Redlands eAcademy: A Blended Learning Success Story
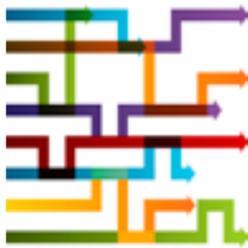
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On June 9, 2015, students and their families, well-wishers, and faculty and staff from the Redlands eAcademy joined to honor their graduating seniors in a commencement ceremony, like many schools across the nation. And like many other school graduations, there were speeches, songs, tears, applause, and great excitement about the future for these eight graduates and their peers in the eAcademy. But this graduation was special, because the Redlands eAcademy is not like other schools. At one point in their educational careers, several of these students may not have thought they were going to participate in this important life event, that is, until they enrolled in the Redlands eAcademy. The story of these students' graduation—the school's first graduation—is the result of a unique approach to meeting the needs of students who might not otherwise have reached this important milestone.

The Redlands eAcademy is an accredited, K–12 public school in the Redlands Unified School District (USD) in California, which hugs Interstate 10 about equal distance from Los Angeles to the west and Joshua Tree National Park to the east. It is unique because the school uses a blended learning model that has exceeded all expectations. The school was originally conceived in 2009 as a totally online school in response to an increase in the number of students leaving district schools and seeking online learning opportunities elsewhere. Like many virtual schools across the country, the intent was to keep students in the district while also encouraging students from other districts to consider attending the online school in Redlands.

Like many school districts considering sponsoring virtual schools, Redlands USD saw potential financial benefits from offering online instruction. Because funding is dependent on student attendance—in California called "the current expense of education per average daily attendance," or ADA for short—retaining students and keeping their associated ADA in the district was a prime concern. Drawing students from outside of the district, along with their ADA

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funds, was a potential secondary benefit. There were potential pitfalls as well. Many virtual school programs across the country have received negative publicity—not to mention a number of lawsuits levied against virtual school providers in multiple states (Adams, 2015; O'Connor, 2015). Complaints include lack of rigor, poor student performance, overextended teacher workloads, and lack of accountability measures commonly used to evaluate brick-and-mortar schools. The Redlands USD took an important step in the development of the eAcademy that has avoided some of these well-documented pitfalls of online learning. Instead of an entirely online school, the Redlands eAcademy embodies the philosophy of a blended learning model that still provides students with flexibility and independence promised by online learning but pairs that with interactions with teachers and peers on a school campus. The focus is on student learning, yet other benefits have followed.

This descriptive study provides an overview of the Redlands eAcademy using as an organizing framework the *Blended Learning Readiness and Progress Rubric* (hereafter called "the DSRN rubric"), developed by the District Reform Support Network (2015) for the U.S. Department of Education. The network provides technical assistance to Race to the Top—District grantees and published the DSRN rubric to help educators plan for and implement blended learning initiatives. It is based on local, state, and national research and public feedback from practitioners, educators, and business leaders; and it provides assessment and action guidance in five key topics or "constructs": (a) leadership, (b) professional learning, (c) technology and infrastructure, (d) content and curriculum, and (e) data and assessment. The following study is organized around these five core constructs from the DSRN rubric with some consolidation of indicators. This is not a rating or evaluation of the Redlands eAcademy based on the DSRN rubric. Instead, the DSRN rubric is used to frame this study and to provide a structure for others to use when planning for or implementing their own blended learning initiatives.

Leadership

As with any effort focused on change, capacity building, or reform, leaders play a critical role in steering the effort towards hoped-for outcomes. As might be expected, a key indicator of the DSRN rubric under the construct of leadership is a well-defined and clearly communicated vision that is shared by all stakeholders. In a blended learning environment, that vision should describe how the model selected is expected to help achieve desired learning and programmatic outcomes. School and district leaders are also responsible for developing and/or administering policies to support the effort and for taking steps so the effort can be sustained over time, if found effective, or modifying strategies when necessary.

Model

Most descriptions of blended learning models are drawn from the work of the Clayton Christensen Institute for Disruptive Innovation, which has modified its original six models of blended learning, reducing the number to four primary models with some variations (see iNACOL, 2015, for descriptions of the models.) As the literature on the impact of blended learning models emerges (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2014; Murphy et al., 2014), a majority of these reports focus on models in which the brick-and-mortar classroom is the focus, most incorporating a **rotation model** in which students

rotate through in-person and online learning. Students often attend a brick-and-mortar school five days a week, but learning opportunities incorporate blended aspects during or after school. (For additional examples, see the schools and districts profiled by the Clayton Christensen Institute and Evergreen Education Group, 2015; and by Page, 2015.)

Many of the blended learning programs profiled in the literature to date are based on three models—rotation, flex, and a la carte—in which learning primarily occurs on a brick-and-mortar campus. The Redlands eAcademy, however, bases its learning delivery on the **enriched virtual model** (iNACOL, 2015), which gives greater emphasis to distance learning. Perhaps because it was first conceived as an online program, the Redlands eAcademy relies on online presentation of foundational content off-site; that content is then supplemented by on-campus activities with a highly qualified teacher. In the other models, students are often meeting with a teacher daily, but at the Redlands eAcademy, elementary and middle school students meet with a teacher six hours a week and high school students meet three hours a week.

According to the eAcademy's principal, David Finley, "The goal is to provide a context of having both individualized learning—the ability to have a more individualized approach for that student—and also having a socially engaging environment that is achieved through human contact. We do both." Finley emphasizes his belief that significant learning occurs within the context of relationships. "There are ways to do that online," he notes. "My children do that, but I still think that there's a benefit to face-to-face time with someone who knows your name, sees your face, and talks to you directly. There's a rootedness to the physical place—especially for online learners. They need to get up and meet people. It makes it meaningful. It extends the learning. What makes [the model] successful is the teachers, the people, the context. Parents know someone cares about their kids."

At this time, teachers are hourly employees, not salaried, which has its pluses and minuses. Working with hourly employees provides some flexibility in terms of scheduling and recruitment. The position is ideal for those who may not want a full-time position, but the hourly rate presents some challenges, especially in ensuring stable employment for those who want a full-time position. The teachers at the eAcademy do qualify for benefits based on the amount of time they work, but the hourly pay rate remains fairly constant from year to year; teachers do not move up a pay scale in the way that salaried employees would.

The school relies on online content providers for the initial delivery of instruction, which is critical for managing the work. Because teachers have so little time with students each week, the online content provider supports a variety of important activities. These systems can pre-assess students, select activities or design learning paths based on the outcomes of those assessments, serve as a learning management system for students to store work, complete summative assessments, and provide real-time data on student performance for parents and teachers. The school has used content and services from three commercial providers, but the faculty and staff keep an eye on new products when they attend conferences or professional development sessions, view websites or other news services, or converse with other educators.

The Redlands USD also relies on a student information system commonly used in California; grade reporting and other important student data are managed by this system.

The district also has its own Google Apps for Education (GAFE) domain and all of the eAcademy faculty, staff, and students are assigned their own district Google account. The sharing of data between the multiple systems is not seamless at this time and requires multiple sign-ons. This can cause confusion for parents and students, who may see incomplete grade calculations in a content management system because it does not incorporate graded activities that occur offline.

Students spend time on-campus in periods called "blocks," seen as critical to the success of the model. Activities vary during the blocks, with teachers sometimes working with individuals or small groups. Teachers can review particularly troublesome or difficult concepts from the online content or supplement it with their own content or instruction, which is especially important in science classes with their required labs. Supporting the writing process is another activity commonly focused on during the blocks. Planning for the blocks can be a challenge, as teachers often teach multiple grades—some teach multiple subjects—and enrollment is not based on grade level. The eAcademy teachers have learned to be collaborative and are very collegial, and so have become adept at being flexible during the blocks in order to best meet the most pressing needs of their students. Planning for and leveraging the use of the blocks continues to be a concerted professional growth effort for the faculty and administration.

Figure 1. Block time can look fairly traditional in some cases, such as with these elementary eAcademy students.

Students new to the eAcademy have time at the beginning of their tenure where they spend some of their block time on campus learning how to use the online learning system with support from teachers. Teachers also help younger students transition to more independent learning online, especially at the middle-school level. Finley notes that transition is "a process of helping them to develop the skills of managing their time, being self-directed, and persistent. They have to learn how to be an online student." Students who cannot make the transition are not good candidates for the model.

Vision

One of the strongest components of the eAcademy's success is the strength of the school's vision for blended learning and its understanding by faculty, staff, and parents. This vision is embodied by the school's principal, who routinely communicates this vision during meetings with these stakeholders and who supports two-way communication online, in person, and through emails, phone, and texts. He purposefully acts as an advocate for his students, his staff, and the program on and off campus. His passion for the school and his belief in the importance of the blended learning model are shared by faculty and parents.

During Year 2, faculty and parents described remarkably similar visions for a successful eAcademy and the components that make it happen during role-alike visioning sessions. Faculty note and parents confirm that dedicated and motivated faculty and administration make the school a success and that students are provided significant voice and choice in planning and directing their own learning as well as determining school activities. This student-directed learning is achieved through small class sizes—the current limit is a 10-to-1 student-to-teacher ratio—that allow significant interaction when students are on campus. Parents confirm that the small class sizes and the one-on-one sessions with teachers are a key component of success. Both groups emphasized that flexibility offered by the model is key. Teachers further reported "a triangle of accountability" involving parents, students, and faculty and staff at the school; and parents agree that their engagement in their child's learning is an important component of the vision for the school. Parents express ownership in the process and want to be involved to make the school successful.

Communication and Collaboration

As noted above, varied means of communication are used on and off campus. Because the school is dependent on online interaction, the school leverages a variety of online communications to support student learning and to interact with parents. Because much of the foundational learning occurs off campus, parents are encouraged to interact with faculty and staff. Parents noted that the eAcademy's website is helpful and allows parents to sign up for email or text reminders for school events and activities. Some needed help or guidance on using digital technologies to communicate, but parents also noted how easy it is to contact staff by phone.

The communication doesn't rely solely on technology, however; and the principal encourages routine communication through frequent parent meetings on campus. These meetings allow both parents and staff to share curricular and programmatic concerns, to discuss goals, and to get feedback from each other. Parents *must* be involved in curricular issues, especially with younger students, as much of the initial instruction takes place at home. Thus, when parents enroll their children in the eAcademy, they are making a commitment to being involved in their children's learning. As a result, the school has a level of parent involvement that is enviable. The strong parent support reached a zenith this year with the establishment of the school's PTSA, its charter and officers approved by the California State PTSA.

The structure of the school lends itself to parents being involved in their children's learning, especially with the younger students. The teachers sequence instruction and help determine assignments, but the parents of elementary school students deliver much of the content at home. Parents report to teachers about which activities did or didn't work and whether things worked well in the allotted time. If parents can't be that involved, the eAcademy is not a good option for the student. This level of parent involvement is less of an issue as students get older and are able to use the online learning envi-

ronment to monitor their own learning.

Students who enroll in the eAcademy are assigned a Google Apps for Education (GAFE) account by the district, which gives them access to secure Gmail within the domain. During Year 2, faculty and staff made a concerted effort to better learn and use the collaborative features of GAFE to support their work. Plans for these resources include teachers' targeted use with students to promote greater collaboration on student work, not just collaboration between faculty and staff.

Policy

The founding of the Redlands eAcademy and the creation of policies that govern its operation were greatly facilitated by the district's independent study program, established for more than three decades. The program, called RISE (Redlands Independent Study Education), is available for students in Redlands USD that may need access to one or all of their courses away from their normally assigned school for a few weeks or even years. RISE is considered an independent study *program,* not an accredited school, the school of record being another campus in the district. The program must adhere to the requirements for independent study found in the California Education Code and monitored by the California Department of Education (2014).

Because of this administrative experience with RISE, Redlands USD was prepared to establish an accredited school, one based on the independent study model but that also serves as the school of record for students. The eAcademy is still considered an independent study program so therefore must meet California's requirements for such programs. However, it is also an accredited K–12 school, receiving accreditation from the Western Association of Schools and Colleges, which, among other things, requires teachers be highly qualified with appropriate certifications. In addition, the courses it offers must meet "A–G subject requirements," stipulated by the University of California system for students who wish to attend the state's universities (Regents of the University of California, 2015). The letters refer to categories of courses (i.e., A = history/social science, B = English, etc.) and the number of years of study in each. Therefore, in meeting the requirements of an independent study program and maintaining accreditation and offering A–G approved courses for its students, the eAcademy must serve several masters.

Redlands USD has been able to leverage what the DSRN rubric refers to as "blended learning enablers" and to overcome some "blended learning inhibitors." Enablers include policies that alleviate seat-time requirements, incorporate a variety of assessment measures, and increase equitable access to technology for students. Inhibitors discourage the flexibility promised by blended learning by requiring stricter adherence to outcomes indirectly related to student learning—such as seat-time requirements—instead of competency-based outcomes.

Students in the eAcademy are required to participate in a prescribed minimum amount of time online, but the rigor of the learning program is such that successful students routinely exceed that minimum. Students who do not meet the minimum can be removed from the school, so the inhibitor of seat time is not completely alleviated. Because it is an independent study program, face-to-face time is not required, but the faculty and staff place such importance on meeting with students during block time, most students participate each week. It's an expectation for participation. That plus the stu-

dents generally want to participate. As principal Finley noted, "Students will say, 'I don't want to miss the good part'" in reference to block time.

Professional Learning

Whether implementing new school models or sustaining a selected path, few would argue that ongoing professional learning is critical for reaching desired outcomes. The DSRN rubric provides indicators that go beyond simply providing opportunity for professional learning but emphasize that professional development should focus on developing skills and knowledge necessary for implementing the blended learning model specifically. Topics for professional development include blended learning strategies catering to the needs of specific types of students and identifying and vetting instructional practices shown to work in this setting. A professional learning community is also an indicator in this category of the DSRN rubric*.*

Focus and Format of Professional Development

Because the Redlands eAcademy relies heavily on the online presentation of learning materials, teachers in the program need to have strong basic technology skills. District and school administration knew the challenges of teaching in a blended environment that relies heavily on online interaction, so administrators made a concerted effort to prepare teachers for this setting. Prior to Year 1, teachers participated in an online learning cohort supported by an external provider. The eight-week Online and Blended Teacher Certification Course focused on addressing the iNACOL (the International Association for K–12 Online Learning) standards for online teaching. Educators who successfully complete the course receive ongoing support through an online professional learning network of other certified teachers.

All the eAcademy teachers are eligible for and are consistently encouraged to attend professional development offered by the district and are paid for their time they attend. Sometimes this professional development connects with their unique teaching setting and needs; sometimes it does not. Other schools in the Redlands USD each have a teacher assigned to follow up with colleagues who have attended the district's offerings. Because of its small size, the eAcademy does not have such an assignment, but the district arranges shared support from other campuses. "We don't fit in the boxes all the time. So sometimes we miss out," notes Finley, who also provides some of that follow-up with his faculty through some creative scheduling.

Because students meet for limited blocks of time on campus as compared to a traditional school day, Finley has been able to schedule several "block free" weeks throughout the year to provide job-embedded professional learning. During these weeks, students continue their work online but don't come into campus. These weeks provide teachers with opportunities to collaborate, plan lessons, review student data, and sometimes participate in structured professional learning offered by trainers either from within or outside of the district.

Building Individual and Group Capacity

The faculty of the eAcademy is a collegial one, and that is important, especially since sometimes multiple teachers meet with students in a classroom at the same time. These close quarters are one factor that encourages collaboration, and many of the faculty col-

laborate on- and off-site to develop resources and materials that support the program. Having tech-savvy faculty in this collegial setting is also a boon. Because of the collaborative nature of the group, faculty will often help each other when learning new technologies or exploring new resources.

Although supportive, the school does not have a professional learning community as would be described in a classic sense. "It's not like they can meet with another teacher to talk about what they're doing, because they're all doing different things," explains Finley; they need "a different kind of collaboration." Because they are often the only teacher in the school working at a grade level or in a content area, they can "get stuck in what we do," according to Finley. He feels they need a broader picture and so need intentional time to stop and talk about craft. The block-free weeks are one strategy used to support this need.

Finley suggests that schools or districts interested in this model need to focus on structure. A clear structure was important to get the program off the ground, and staff meetings still often involve discussing structures, determining which ones are working and adjusting those that don't. The district's model of improvement, a model for which all district administrators have training, undergirds these discussions of structure at the eAcademy. For example, Finley described one of the challenges of the eAcademy's structure: A student's falling behind in an online course is different than falling behind in a regular course. If a student misses a week in a traditional class, he or she returns and the whole class is engaged in the same learning goal. There may be a gap in the student's learning, but because he or she is a member of the class, peers can provide some context and support to overcome the gap. With the online curriculum, if students miss a week, they can't simply vault over missed content, picking up what was missed as best as possible. The system doesn't allow them to miss content because they're absent. Because of this inflexibility in the content management system (CMS), Finley and the eAcademy's faculty have discussed means to keep kids on track and to head off problems. Their solution: scrap the original 14 weeks of traditional schools—"That's too long," says Finley—in favor of deadlines every 3 weeks, giving students a better chance of staying on target and not falling behind.

Technology and Infrastructure

By their very definition, blended and online learning rely heavily on a robust technology infrastructure that allows students to access high-quality content, communicate, collaborate, and generate products that demonstrate learning using a variety of relevant digital tools that promote college and career readiness. The technology and infrastructure section of the DSRN rubric includes indicators for the software, hardware, and networking required to provide a successful online component to the program. Supporting these technological assets are training and support specific to available technologies, polices to support their ethical and legal use, and the use of enterprise data systems. Well-designed enterprise data systems provide easy data analytics, reporting, and warehousing, and allow users to seamlessly transfer data across applications using data standards.

Infrastructure

When Finley began his first year at the eAcademy, the beginning of the school's second year, he was fully aware of the irony of the situation, "For an online school, we really didn't have very up-to-date technology." Adequate infrastructure has since been a focus

### Who Should Attend the eAcademy?

Although this blended learning model is not for every student, there's also no universal description of an eAcademy student. As in most schools, students are diverse and come with different needs, interests, and strengths. Principal David Finley shared stories of some eAcademy students and how the model helped them succeed when a more traditional school did not.

The first student he recalled is a junior who struggled in a large public school. Finley describes this student as "painfully shy," even physically withdrawing by pulling over a hoodie during class. But this student has many talents and is a gifted graphic artist. The eAcademy was a good fit because of the small class size and personal attention. This student had one or two good friends and related well to the teachers, who were able to build trust. At the end of the year, the student's parent excitedly told Finley and the guidance counselors that her child is going to take some classes at the local community college. She's happy and also a little afraid, but never thought her child would have this opportunity.

Several student stories center around physical issues. Students with juvenile diabetes, autism, social anxiety, and debilitating migraines have found success at the eAcademy. These conditions don't preclude academic ability but can be difficult to manage in a full day of schooling. One sixth-grade student hadn't been able to attend school for five years until enrolling in the eAcademy. Because much of the learning occurs at home, students flex their time and make up work on days following episodes that prevent them from maintaining a regular schedule. The short blocks of time on campus in small classes are also more manageable for many of these students. This environment also presents social advantages for some students, who develop friendships and help monitor each other's conditions that would have isolated them elsewhere. Students with diabetes, for example, ask each other about their blood sugar levels and provide each other a non-threatening support system.

Blended learning has become a family affair, at least with one family who first enrolled their sixth-grade autistic child who had been bullied elsewhere. Being in a small class helped the child make friends and participate. Finley observed that this student "didn't feel out of place and opened up." This child did so well in the setting, the parents later enrolled an eighth-grade sibling and plan to enroll a third child—the only one to previously attend public school—in fifth grade at the eAcademy in the fall. These parents find the model works because they want to be involved in their children's education, and the model not only encourages but actually requires parent involvement. This father related to Finley how much he enjoys working through the lessons with his kids, who are very inquisitive. Despite all three having different needs, the model works for each of them.
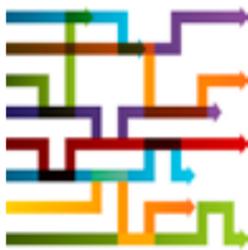
for improvement. Perhaps because the initial conception of the school relied so heavily on students learning online at home or elsewhere off campus, the need for hardware and networking on campus wasn't originally seen as a priority. Furthermore, the existing RISE program relied less on technology and more heavily on traditional textbook and other print-based instruction, and had done so for decades, so there was little experience with what the new online setting would require. Originally, the school had hand-me-down desktops and a laptop cart in case students needed them while on campus. The reality is, if teachers and students are going to work together on those online materials, they need to be able to access them at any time, and that was difficult—sometimes impossible—with the original technology infrastructure. Older operating systems and inadequate bandwidth wouldn't allow students or teachers to access some of the curriculum resources adopted for instruction, some of which relied on video, simulations, and other interactive media.

Some students and teachers resorted to bringing in their own laptops or tablets in order to access materials necessary for instruction, but personal computers won't allow teachers to access some secure services provided by the district. Principal Finley stepped in with his role as advocate for students and faculty, and purchased new or refurbished computers for faculty and staff. He was able to combine funds from different programs and share the devices across these programs. And, because the school exceeded original enrollment projections, the district upgraded the network. Students now have access to printers on campus but use their own digital cameras and other devices, and some still bring their own laptops.

Original enrollment projections for the school were small, so instead of its own campus, the eAcademy and the RISE program are situated in two buildings on the campus of Orangewood High School, a continuation school in the district that provides credit recovery opportunities in a traditional on-campus setting. Space is limited; teachers share classrooms lined by their separate workspaces. Although the space and infrastructure may have been adequate for the 20 students that participated in Year 1, the enrollment more than quadrupled to 85 students by the end of Year 2. If enrollment increases at the same rate, the school will outgrow its existing home, so the district and principal are reviewing alternatives with infrastructure being a key consideration.

Technical Support

As might be expected, the eAcademy faculty is not numerous. Faculty and staff for the eAcademy and the RISE program currently number around 20; therefore, there is no full-time technical support member on the team. Some of the faculty and staff at the school have advanced technology skills and are able to perform routine troubleshooting related to hardware and some online resources. Redlands USD also provides assistance through a trouble ticket system. The teachers and staff note that district technology staff are very responsive and quick to respond. Not having an on-site tech support person is not seen as a limitation at this time.

Enterprise Information Systems

Finding the right match between a content management system (CMS) and a student information system (SIS) has been a struggle. Access to the district's SIS has been beneficial in some aspects of data management and security, especially when enrolling

students or communicating with parents or other schools in the district. Integrating the district's system also provides the advantage of cost effectiveness for a single school, especially a small one like the eAcademy.

However, the school also relies on third-party content providers that often deploy a proprietary CMS. These systems help the model work. The eAcademy's small faculty could not effectively or promptly plan for, monitor, and assess student progress for the wide range of students it serves without the help of these online systems. And because much of the learning occurs off-site, parents, too, depend on these systems to determine if students are staying on track and reaching expected goals and outcomes. Parents may not understand all of the content their children are learning, but the CMS can help them determine whether their child has completed a task or not.

Adjusting the scope or sequence of instruction in a proprietary CMS has proven difficult, and the school has yet to find a system that allows for the easy insertion of graded activities outside of the provided content. Teachers have found workaround solutions, but these can cause confusion for students and parents. Also, these CMSs do not interface seamlessly with the required SIS. The result is more confusion because the CMS reports grades for activities within its own system but is not able to take into account other gradable activities—at least not easily—and so the grade on the CMS and the SIS may not always match until a time when the teacher can update all records, usually manually. Faculty and staff have considered different options, such as incorporating a learning management system (LMS) outside of the CMS. But this would add another layer of complexity and potential problems for all stakeholders. The principal continues to share his faculty's experience with content vendors in an effort to help streamline data management and make their products more useful.

Governance and Policy

Being a school in a large district has also meant that the eAcademy could rely on the district's established policies that provide access to and govern the use of online resources. Faculty and staff are well aware of and follow common district governance policies for the use of digital resources, such as acceptable use, email, password generation, and management policies. These did not have to be developed at the school level. Having access to the district's common CMSs and SISs allows faculty and staff to appropriately follow federal policies, such as the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA); and unique student logins to these secure systems and the school's network conform to requirements of the Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA) and the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) and others.

Based on the school's success, school and district leaders will undoubtedly continue to look at long-term governance that will continue if not expand that success. Policies related to information technology decision making, such as procurement and replacement policies and proven methods for ongoing project management, will become important over time.

Content and Curriculum

Indicators under this main category in the DSRN rubric focus on the use of digital tools to provide access to high-quality content and curriculum that can be custom-

ized for individual students or for groups. Because of this emphasis on customization, one indicator probes the degree to which a program is student-centered—that is, the degree to which students can select their own learning paths, based on learning goals they help determine, and the degree to which they can learn at their preferred pace, place, and time.

Teacher Role

Dziuban, Hartman, and Moskal (2004) assert that blended learning is best conceived of as a pedagogical approach that combines the positive learning and social outcomes of the classroom with the affordances of online learning. This position, originally posited for higher education, minimizes the importance of time students spend in one setting or the other, focusing instead on adding value to instruction. These authors recommend three strategies for achieving more value in instruction:

- shifting to student-centered instruction
- increasing interactions between student and teacher, student and student, as well as student interactions with content and outside resources
- integrating formative and summative assessments to help students and teachers monitor student progress

This conception of blended learning aligns well with the philosophy of the eAcademy and the model being implemented there. Still evolving its approach, faculty and staff at the eAcademy continue to work towards identifying ways to augment these strategies.

Although the majority of the curriculum is available through an online CMS, faculty engage students during the block time with a variety of pedagogies, from review and consultation to small-group discussions and projects. Although the shift to student-centered instruction in block time has had some success, faculty are still seeking resources and pedagogies they can further enhance the student focus and instruction in the blocks. They want to have more control over the curriculum and to provide more targeted support during the week in an effort to increase the effectiveness of what is already perceived to be one of the most successful aspects of the blended learning model.

Faculty and staff have participated in professional development for Google Apps for Education (GAFE) and for student-centered instruction provided by a computer manufacturer's professional learning partner. As a result, faculty and staff have used the collaborative features of this platform to reduce paperwork and streamline some management processes. Faculty next intend to leverage these resources and the collaboration skills they've developed among themselves in order to help their students use collaborative resources during and between block instruction. Teachers are very interested in increasing student-to-teacher and student-to-student interactions. The ability to share teaching and learning resources synchronously and asynchronously within the district's GAFE domain will enable students to work more collaboratively on products within a secure environment.

Because the CMS provides some pre-assessments, allows students to submit their completed work, and offers summative assessments, the system generates a sizeable amount of data for teachers to monitor in order to determine student progress and necessary supports. Teachers are seeking greater control over the scope and sequence

of provided CMS resources. This additional control is much easier in lower grades not governed by the A-G course requirements, but even courses in higher grades can be adjusted to some degree and still meet the requirements. Teachers have the content and pedagogical expertise to determine appropriate instructional substitutions and continue to determine the best method to support them in the CMS and grade reporting.

As might be expected, one of the greatest challenges for finding the right teachers for the eAcademy is the necessity of having deep content knowledge across multiple grades—sometimes multiple content areas. One language arts teacher may be responsible for all language arts courses for a grade band. And while it is not unusual for elementary teachers to teach all core content areas, few elementary teachers have to do this for three grades, as is currently the case at eAcademy. And teachers have to understand a range of technologies, too. These requirements make the successful eAcademy teacher exceptional and somewhat difficult to recruit.

At this time, the school does not have access to teaching assistants or paraprofessionals, but there are plans to expand course offerings. The district has been negotiating with the nearby Crafton Hills Community College to offer courses in the arts so that the eAcademy may become an early-college high school from which stu-

Figure 2. The first graduating class of the Redlands eAcademy.

dents can graduate with a high school diploma and an associate's degree. Some students already participate in dual enrollment and get credit for high school and college courses. The Redlands USD School Board allows college credit for electives, and foreign languages courses are considered electives. In addition, the district has telepresence in all of the high schools. A live teacher on one campus has students in their own classroom and also connects to and instructs students on other campuses using synchronous online video. The eAcademy began offering Latin through telepresence in Year 3. If successful, the school hopes to expand foreign language opportunities for students.

Student Role

It may be a cliché to say that online learning is not for everyone, but if you talk with the students at the Redlands eAcademy, they are quick to note they've had friends that tried but did not succeed at the eAcademy because of the school's format or the amount of independent work it requires. The biggest issue, as reported by some of the students,
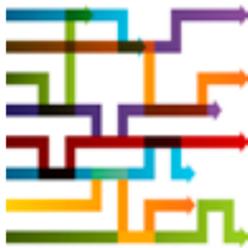
is that some students enroll in the eAcademy thinking that it would be easier than traditional schools, that they wouldn't have to go to class and would have a lot of free time. Ask the students, and they'll tell you that's not the case.

Some say that, although they did not feel comfortable or do well in a traditional school for a variety of reasons, the eAcademy is not necessarily easier. In fact, several say it's harder, but they find value in the program so are willing to do the work. What motivates them? Mostly, it seems to be the individualized instruction provided by eAcademy's teachers. Students talk about how they felt isolated in their previous school and that they didn't know how to seek help, but not at the eAcademy. Even though the students spend a good deal of time working online off campus, they note that the individualized attention they get from teachers is a key aspect of what helps them be successful.

It takes some time to figure out how to be a successful blended learning student. Elementary teachers don't rely as heavily on a CMS and provide a range of resources for students. As the kids matriculate, their computer and self-learning skills are developed so that they're better able to handle the more independent work beginning at the middle-school level.

One of the hallmarks of blended learning—student choice—allows eAcademy students great flexibility in setting their own pace, but some do not use that time wisely at first. As noted above, students that don't perform a minimum amount of work each week can be removed from the school. In these cases, teachers are important for helping students stay on track, and faltering students, especially new students, are often supported by their more experienced peers: One young girl was overheard saying to her friends about a new student, "She just hasn't figured out the way to get the work done, yet. Once she does, she'll be fine."

Because the CMS content for older students is approved by the University of California system and drives much of the curriculum, learning goals for students are often based more on that curriculum rather than on their own expressed needs, abilities, or interests. Most students have to follow the approved curriculum; so differentiation occurs in terms of helping individuals master curricular goals. Currently the program does not develop individual student learning profiles, another characteristic of some blended learning programs. As faculty and staff continue to massage the course offerings and have greater control over the curriculum, it is likely the program will become even more student-centric and less prescribed.

Digital Content and Resources

Using curricula available through the CMS makes the eAcademy possible. It reduces the time teachers spend planning instruction and monitoring student progress, and it provides data to target instruction during block time. Acknowledging the benefits of its CMS, the eAcademy faculty and staff nevertheless actively seek continued improvement in the services they provide to students, including improvements in the eAcademy's digital resources, which will continue as a focus in professional learning during the school's Year 3.

Individual faculty members often review alternative digital resources on their own, sharing the best that they've found. This is how several teachers found and began using the free social bookmarking tool Symbaloo to help coordinate students working across

multiple platforms. For specific activities or units, teachers have created Symbaloo pages that help students find resources and complete activities quickly.

As noted earlier, faculty are also expanding their use of Google Apps for Education. Relying on the district's GAFE domain allows teachers to use this secure environment to support teaching and learning. Not only do the basic applications (docs, sheets, slides) provide support for research and collaboration, but the many apps that can be added to Google Drive expand that functionality. Apps for such tasks as concept mapping and flowcharting (Mindmup and Cacoo), drawing (draw.io), geometric modeling (GeoGebra), narrating presentations (Movenote), and creating and editing videos (PowToon and WeVideo) can both aid student learning and provide tools to demonstrate that learning, as well.

Teachers currently use Google Drive to house a basic student portfolio. Being on Drive, both teachers and students can have access to the portfolio and its contents. Students submit work samples digitally and the teacher determines which work is best for the portfolio.

Data and Assessment

Digital tools can generate a good deal of data about student learning. In its data and assessment section, the DSRN rubric notes that the digital tools used in the blended learning model should provide a range of data, including formative and summative assessment data, that is easy to use by students, parents, teachers, and staff, and that promotes a student-centered environment, as described above. The DSRN rubric encourages the development and use of individual learner profiles, as well as the use of a variety of plans for secure use of data over the long term.

Data Systems and Security

As noted previously, the Academy relies on its CMS to collect and share data with students, parents, and teachers. The system is the backbone for the off-site learning, but the eAcademy has yet to find a single solution that will incorporate all teaching and learning data that can easily be shared with the district's SIS. That said, parents nevertheless find the CMS helpful because both they and their children can see scheduled assignments, when those assignments are completed, and student scores on those items that can be graded by the system. Teachers, too, use the system to monitor student progress but may keep separate records of alternate learning activities, especially those offered during on-campus block times.

Those teachers that teach district curricula use common assessments provided by the district. These assessments are offered primarily in the lower grades; older students rely on the online curricula approved for A–G credit. California is a member of the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, and all eAcademy students participated in this assessment this year. Scheduling so many different tests for so few students was a challenge.

Faculty and staff at the eAcademy rely on the district for providing systems that keep student data secure. Certain indicators of the DSRN rubric—such as those for long-range plans for change control, contingency planning, data protection and storage, and auditing—are handled at the district level. Systems deployed across the district are selected

with these and similar data security issues in mind and provide a secure environment within which students, parents, and teachers can interact.

Learner Profiles

Learning profiles are a key component of differentiated instruction as described by Tomlinson and others (Tomlinson, et al., 2003; Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010), helping teachers better understand how each student prefers to learn. The differentiated instruction literature suggests that a student's learning profile can be influenced by their learning style, intelligence preference, gender, and culture. The DSRN rubric doesn't provide required components of such a profile but instead suggests that multiple sources of data be used to create one. It should be based on the characteristics of each child as well as the larger student population, and serve as the key tool in decision making for all teachers and administrators.

Although eAcademy students feel that their teachers know more about them than

did teachers in previous schools, thus promoting personalized attention for each student, the eAcademy does not rely on formal learner profiles as described above. Students do go through an orientation session with the school's guidance counselors, who generate a general summary of the student's background and identify any special needs the children may have. The principal and guidance counselors also offer parent meetings weekly for prospective students and their families. Students that show continued interest participate in an interview pro-

Figure 3. During the study of unions, eighth-grade eAcademy students proposed to unionize the students and explore that possibility.

cess to try to determine if they're a good fit for the program. Principal Finley notes that "when we do a good job during the interview process, we've found that it's better for all concerned in the long run." If there is some question about a student's suitability for eAcademy, he or she can be placed in the RISE program temporarily in order to further evaluate his or her readiness for the blended learning program.

Formative and Summative Assessments

The CMS incorporated by the eAcademy provides data on student progress that is focused more on summative than formative outcomes. Teachers can see which items students have completed and a grade, if applicable, provided by the system. Opportunities for incorporating formative assessment strategies occur during on-campus block times. Prior to and during these meetings, teachers can access student data from the CMS to

shape conversations. Teachers note that they truly try to push students beyond compliance (e.g., completing a set number of activities) to true understanding and skill mastery.

In a totally online setting, students might not have as much opportunity for formative evaluation by their teacher. While the online content is valuable, there are still some pedagogical limitations that teachers must address in person. One of these is writing. As noted by one of the English teachers, writing samples can be checked online by the CMS, but it can only base its evaluations on a single *product*, scoring it primarily according to amount of input, use of key words, and the mechanics of language. But writing is an iterative *process*, and, like most English teachers, those at the eAcademy stress multiple stages of writing: planning, reviewing, editing, and revising. In process-based activities like writing, the teachers incorporate formative evaluation at appropriate phases of the process through self- and peer-review and the use of rubrics and other guidelines for students.

The DSRN rubric includes an indicator for the collaborative development of assessments. Teachers at the eAcademy have begun this work and have collaboratively developed assessments as part of designing or updating curricula. During Year 2, faculty received training on the development of performance-based tasks, and this work is expected to continue during Year 3. Performance tasks are seen as one strategy to increase the impact of the block time students spend on campus.

Sustainability and Future Plans

As with any new effort, progress towards goals can be viewed along a continuum, such as those described in the DSRN rubric. The Redlands eAcademy has only completed its second year of operation but has already exceeded original expectations. Enrollment is booming, and student success indicators, including a first graduating class, suggest that the model has a strong foundation that could continue to yield a return on investment over time. That does not mean that the work of school and district leaders is done. They are focused on investigating continuous improvement efforts that may yield higher learning outcomes for current and prospective students. As mentioned earlier, now that the model is established, school faculty and administrators are focused on leveraging on-campus block time to yield higher student learning outcomes. The district has also negotiated expanded learning opportunities with the local community college to provide a comprehensive school experience to students at the eAcademy.

While faculty and staff of the eAcademy focus on improving return on investment—that is, better learning outcomes—the program still needs to be sustained financially. There are social and altruistic benefits for providing an alternative for students who are not successful in more traditional schools, but—as with all things—there is a bottom line, and the eAcademy has to meet these financial obligations just like any other school. Fortunately, there are indications that the school is exceeding expectations here as well. At the end of Year 2, the principal and guidance counselors completed an informal tally of where current students attended school previously and how they came to the eAcademy. These initial data indicate that not only has the school been successful at helping to retain Redlands USD students in the district—37% are from other Redlands USD school— but it has increased district revenue by attracting students that were not previously contributing to the district's overall ADA. Yes, students from other districts—15%—are at-

tending Redlands eAcademy as originally hoped. Another 30% come from home-schools, charter schools, or other private schools within the district boundaries. These students were not contributing to the district's ADA because they were not enrolled in public schools in *any* district.

Success has brought some new challenges, so there is long-term planning underway to better understand the implications of the blended learning model and how the school should evolve over time. If the school is to continue at its current rate of expansion, it will outgrow its existing facilities and may be forced to find different facilities that must meet infrastructure and connectivity requirements.

As noted earlier, having enterprise systems that seamlessly share data and that are easily accessible to all users is still a challenge. At the eAcademy, such a system would include a CMS that is easy for parents and students to use and for teachers to customize. The CMS would seamlessly share data with student information systems and content repositories so that users need only log in to one place to easily find all information necessary to support teaching and learning. This is a long-standing concern that efforts like the Schools Interoperability Framework, a data-sharing specification, have been trying to address, but still remains a challenge in many districts across the country. A solution, or even just more efficient and effective methods, will require continued collaboration between vendors and educators.

Recruitment of teachers can also be a challenge, as noted earlier, because the blended learning setting requires special skills. Teachers must be content experts in multiple grades, and sometimes multiple content areas, as well as having strong technology skills and skills for teaching in the blended setting. Evaluating teachers in this setting can also be a challenge, as teachers don't often follow a common lesson presentation or perform the same roles they might in a more traditional classroom (TNTP, 2014). They also perform a range of duties specific to the blended model that may be difficult to observe.

If the eAcademy continues to grow, teachers may be able to move from hourly to contract employees, a change which many of the teachers would welcome. Larger enrollment may also mean that teachers may be able to teach fewer sections. This would also streamline their planning and grading efforts. At some point additional teachers may be required, whether part- or full-time. District and school administrators must consider where these tipping points are and whether expansion to this degree is feasible or even desirable.

Conclusion

In summary, a few key features have helped the Redlands eAcademy become successful in its first years of operation, and all can all be found in the literature supporting blended learning:

- A clear vision focused on the needs of students is shared by all stakeholders. This includes a knowledgeable and skilled leader who serves as an advocate for the students and the school.
- Parents and students must fully support the blended learning model.
- Teachers and administrators require ongoing, job-embedded professional development focused on maximizing the blended learning model.
- An online curriculum is essential to get the program started. At first, it might

not be perfect, but the online curriculum will make a new blended learning school manageable for students, parents, and educators. When it's in place, faculty and staff can continue to customize it to better meet the needs of the students.
- The creation of a blended learning school will be easier in larger districts with established governance and policy support, as well as technical expertise and infrastructure support.
- Establishing a blended learning school requires dedicated faculty and staff with a mindset towards continuous improvement. These characteristics of dedication and commitment to continuous improvement are especially critical for individuals considering working in this environment.

This study provides a look into a promising program using a model not often described in the literature on blended learning. Models in the emergent literature primarily involve blended aspects within a more traditional school setting. The Redlands eAcademy is an example of the **enriched virtual model** that evolved from the original intent of providing a strictly virtual school experience. Although that model, too, has evolved, the core focus has remained: the belief that the blended learning components will improve student learning outcomes. With that same belief, school leaders across the country are considering or implementing variations of the blended learning model; schools and districts might well benefit from the lessons learned from the Redlands eAcademy's own variation, both innovative and successful.

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