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Amid Skepticism, Blended-Learning Models Aim to Transform Teachers' Work

By Anthony Rebora

Nancy Gardner, a veteran English teacher at Mooresville High School in North Carolina, admits that when her school district launched a laptop-oriented instructional program six years ago, she "may not even have known enough [about the approach] to be skeptical." But at this point, she's glad she kept an open mind.

Gardner says the **now-lauded 1:1 laptop program** in the Mooresville Graded School District—under which students in grades 4 through 12 do a significant portion of their learning on district-provided MacBooks—has had distinct benefits for teachers as well as their charges.

"There were serendipitous results," she said. "It immediately broke down barriers for collaborative work between teachers." With the teachers now looking to leverage digital resources and tech tips, "Everyone began to share information a lot more than we used to. This cut across disciplines, which was nice. We were not as isolated."

Gardner also credits the laptop program with spurring teachers in her school to take "a more-student centered" approach to instruction. "You see teachers circulating more, not doing as much lecturing," she said. "You don't see people standing at the front of the room."

In Gardner's own classroom, students sit at tables rather than in rows of desks. They spend the majority of their time in class working on their laptops, often researching background resources for literary projects, collaborating on Google Docs, or working on online skills exercises or assessments. Gardner leads periodic whole-class discussions and works with students in small groups or one-on-one.

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And if the laptop program has fostered a "more engaging way of teaching," Gardner said, it has also opened up opportunities for new modes of professional development. Teachers at Mooresville High meet regularly in professional-learning teams to share strategies and analyze student-progress data gleaned from online formative assessments. In the summer, teachers themselves lead training sessions on digitally oriented instruction. Gardner, a department chair, has also led staff-development workshops in other districts now attempting to make the leap to technology-based instructional models.

"So it has opened up leadership opportunities for teachers," she said. "It's always important for teachers to be able to lead. It creates a renewed sense of professionalism."

New Career Possibilities?

In many respects, Gardner's experience approximates the expectations of digital-education advocates who say that blended- or personalized-learning arrangements can enhance not only student learning but teachers' working conditions and job satisfaction as well. In such arrangements, students do more of their classroom learning individually on computers—thus, proponents say, potentially giving teachers greater flexibility and new opportunities both professionally and pedagogically.

A **report** issued last year by Digital Learning Now, the policy arm of former Florida Governor Jeb Bush's Foundation for Excellence in Education, argues that, under the right conditions, blended-learning programs can significantly improve "teachers' experiences as empowered professionals." The authors say that such programs can give teachers more time for collaboration and professional development, help them tap dynamic educational content, and allow them to better cater to students' individual learning needs. By delivering some content to students virtually and facilitating new structures for the use of classroom time, they add, tech-infused learning models can also extend the reach and impact of expert teachers and create new paths for career advancement in schools.

While some of those claims are largely speculative at this point, blended-learning advocates say that many teachers are already seeing advantages from integrating online-learning components into their classrooms. "Teachers who are in schools that are getting blended learning right are able to get back to what they want to do, working with small groups, focusing on individual students, and using data to differentiate instruction," said Carri Schneider, the director of policy and research at

Nancy Gardner

Getting Smart, a digital-education advocacy group, and a co-author of the Digital Learning Now report. They're also gaining "new opportunities for leadership," she said, particularly in connection with professional development and content-area expertise.

'Flipped' Out

Even so, many teachers remain skeptical of school and district efforts to merge instruction with digital devices, fearing top-down technology mandates that they say could reduce their control over what's taught in classrooms and minimize the importance of personal interaction between teachers and students.

Reports of dubiously designed digital-learning initiatives—including the **problem-plagued rollout** of a student-iPad program in the Los Angeles Unified School District's last fall—have fueled such concerns. But some teachers have personal experiences to rely on as well.

Mary Porter, a veteran chemistry teacher at Revere High School in Massachusetts, says that an iPad-based "flipped classroom" program introduced last year at her school, far from being a boon to teachers, has largely been a source of frustration for them.

Under the program, the teachers are expected to create lessons for their students to complete on their school-provided iPads, while reserving more class time for small-group projects and one-on-one instruction. According to Porter, most teachers in her school received roughly three-and-a-half days of grant-funded professional development from outside consultants on the new instructional model.

But in her view, the training didn't go nearly far enough to help them adapt to the prescribed changes. Meanwhile, Porter said, the learning-management system and other software applications supporting the program have been glitch-ridden, and are ill-equipped to satisfy students' need for personal feedback. Teachers have also had a difficult time keeping students on task with their online work, which has further complicated the instructional model.

"I think everyone is frustrated trying to make it work," Porter said, adding that, in her view, school technology funds could be better spent on specific learning resources selected by teachers.

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While not commenting directly on Porter's experience, Getting Smart's Schneider said that many schools and districts attempting to integrate digital-learning platforms make the mistake of "leading with the technology rather than with their goals for teachers and students." That can undermine the potential success of the program and the objective of empowering teachers, she said.

"As with any good leadership initiative," Schneider added, "teachers need to be closely involved in the decisions [around a blended-learning program] and what it means for them."

Andrew Calkins, the deputy director for Next Generation Learning Challenges, a grant-making group that supports educational technology initiatives, said that many schools also fail to make the structural changes necessary to support teachers' transition to digital- or personalized-learning models. "When teachers are still working in what feels like a traditional model and suddenly this new component is added but nothing else changes, you're likely to hear dissatisfaction and for good reason," Calkins said.

Depending on the extent of the program being implemented, he said, the school-organizational changes required can range from providing increased professional development and technology support to reconfiguring daily schedules and teachers' roles and responsibilities.

Calkins added that schools setting up digital-learning models as a way of saving money or cutting back on staff are "going into it for the wrong reasons and won't have good results."

For her part, Mooresville High's Gardner said that educators' satisfaction with digital-learning models depends on schools maintaining a healthy balance between the power of instructional technology and the value of teachers' content expertise and interpersonal skills. "This is not an online class," she stressed with respect to her own teaching. "I do not put my curriculum on the laptop. It's simply a tool."

She added, "The laptop can't do teachable moments."

A 'Playlist' Curriculum

And yet some teachers in arguably even more cutting-edge settings than Mooresville might argue that, in the right instructional context, putting more of the curriculum online can create additional opportunities for such moments.

Science teacher Brian Johnson says as much about his experience at Summit Denali, a newly minted grades 6-12 charter school in Sunnyvale, Calif., that's oriented around self-directed learning. Students at the school, which is part of the Summit charter school network in California, spend 10 to 11 hours per week working individually on online curriculum "playlists" that have been curated by their teachers. The playlists include lesson resources, checks for understanding, and formative assessments. Each student also has an online personalized-learning plan that helps teachers monitor his or her progress and assist where necessary.

With their content-learning partially covered by the playlists, the students are able to spend four hours every day in teacher-facilitated "project time"—in which they work collaboratively on experiments, presentations, or interdisciplinary projects.

Johnson, a former high school teacher and principal, says the school's unconventional model—which also allots

teachers two full weeks for professional development after every eight-week term—allows him to better understand students' particular learning needs and spend more time giving them personal feedback.

It also gives him greater flexibility to provide what he sees as richer, more authentic learning experiences. "I always wanted to get kids to become good scientists, but I had to spend so much time just getting through the content," he said. "Now I have time to help them learn those scientific skills, like preparing labs and developing experiments and analyzing information."

"I feel reengerized," Johnson added. "I feel like I'm so much more effective now, like I'm really teaching them what they need to know."

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