How many flipped classes should a student be allowed to take? Is there a maximum number?
- Can standards, objectives, and assessments be modified to take advantage of flipped instruction?
- How can the concept of the flipped classroom be explained to schools and the communities that support them?
- What are the long-term implications from the flipped classroom for teacher preparation, teacher training, policy making, and student learning?
- How does the flipped classroom model fit into a district's online learning policies?
- In a time of limited resources, how can students be fairly and successfully assigned to flipped classrooms?

Resources on Policy and the Flipped Classroom

Blended Learning

A policy brief from the National Education Association that includes information about flipped classrooms.

Flipping' classrooms: Does it make sense?

A blog posting about flipped classrooms that includes the perspectives of school leaders, classroom teachers, and students.