

Personalized Blended Learning Plays a Starring Role at Pasadena ISD

“The factory model is not productive. We’ve been moving toward blended learning and will eventually get to personalized learning for everyone,” says Vickie Vallet-McWilliams, director of instructional technology at Texas’ Pasadena Independent School District (PISD).

To make the shift to blended/personalized learning, PISD has held teacher academies and summer training sessions so that teachers learn everything from why this type of learning is so effective to how to work with real-time data to individualize lessons. Just like any large district, some teachers are further along the learning curve than others. Valet-McWilliams says the teachers who are already teaching in a blended or personalized environment tell her that their students love to learn this way and that they hope to never go back to the factory model again.

Of course, a shift of this magnitude does not happen overnight. Here are some of the steps the district has taken.



Step 1: Get Devices in Students’ Hands

Six years ago, PISD did a 1:1 pilot with 300 seventh-grade students. “Other districts had been trying 1:1. We wanted to see what it could do for our students,” says chief technology officer Steve Wentz. Administrators chose 11-inch HP netbooks because they were small, mobile, not too costly, and easy to use.

The first year went well, so in year two the students brought their netbooks to eighth grade and the new 7th-graders got their own devices. PISD was beginning to understand how to ramp up the 1:1, figuring out student usage fees, a maintenance procedure, and a strategy to educate and involve parents. “We went through all the pain points on a small scale,” says Wentz. Teachers learned how to integrate the netbooks into their lessons during the spring that preceded their pilots, so they had several months to prepare. Many of them met during the summer to work out details amongst themselves.

In Year Three, teachers and district-level curriculum specialists began to rewrite the curriculum to make more sense in a 1:1 environment. The 1:1 program expanded to include grades 7 and 8 at additional intermediate schools. In year four, all 10 intermediate schools, two ninth grades, and a new career & technical high school (CTHS) went 1:1.

As of 2015, all the intermediate and high school grades have take-home 1:1 programs and an in-school pilot has started at three middle schools (grades 5-6). The in-school 1:1 is basically the same 1:1 program except students do not bring the computers home.



Step 2: Update the Device as the Program Expands

In 2014, the 4,000 HP netbooks were passed down to the middle schools to make room for a new device for the upper grades. Wentz and Karen Hickman, the deputy superintendent for curriculum, had attended a Microsoft meeting where they learned about a school

using digital ink; it inspired them to bring it to PISD. The new device, a Dell Venue 11, is a Windows 8 tablet with a digital ink active stylus that makes it much easier for math and art classes to participate in the 1:1. In addition, the district opted to purchase keyboards to accompany the devices, allowing users to adjust their input method based on the task at hand.

Wentz says they went with Windows for a number of reasons. "We are comfortable with a Windows environment. We use it for our state testing, it runs the programs we need, and we can manage it with our current tools," he says. The Dell Venue 11 was the perfect size – portable, and light. "We wanted teachers to be able to move around, so carrying a larger laptop didn't make sense. With a smaller tablet they can undock and walk around." PISD also introduced WiDi capability so teachers can project wirelessly on their projectors.

Today, more than 18,000 students in grades 7 through 12 have Dell Venue 11 tablets and there are more than 2,000 Dell Latitude 3150 notebooks in grades 5 and 6. At the elementary (K-4) level, there are approximately five computers in every classroom, as well as laptop carts that were passed down from the middle schools. "By the time we get every middle school into the 1:1, the elementary schools will almost be 1:1," says Wentz.

Step 3: Move Towards Personalization

"Our 1:1 is leading us to personalized learning, where children learn at their own pace and teachers use data for immediate recovery," says Wentz. "We're trying to give as much flexibility and mobility as we can."

In 2014, three PISD schools (one middle, one intermediate, and one high school) were selected to partner with **Summit Public Schools**, a charter management organization. Teachers in the three schools attended Summit Basecamp and learned how to bring personalized learning to their

classrooms. "It's exciting to see how quickly students and teachers have embraced this new approach to learning. We are seeing a tremendous amount of success within eight weeks of implementation," says Valet-McWilliams.

In order to eventually replicate the Summit model across the district, Valet-McWilliams continues, "we're focusing on a lot of PD, reworking the curriculum around blended learning, and changing the culture."

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There is a lot of evidence already that the new approach is paying off. Kelly Cook-Costley was an assistant principal at Shaw Middle School in September 2013 when she and Rebecca Dietz implemented a blended format in Dietz's sixth-grade science class. Dietz placed the curriculum into a learning management system and broke the class into small groups, working one-on-one with a child who needed intervention while other students worked independently online. Reaching a classroom filled with different types of learners is incredibly challenging, but the blended model allowed Dietz to address everyone's needs. The results were outstanding. Many of the English language learners started out with failing grades but 90 percent passed the end-of-course exam. "They were way ahead of the district average," says Dietz. "Through the blended/personalized model we were able to fill in the gaps."

That summer, Shaw Middle School hosted summer school for fifth- and sixth-grade students. They had to pass standardized tests to be promoted. Teachers taught in the blended style because they had a

mixed age group with general education, special education, multilingual, and advanced students in the same classroom. Blended learning allowed them to differentiate for every level and population, and the students saw huge gains, which is not typical for summer school. The next year, the whole science department went blended. They shared their curriculum via the Schoology LMS and curriculum specialists made sure everyone stayed on track.

Over at Carter Lomax Middle School (a Summit partner school), the personalized movement is in full gear. "In the past, we had more than 1,000 students and were busting at the seams," says Principal Norma Penny. "Teachers were working so hard, but we weren't meeting our students' needs." She learned about Summit Schools and used campus funds to visit. Carter Lomax is one of the three PISD schools that were selected from a pool of over 150 schools around the nation to participate in Summit Basecamp. The partnership required teachers and administrators to attend a two-week training program in California. Because Summit operates under the Common Core and Texas does not, the Summit Partner schools' teachers had to rebuild the curriculum. "They spent so much time and energy, but now our students are excelling. Some need more support but the teacher has the opportunity to do one-to-one mentoring. The children get more individual time," says Penny.



Jordan Arbuckle, a sixth-grade math teacher at Carter Lomax, says her students start their days by watching videos or PowerPoints and taking notes. While that's going on, she does quick check-ins or one-on-ones. Next they work on cross-curricular projects to solve real-world problems, perfecting their collaboration and social skills. Later, it's time for reading and math calculations on Khan Academy. Then it's more project time with a different group. Students end their days with another round of personalized learning (using videos and other digital content), during which time Arbuckle pulls aside small groups of students, based on up-to-the-minute diagnostic data, to go over anything they've missed. "The teacher is always the facilitator. This format lets us use the best practices that we know are effective," she says.

"Having time for one-to-one conferences is terrific," adds Dietz. "I can tell you more about my students from conferencing with them and getting to know them than I ever could before."

Arbuckle agrees. "Most teachers don't get into teaching because they love paperwork. It's because we want to change lives. Building those relationships and knowing what the students are into helps them understand how they'll use what they're learning. Blended and personalized instruction lets teachers get back to teaching."

For Cook-Costley, the real-time data makes all the difference. "With the online system, everything is graded automatically. When you don't have to grade assessments or daily assignments you're a more effective teacher. You're provided with activities that reach all modalities so students can choose the best one. They determine what type of learner they are and how they learn best."



At A Glance

Pasadena ISD has

- 63 schools: 35 elementary, 8 middle, 10 intermediate, 5 high (+Career & Technical High School), 4 alternative.
- 54,382 students: 82% Hispanic, 7% African American, 7% White, 3% Asian.
- 26% Bilingual/ESL; 18% Career & Tech, 9% Special Education, 5% Gifted.
- An 89% Graduation Rate.

Pasadena ISD high school students earned top places in national and international Career and Technology competitions.

Pasadena ISD was named a leader in music education for five consecutive years by a national survey sponsored by the NAMM Foundation and its AMC division.

In 2011-2012, every district sixth-grader visited a college campus after completing the Kids2College curriculum.

Infrastructure

More than 18,000 students in grades 7 through 12 have a Dell Venue 11 that they are allowed to take home. It's a Windows 8 touch tablet with a digital ink active stylus and a keyboard.

More than 2,000 students in grades 5 and 6 have Dell Latitude 3150 notebooks that they leave at school. This is a three-campus 1:1 pilot.

At the elementary (K-4) level, there are approximately five computers in every classroom, as well as laptop carts.

There are more than 350 Promethean boards in classrooms around the district.

Learn More

Website: [PISD Technology Services](#)

Website: [Summit Public Schools](#) where you can learn more about the "Connect" program that three schools—Carter Lomax Middle School, Thompson Intermediate, and Frank Dobie High School—are involved with.

Video: [A Day in the Life Of a Connect student at Carter Lomax.](#)

Video: [Juan's Day: a portrait of a Pasadena ISD student.](#)