District-Level Blended Learning Implementation

Readiness Points and Challenges

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MICHIGAN VIRTUAL LEARNING®
RESEARCH INSTITUTE

About Michigan Virtual Learning Research Institute

In 2012, the Governor and Michigan Legislature passed legislation requiring *Michigan Virtual™,* formally *Michigan Virtual University®*, to establish a research center for online learning and innovation. Known as *Michigan Virtual Learning Research Institute®* (*MVLRI®*), this center is a natural extension of the work of *Michigan Virtual*. Established in 1998, *Michigan Virtual's* mission is to advance K-12 digital learning and teaching through research, practice, and partnerships. Toward that end, the core strategies of *MVLRI* are:

- Research – Expand the K-12 online and blended learning knowledge base through high quality, high impact research;
- Policy – Inform local, state, and national public education policy strategies that reinforce and support online and blended learning opportunities for the K-12 community;
- Innovation – Experiment with new technologies and online learning models to foster expanded learning opportunities for K-12 students; and
- Networks – Develop human and web-based applications and infrastructures for sharing information and implementing K-12 online and blended learning best practices.

Michigan Virtual dedicates a small number of staff members to *MVLRI* projects as well as augments its capacity through a fellows program drawing from state and national experts in K-12 online learning from K-12 schooling, higher education, and private industry. These experts work alongside *Michigan Virtual* staff to provide research, evaluation, and development expertise and support.

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Introduction

The mission of *Michigan Virtual* is to "to advance K-12 digital learning and teaching through research, practice, and partnerships." With this mission in mind, *Michigan Virtual* launched the blended learning partnership program in 2015, bringing together local school districts, their teachers and building and district leaders, and *Michigan Virtual* staff, to propel blended and personalized learning forward systemically. At its core, the blended learning partnership program was a two-year district partnership. The multifaceted nature of the partner school program involved ongoing professional learning and blended learning implementation consultation and coaching.

This report examines the readiness and challenges of each school district as those involved worked to learn and implement effective blended learning strategies in their district. *Michigan Virtual* engaged in a collaborative partnership with four Michigan school districts, all committing to intentionally focus on implementing a blended learning initiative. These partnerships spanned multiple school years, and, while each district's strategies and objectives varied, all had the common goal of increasing student engagement and achievement through the implementation of personalized and blended learning strategies.

For this report, the four partner school districts shared how they viewed their readiness points (district-wide strengths) and challenges for initial implementation and program development. A survey was sent out to every teacher involved in learning in partner districts; superintendents and district leaders were interviewed and responded either via email or phone. As *Michigan Virtual's* blended learning coaches and instructional design coach were instrumental in the development and delivery of the professional development for these partner schools, data were also collected from this team. Though the exact words of each question varied by audience, the two questions asked of everyone were:

- As you reflect on your implementation of blended learning strategies, what elements of your (or the district's) environment or your own (or the district's) experiences set you (or your district) up to be ready for implementation?
- In contrast, what elements of your (or the district's) environment or your (or the district's) experiences ended up being a challenge for your (or the district's) implementation of blended learning strategies?

The goals of this study were to understand better the readiness points and challenges that different stakeholders had when they began to implement blended learning and to share these findings so that their peer institutions could learn from their efforts and help move the field forward in an informed way.

Exploring the State of Blended Learning and Implementation in Michigan

In 2013, *Michigan Virtual* began a sustained and concentrated effort in outreach, professional learning, and support for educators who wanted to gain an understanding of how to implement blended learning strategies within their own classroom or district. The team at *Michigan Virtual* was composed of instructional designers, educational technology specialists, and blended learning

coaches who all had prior K-12 education experience in online, face-to-face, and blended modalities. Combining a team with expert experience in blended and online learning with the statewide outreach and capacity-building focus of *Michigan Virtual* was a powerful engine for professional learning development and delivery for the state. A significant focus of the educational outreach for *Michigan Virtual* was in the power of using technology to personalize and differentiate instruction for improved educational outcomes of all students. The team consistently communicated the clear definition of blended learning[1] from the Christensen Institute (2016) while also supporting a message of intentional integration of technology in lesson design.

In the Michigan education landscape, teachers have been more interested in developing and modifying their own lessons rather than using licensed or purchased content. This focus caused the *Michigan Virtual* team to combine the formal definition of blended learning with technology integration frameworks such as SAMR (Substitution, Augmentation, Modification, Redefinition) (Puentedura, 2006) and TPACK (Technology, Pedagogy, Content Knowledge) (Mishra & Koehler, 2006). The spirit of home-grown or locally controlled content and program development became a noticeable theme throughout the state of Michigan and is a theme to note as it significantly influenced why *Michigan Virtual* chose to partner with school districts in an embedded and collaborative manner.

As *Michigan Virtual* began to partner with Michigan school districts, the process, partnership, and program development varied from district to district, depending significantly on how administrators and teachers viewed any new initiative or implementation process in their district. Michigan is a state that values a large amount of local control at the local district level. There are large components of the K-12 education system that are controlled and mandated by the Michigan Department of Education or by the U.S. Department of Education; but for the most part, school districts appreciate having control over their mission and vision for teaching and learning and their own systemic processes to achieve specific learning goals for their students.[2] Despite recent legislative shifts in federal and state mandates, district leaders hold strong to the foundational premise that local districts should be able to use funding and policies that best fit the needs of their students. Working within this structure of local control, *Michigan Virtual* decided to closely partner with a handful of school districts to better understand the nature of school and district-wide implementation. This route resulted in learning lessons about whole-district change and the impact

[1] The definition of blended learning is a formal education program in which a student learns:

1. at least in part through online learning, with some element of student control over time, place, path, and/or pace;
2. at least in part in a supervised brick-and-mortar location away from home; and
3. the modalities along each student's learning path within a course or subject are connected to provide an integrated learning experience.

[2] See Theobald, N. D. (2000). *Balancing local control and state responsibility for K-12 education: 2000 yearbook of the American Education Finance Association*. Larchmont: Eye on Education, for background on Michigan's local control history.

that a well-developed professional learning program can have on teaching and learning throughout a system.

Partner School Activities and Implementation Design

Beginning in the fall of 2015, *Michigan Virtual* recognized the critical need to study and support full-district implementation of blended learning through professional learning supports. With the understanding that local district decisions drive implementation and learning activities at the building-level, *Michigan Virtual* embarked on four district partnerships. The work began with a series of discussions focused on collaboration and recognizing the importance of personalized learning models. Each relationship valued three tenants, or foundational elements, of the proposed work. The first element was that school districts must leverage the power of technology tools to differentiate instruction, achieve new efficiencies, and make learning more relevant for today's students. The second element was that online and blended learning could serve as critically important instructional strategies to personalize learning for all students. Lastly, implementing new and effective delivery models would likely be a challenge, and no single road map would guarantee student success and system sustainability. These districts began collaborations with the understanding that blended and personalized learning strategies could make a difference for students. In addition, support for the partnership districts must be integrated intentionally within each district's mission, vision, and school improvement plan.

Partner school collaborations began by engaging in intentional information gathering and interviews to build awareness of each district's vision for teaching and learning and the culture for professional learning within their district. The goal was to develop a professional learning structure that valued local decisions about goals and strategies to work with their teachers to provide both a unified message and vision for blended learning while also supporting and coaching the development and implementation of blended lessons. Through multiple meetings, district administration and school leaders worked with *Michigan Virtual* staff to set goals and expectations for the two years of work. Together, the teams drove decisions about strategy, objectives, and process while developing strategies to overcome potential barriers. After two years, the end result was four unique yet similar professional development and implementation plans.

Partner District Profiles

Each partner school district began the collaborative professional development and implementation planning with the same core goal: to have a positive impact on student achievement through the implementation of intentional and effective blended learning strategies. Because of the strong desire for local control, each district was given the autonomy to direct the focus and modality of their blended learning professional development process, rather than providing a prescriptive, one-size-fits-all program for each district. Through the locally-identified challenges and readiness points, *Michigan Virtual* worked to develop and launch customized professional development options to meet the needs of each district.

Ann Arbor Public Schools

Ann Arbor Public Schools (AAPS) is a district with a student population of over 17,500 K-12 students. This is a large district for the state of Michigan, and one that came to the table with a ready and able team to take on the in-district support and training necessary to roll-out a professional learning structure for their teachers and administrators. As AAPS is quite large, with more than 30 buildings spread out over the university-centered city of Ann Arbor, Michigan, the district found it challenging to gather teachers across schools in the same place at the same time. A desire to do professional development differently drove the district to reach out to work with *Michigan Virtual* to develop a more personalized learning experience for their cohorts of blended learning teachers mostly in the online environment. The cohorts met together a few times over the course of their learning for collaboration, coaching, and sharing. The administrative team joined together for multiple face-to-face and online sessions throughout the process as well, building their awareness and capacity to lead and support teachers.

Hamilton Community Schools

Hamilton Community Schools (HCS) is a district with a student population of over 2,600 K-12 students. This district began engaging with *Michigan Virtual* with significant vision from the district and building leadership levels. They saw blended learning strategies complementing their continuous years of work in standards- and competency-based learning. At the very beginning, staff were hesitant to start "just one more thing," as they were heavily involved in adjusting curriculum, rubrics, and assessments for their standards-based approach. *Michigan Virtual* had the opportunity to speak to the entire district at the same time, focusing 100% of the teachers on what blended and personalized learning was and how it was a part of the process of teaching and learning rather than another initiative. After this learning day, teachers were given the option to self-select into learning cohorts. The district struggled getting these cohorts of teachers out of the classroom due to a lack of substitute teachers in the area. The professional development, therefore, was mostly online in Google Classroom. Teachers learned together in this online space and with a series of face-to-face days outside of school. The cohorts had consecutive days together in the summer, in addition to picking two of three focused Saturday sessions during the school year. The face-to-face time was focused on learning, collaborating, and sharing unit development and lessons learned. HCS was able to support three cohorts of teachers through this learning process, picking teacher-leaders along the way to support and fuel building-specific leadership.

Haslett Public Schools

Haslett Public Schools (HPS) is a district with a student population of over 2,700 K-12 students. The district had a great deal of interest in blended learning when they approached *Michigan Virtual* to engage in a partnership. This district shared a technology director with neighboring district, Williamston Community Schools, another partner school. The entire district was able to engage in after-school professional learning sessions to build awareness of blended learning strategies before they self-selected into learning cohorts. As the professional development planning began, the district technology leadership team was interested in developing individual learning plans for each teacher. The district recognized that each teacher would want a different focus or goal area in addition to having a wide variety of foundational technology skills. The district was able to support

the time-intensive process of individual learning plans for their cohort as they provided an instructional technology specialist for the entire district. The role of the specialist was to provide classroom-level support and coaching for lesson design and implementation. The specialist was also responsible for communicating with the *Michigan Virtual* blended learning coaches, gathering groups of teachers with similar goals together for group coaching or technology learning sessions. In addition to teacher learning cohorts, HPS engaged together at the administration level. Every building and district leader learned together in the summer and throughout the year, focusing on building culture elements that supported a move towards more personalized and blended learning as well as research-based best practices in technology implementation, such as SAMR and TPACK models. These frameworks and research built the foundational knowledge of the administrative team as they were working with all teachers in their buildings, not just the teachers who self-selected into a learning cohort. HPS was able to quickly gain momentum and classroom-level buy-in from a majority of the staff and administration. They also were able to give teachers significant autonomy to make decisions and work on goals that were geared toward the needs of their own students.

Williamston Community Schools

Williamston Community Schools (WCS) is a district with a student population of approximately 1,800 K-12 students. The district was excited about engaging their staff with new and innovative ways to reach learners in their district and wanted to get started quickly. The district appointed a blended learning coach who was released from a portion of her teaching day to support teachers throughout the district. WCS was the first district to partner and develop their implementation plan, and the collaborative *Michigan Virtual* team decided to begin by working the first group of self-selected teachers through an online experience with technology-focused, after-school sessions throughout the year. Similar to Haslett, the in-district blended learning coach was the connection between the cohort of teachers and the *Michigan Virtual* team, organizing extra blended learning group coaching sessions when needed. The district was even able to drum up enough interest in specific content areas (like mathematics) to hold half-day learning and developing sessions. The teachers were encouraged to develop and share a blueprint for a technology-enhanced blended learning unit for implementation in their next year. A challenge arose when faced with how to overcome the direction the professional learning took in the first year, as primarily online learning wasn't the best fit for the culture. These teachers were able to get out of their classrooms to work together on a semi-regular basis. To make work meaningful, it was important to weave the learning time into the time already set aside during their week for blended learning work. In the second year, the professional learning model changed to support whole-district change through continued face-to-face learning and coaching that was requested through the district blended learning coach and other instructional leaders. In both years of implementation and professional learning support, Williamston teachers were engaged in a summer educational technology camp where they were able to gain resources, collaborate with other teachers and design lessons for their fall classes. The teachers in the district used support from the *Michigan Virtual* coach and the in-district blended learning coach to implement technology-enhanced and blended learning lessons throughout the classrooms of engaged and self-selected groups. Some buildings, especially at the elementary levels, used both sources of coaching support, which proved to be an important collaborative effort. The

WCS building and district leaders also worked together throughout the year to develop common understanding of effective blended learning strategies, the culture necessary to support the shift in pedagogy, and frameworks that supported high-quality blended pedagogy in the classroom.

Table 1 summarizes the key elements of professional development for each of the four partner districts.

Table 1. Summary of Partner Districts

District	District-Wide PD to Build Awareness	Admin Training	Building or Teacher Directed PD	Online PD	F2F PD	District Technology Coach/Leader
Ann Arbor		X		X	X	X An established team
Hamilton	X			X	X	X Chosen from first cohort
Haslett	X	X	X	X	X	X Full time position
Williamston		X	X	X	X	X Partial position

Readiness Points and Challenges

As administrative and professional development teams worked to design and provide professional learning experiences for their districts with the goal of implementing blended learning with fidelity, there were certain elements of the sustained efforts in the four partner districts that proved to be readiness points for implementation. In this context, the characteristics of a readiness point would be a strength within the district or teachers' culture or learning environment that became an accelerant for implementation or change. These readiness points were elements of the district or teacher environments before work began. In contrast, challenges became evident upon implementation and were not always recognized before work and implementation began. Upon reflection, challenge points were elements of each district or teacher environment that had an unintended impact on implementation. These challenges often required districts to adapt and change as the collaborative district and *Michigan Virtual* teams learned more about the process.

For the purpose of this report, three different audiences were asked to reflect on elements of the start of their journey that proved to be readiness points and challenges for their learning process and for implementation. From a professional development provider perspective, the *Michigan Virtual* blended learning coaches examined what elements of the district made the cohorts of teachers ready and what elements challenged them as coaches working with teachers in each district. From the teachers' perspective, all teachers from the cohorts of learning across the four districts were sent a survey where they answered what elements of their own personal awareness and environment made them ready to learn and implement blended learning and what elements created a challenge that they had to overcome. From the administrative and leadership perspective, all district-level leaders were asked what made their entire district ready to embark on the journey to blended learning together and what district elements challenged system-wide implementation and change.

Professional Development Provider

Readiness Points

In designing professional development and professional learning structures for effective blended learning implementation, four themes or elements of the partner districts contributed to the successful design and implementation of a learning curriculum and structure.

Mission and Vision-Driven Pedagogy

A school district that has a clear and focused vision for the teaching and learning environment creates coherence throughout the district. This is a solid foundation for the effective integration of technology-enhanced and blended learning strategies. A strong mission and vision for learning creates a system where teachers are able to connect the use of technology and personalized learning to strong and focused lesson design. Teachers can speak the same language about learning, and this common culture and value system gives the strategies a structure in which to become embedded. Blended learning and technology strategies will be a struggle to connect to students without sound research-based pedagogy and lesson design. A district with a strong vision for teaching and learning will be ready for the next step: using technology to help personalize the learning environment.

Visible Leadership

Successful districts, and buildings within these districts, were able to see engaged leaders throughout the process. Some administrators were involved in the cohorts of teacher learners as well. These leaders participated as learners throughout the process, embracing whatever vulnerability they encountered. In addition to learning with the teachers, these visible leaders were open to suggestions from their staff while also keeping the collaboration and discussions focused on the clear vision and mission of the district and/or school. The principals and central office administrators were able to push their teachers to become leaders in their own right by stepping up and delivering professional development and informal coaching within building- or grade-level teams.

Professional Development Structure that Valued Collaboration

Each partner district came to this pilot as a collaborative team. The core value of work depended on this as a foundation of the work and culture between the two organizations (i.e., the district and *Michigan Virtual*) and within the school districts as well. The district leaders trusted the *Michigan Virtual* team as coaches and experts while the *Michigan Virtual* staff saw the leaders and teachers with the districts as the fantastic educators that they are, working hard every day to meet the needs of their students. Mutual respect fostered a true collaborative environment, where each team member came to the table with their strengths, all voices mattered, and collaborative culture grew because of this shared work. Each district had powerful interactions among teachers, as well as within administrative teams. Their established norms created community so teachers worked more easily through their learning process together and immediately established a collaborative spirit with the *Michigan Virtual* team.

Growth-Minded Culture

These four partner districts understood that teachers were the architects of their own blended classrooms, and while one-size wouldn't fit all, they understood the value of individual components of learning that guided them along the path. Successful teacher teams had the ability to engage in difficult conversations about current practices and used their open-feedback culture to support these conversations. Learning was seen as a transparent cycle for all, where growth areas and successes were celebrated and failures were identified as opportunities for the future.

Challenge Points

In contrast to readiness points, certain elements of the partner school district's environment challenged the initial implementation and design of professional learning and blended learning implementation. The three themes below are presented as elements within many districts rather than a description of one specific school or district culture.

Vision

While vision-driven pedagogy was one of the readiness points identified above, vision for blended learning also remained a challenge for many districts. District and building leadership often needed collaborative learning time with their colleagues and experts so they, too, could develop a common understanding of what blended learning was and what it should look like for their students. There were many blended learning myths, and it took time to create a consistent and common vision for the effective and authentic implementation of technology for increased personalized learning. Often, when a school district decided to make blended learning implementation a priority throughout the district, there was an initial champion for the cause. It took time and intentional learning to share the knowledge and excitement of that champion with all leaders and stakeholders so the vision for blended learning was coherent. In many cases, the beginning stages of implementation at the teacher level began without the coherent vision for blended learning from the leadership levels across the system. This was a challenge for the teachers who were the first to learn and implement new initiatives as they became the trailblazers. It also became a challenge for teachers who were hesitant or resistant about the change, as it made some of these teachers question the validity or the staying power of the new effort, making blended learning implementation seem like it was the "initiative of the year" instead of a consistent and focused effort on the effective use of technology for all students.

Courageous Culture

As teachers and administrators looked to implement more personalized and blended learning strategies, there came a time for difficult conversations about current classroom practices. This was when a whole-district growth mindset was necessary but not always present. The adoption of new practices and strategies was paired with the need to spend less time on other classroom practices. Some of these conversations became difficult and uncomfortable for everyone involved, and they involved more than just the teachers. All stakeholders, from the parents to the school board, faced moments where they felt tension between their legacy knowledge of how school works with the new and changing pedagogy of blended learning. Blended learning implementation was challenged when stakeholders were not able to have these discussions with each other in a safe environment.

There was a need for districts to stay connected and lean into difficult conversations about classroom practice, rather than shy away from them. The culture of the district either helped or hindered this process, depending on how connected the administration team was and, again, how connected the implementation work was to the coherent vision of teaching and learning for the district.

Planning with the End in Mind

Another challenge to district-wide blended learning implementation was the need for planning to begin at the onset of any project or initiative. This planning often happened before the district-wide vision for blended learning had been established. The particular challenge this created for blended learning implementation specifically was the unintended focus on particular technology tool training or a desire to have the recipe or cheat sheet for blended learning in every classroom. The challenge then became planning a professional learning series when the educators were unsure of the goal or possibly had conflicting views of the goal of blended learning implementation.

Teacher

Readiness Points

A reflection survey was sent to the teachers who were intimately involved with sustained and continuous training. What follows are some of the common themes in their reflections about what made them personally ready to learn and implement blended learning strategies with fidelity.

Prior Experience and Knowledge with a Personal Desire to Learn More

Teachers mentioned they were ready to begin to implement or learn about blended learning strategies due to their own experiences either in college courses or with their personal decisions to explore, learn, and implement technology into lessons. Many of these teachers noted that they had prior knowledge of online and digital platforms and many technology resources for student learning felt as if they were already partially down the path toward blended learning when they began to learn together with colleagues in a cohort. Teachers also mentioned that their personal desire to learn more was really focused on their own journey, and they needed to feel they were being honored with professional flexibility with the learning process, much like the personalized learning strategies they were designing for students. These teachers, who could be considered more innovative and technology-savvy, still saw technology use as a growth area for them. One teacher mentioned, “I am a person that is eager and ready to try new things in my classroom which is why I feel successful with my blended strategies.”

Strong Learning Networks with Access to Experts

Teachers involved in the learning cohorts in the partner school districts felt that their learning networks, both internal and external to their school, played a significant role in their readiness to begin blended learning implementation. The learning networks were identified as the access they would need to experts, which in this case were instructional coaches and their colleagues. Teachers needed a system of support in place before learning and the implementation process began. Tool-focused support was helpful for those who got caught up in specific implementation of a new resource in a lesson. Other teachers referred to the blended learning coaches as “gurus” because

these coaches were the experts who could consult with and support teachers as they learned and developed high-quality blended learning lessons for their students. This support manifested itself in many ways, often depending on the district and teachers' needs. In one district, teachers looked to the *Michigan Virtual* experts for specific content development support, while another district desired an educational tool-centric professional learning structure. What was noticeable in this theme was that the teachers were able to reach out to an expert whom they trusted, with questions about their classroom implementation and design. One teacher reflected, "The support of other teachers and coordinators helped the most. I loved having a group ready to discuss ideas, make plans, and motivate! I took some risks this year and tried new things. I could not have done this without them."

Resources

In addition to a collaborative teaching environment, often identified as a professional learning network, teachers also identified certain resources as readiness points. There was unanimous praise for any intentional time given to teachers to learn, work, and collaboratively develop lessons. Some teachers felt that they had the necessary technology resources to begin implementing their developed strategies. These teachers were grateful for the technology they had, although some wished for even more access to the technology. One teacher said, "The extra time outside of the classroom environment allowed me to feel more comfortable with bringing [blended learning] into my classroom because I had time to create, practice, and ask questions in a smaller setting."

Challenge Points

In the reflection survey sent to the teachers within the learning cohorts, they were also asked about the elements of their own understanding or their environments that proved to be a challenge they needed to overcome in order to implement blended learning strategies effectively. The challenges identified by the teachers were themed into the following four challenge points for blended learning implementation.

Scaffolded Student Support for Technology

In their responses, teachers mentioned the need for increased student technology skills, desire for learning with technology, and accountability when using more tools and resources for learning. While there are statewide and national conversations about students being agents of their own learning, teachers have found that there is still a large technical hurdle when it comes to overcoming login credential issues, device management, appropriate use of applications, digital creation, and independent learning. Early elementary teachers found student agency to be the most challenging, to the point that it almost stopped implementation in some cases. A teacher mentioned, "Due to the age of my students (4-5), I needed to help them a lot. They needed help with some of the apps we used. There were only a few that they were able to access on their own. Due to this I knew I would not be able to set up lessons for them to complete on their own." Another teacher said, "Consistency is key. I front loaded my students with support from their "older buddy friends" and gradually released support once they were independent. Using [blended learning] often helps with this. Lots of visuals for when they get stuck also helps."

Vision for Blended Learning

At the onset of the program, teachers still had a thirst for what the vision of blended learning was, while learning and developing blended learning experiences for their own students and classrooms. Many felt they had to endure a journey through the woods to discover what blended learning meant to them and how it brought value to their own practice. This took time, and time is valuable for teachers. Some noted they wished they could have seen exactly what blended learning would look like in their specific content area or grade level. It was, and still is, a challenge for many of the teachers to push themselves to break out of their legacy knowledge of how to design lessons. This challenge rested right in the ambiguous area of change, where the teachers understood the driver and understood the need for new strategies but were uncomfortable as they developed their own integration of these strategies into their practice and their lesson designs. One teacher said, "In the beginning of the program, I did not have a clear vision for what I wanted to do, so I was adjusting along the way. I wish that I could have made my plan a month or so into the school year!" Another one mentioned, "A barrier for me was breaking out of the way I've done things in the past. Switching to a more blended approach requires a shift in practice, and many times I fell back on the 'old way.'"

Just-In-Time Support and Access to Resources

Overall, the teachers in the learning cohorts were grateful for the extra access to colleagues and experts as they were learning. They were also eager and excited to have additional technology tools and resources from their district. One theme from the data was the overall desire from the teachers to have systems of support, as well as technology systems, tools, and resources, in place at the beginning of the implementation. This was, overall, significantly challenging if the district wanted the innovation to be born from the classroom and driven by classroom needs. The challenge to blended learning implementation, therefore, was having regular and consistent access to someone who could help and coach implementation strategies, lesson designs, and tools quickly within the school day. The *Michigan Virtual* coaches were able to help out with scheduled days of learning but were not able to be the just-in-time support that the teachers needed. Many partner school districts were able to get teacher leaders and points of contact within the district, but some teachers mentioned that it still wasn't enough. Teachers need someone as close to them as possible. While this was not always feasible, the close and quick access to a coach or an expert would have been helpful for all teachers. This quick access to experts extended to those who could help teachers when the technology started to fail during the day. Some mentioned simple concerns like their projectors and app support (i.e. on iPads) that tended to fail and then the teacher was left struggling through a lesson with high frustration. Teachers also mentioned that while their districts had technology for the students to use, it wasn't enough. For example, a teacher noted their classroom devices were used for statewide testing (M-STEP) so teachers were not able to check out devices for two months of the year. Similar comments from teachers highlighted their frustration with the technology access not aligning with their development and implementation of blended learning strategies. The day-to-day hurdles that teachers endured were noteworthy, and adding new technology and blended learning strategies to the mix made this element a significant challenge for teachers. A teacher mentioned, "The obstacle that we ran into all year was tech availability. Since our school district is not a 1 to 1 (a ratio of one device to one student), we have to share devices

with the other 6th grade classrooms. There were many times we were not able to get the devices we needed or felt like we were monopolizing the devices we do have." Another teacher shared, "I wish there was more one-on-one help."

Time

While many teachers appreciated the time they were given to work, learn, and share collaboratively, some teachers felt as if they didn't have enough structured time to develop blended learning experiences in their classroom. The learning was intentionally structured either in online or face-to-face sessions and was specifically focused on giving teachers immediate time to work and apply the learning to their classrooms. The teachers appreciated this learning design consideration but still needed more time. One specific item to note was the challenge for the testing and setup of new technologies within the school day. Especially when teachers were trying a new tool or technology resource for their students, there was a large investment in time for set-up, trials, and even the development of a "plan B" when the technology didn't go as planned. These teachers were eager to make changes to their classroom and their learning environments, so they spent extra personal time and fought through technology challenges. The challenge, however, became a significant consideration as districts began to rollout implementation to teachers who were not as ready for or passionate about blended learning implementation. A teacher shared, "I am very frustrated when software and hardware doesn't work as promised. I am intimidated by the jargon. I do not have the time or inclination to mess around trying to figure out how to make the technology do what I want it to do." A teacher mentioned, "My biggest challenge was when technology did not work as planned! My fear when trying something new was that it would take more time than it would without technology, if the technology did not work appropriately."

District Leader

Readiness Points

District leaders from every partner school responded to the same two questions that were asked of the *Michigan Virtual* professional development team and the partner school teachers. These leaders either engaged in a phone call or responded to the prompts via email. They reflected on the readiness of their entire district as they began their partnership. The themes of their readiness points are summarized below.

Prior Knowledge and Training

Every district leader mentioned some degree of knowledge and innovation, at the very least in pockets and at the most in whole-district learning activities. Prior training and knowledge meant that the teachers and the administration were ready with some degree of foundational knowledge and awareness about new styles of teaching and learning and the effective use of technology. Blended learning seemed to be the next step for these teachers in our partner districts, as it was a comfortable growth area. One district had years of district-wide training with externally-hosted and supported professional development from groups in Michigan and international experts in innovative learning models. Another district had a locally-supported online learning program hosted and run by the district, and, before they implemented blended learning, they had an established curriculum tied to technology, including previous learning experiences with *Michigan*

Virtual. While some spent a few years intentionally working on technology adoption, one district spent years establishing a standards-based grading model throughout the district. This district used blended learning as the next step as they were growing in the ways they were using data to inform their instruction. In all cases, innovation and learning was already present in the district. All focus areas were slightly different as was the scale to which innovation was occurring, but district leaders identified their prior knowledge and learning as a readiness point for moving forward towards blended learning implementation.

Available Technology Resources

Many districts started getting more and more technology resources for their district; but at the time of purchase, the devices were underutilized. In one district, devices would sit in mobile technology carts and were not checked out regularly. District leaders recognized that the teachers needed and were ready for additional professional learning about how to use the technology effectively in classrooms for the betterment of all students. This readiness point is now a challenge for many districts, as an increasing number of teachers have asked for consistent use of devices in the district. Some of the district leaders in these partner school districts felt that having the resources available was an important step towards blended learning implementation.

Established Technology Programs and Staff

A few districts mentioned their established curriculum and school programs were previously tied to the effective use of technology. This consistent focus on technology throughout the district involved a professional development team in one district and district-wide technology coaches in another district. Some district leaders mentioned this was a critical first step as the community of support and awareness was already built before the district decided to begin concentrating on blended and personalized learning strategies. One leader noted that the continuous effort and sustained support helped them be ready for blended learning implementation.

Challenge Points

Recognizing that hindsight is 20/20, it is important for leaders to reflect on what elements their district needed to overcome, or still needs to overcome, as they work to implement blended learning effectively throughout their system. Each district leader had a different and unique perspective, the summation and themes of their reflections are identified below.

Traditional Professional Learning

District leaders all recognized that before the partnership pilot, innovation and learning was happening in their districts but it was not at the scale necessary to be considered consistent across the district. One district mentioned that the classroom innovations were only happening in pockets. As the leaders processed challenges to full blended learning implementation, the design of professional learning structures came up in every conversation. At every level, the traditional model of professional learning was no longer viable or effective. Pulling teachers out of the classroom for learning, collaboration, or coaching was difficult for two major reasons: Funding for substitutes was scarce; and even with funding support, Michigan is experiencing significant shortage of substitutes. This often left administrators with the whole-district or building professional learning days built into the calendar every year. One district leader mentioned that

teachers have grown to be skeptical of the "one size fits all" approach to professional learning days. It is a challenge for Michigan educational leaders to design effective professional learning that will help support teachers with honoring the personalized nature of adult learning. One district leader even mentioned that the leaders in their district need increased support and training to scale blended learning throughout the district effectively. There was a need to break the traditional model of professional learning in schools so that *Michigan Virtual* and district leaders could support the formal and informal learning experiences necessary for all teachers to improve.

Financial Resources

Every conversation with the district leaders from the partner school districts involved discussion of the significant challenges with funding and financial resources to support both the technology purchases and the staff support needed for sustaining a blended learning initiative with fidelity over time. One leader specifically recognized the disconnect between the resources needed (both people and technologies) and this type of support being provided from the state and federal funding structures. This was noted as a significant risk as the threat of reductions in Title II funding for the 2018 fiscal year and beyond loom. Time for teachers to learn, work, and plan will always be a problem that can be solved with creativity and support from teachers. Financial resources become even more of a challenge to overcome and pose an immediate threat to the professional learning process in districts, as well as to the support needed for technology resources.

Key Recommendations

Based on the results of the two years of work with the partner school districts, as well as the interviews and surveys completed for this report, three general recommendations surfaced:

- Lead with vision at all levels;
- Set up an effective professional learning process; and
- Provide systemic support structures for all.

Each recommendation is presented in the sections below.

Lead with Vision at All Levels

In the reflection of all three stakeholder groups (PD provider, teacher, and district leader), a coherent and unified vision for teaching and learning and the integration of personalized and blended learning became a common theme. It is interesting to note that the theme occurred in both the readiness points and the challenges in multiple places. While a clearly-articulated vision is important for all staff in a district, sometimes district leaders know and respect the professional knowledge and expertise of the teachers in the classroom, advocating for the vision to grow from a grassroots group of teacher innovators. Teachers appreciate and value the ability to chart their own course and design and develop lessons and strategies to meet the needs of their own students, but they also appreciate when any initiative is aligned with district vision and the strategic district curriculum and pedagogical focus. Teachers who are pushing themselves to learn new strategies and abandon their traditional methods appreciate much less ambiguity than their more innovative colleagues. While risk-taking and innovation should be encouraged, districts need to quickly seek

the consistent vision for effective technology adoption and personalized and blended learning strategies for the entire district.

Based on the context above, key recommendations include:

- Teachers need to create a common and meaningful vision for the effective uses of technology in their classroom and lesson design. Professional learning processes have to intentionally provide these educators with the knowledge and understanding to be able to develop this vision.
- Leaders throughout districts and schools need to develop a coherent vision for blended learning adoption across the district. It is this coherence[3] that will encourage leaders to look systematically across their whole district rather than focusing on pockets of innovation (Fullan & Quinn, 2016).
- The culture of a building must grow to accept the elements of risk and potential failure that comes with new learning for a new and innovative vision to be widely accepted. The community of learners and stakeholders must embrace a growth-mindset, understanding that learning is a process for adults as well as the students.
- Implementation teams must quickly develop a well-articulated and focused action plan that supports all stakeholders and is aligned to school improvement goals of the district. An effective implementation plan is not only important for the coherent and unified vision, but it is also the driver for communication and the continuous improvement process for any district. District leaders and teachers both noted that any implementation team should include both district team members as well as experts. Experts are able to help districts develop a plan and a vision, as they, themselves, work toward developing a shared understanding of both across the district.

Set up an Effective Professional Learning Process

Another recommendation based on the reflections and feedback from the partner schools is the importance of a meaningful and effective professional learning process. While prior knowledge and understanding was a major readiness point for most teachers, not all teachers in districts will have this foundational knowledge. It is important to build up this knowledge of personalized and blended learning while also giving administrators and district leaders opportunities to be learners. Professional learning processes need to adapt and change to address the challenges facing Michigan's current K-12 education system. With decreasing support and funding for professional learning, instructional coaches, and teacher time, districts are finding creative solutions to working together meaningfully and collaboratively to meet a common goal. This will need to continue. Another pressure on the traditional professional learning process is the system-wide understanding and adoption of informal and personalized learning. By informal, we mean the ongoing process of learning from knowledge creation in a manner where the individual is selecting his or her own desired outcomes and the necessary learning opportunities to achieve those

[3] Coherence, according to Fullan and Quinn (2016) is made up of four leadership components; focused direction, cultivating collaborative cultures, securing accountability, and deepening learning.

outcomes. This is a natural learning process, one that fits together nicely with the attention on personalized adult learning. Educators understand that "one size fits all" learning doesn't work for their students, and it also doesn't work for adults. A system of flexible, personalized, and creative professional learning options will help districts reach teachers where they are, provide them with the one-on-one attention so many need and are asking for, and provide them with the most meaningful experiences for their classrooms so they can have a greater impact on student achievement.

Based on the context above, key recommendations include:

- Informal learning communities within schools and districts need to value the growth-mindset and the risk taking necessary for a shift in pedagogy and educational technology strategies.
- Professional learning structures must provide consistent follow up, one-on-one coaching opportunities, and high degrees of transfer of learning to classroom practice.
- Leaders responsible for designing school and district-wide professional development calendars need to recognize that learning is not one-size-fits-all for adults. Adult learning in schools should include both formal and informal learning experiences as well as creative methods to get teachers to learn and collaborate together. Understanding that there aren't enough substitutes or time to get teachers out of the classroom, technology can be used to reach teachers where they are, while also providing high-quality supports and learning structures.

Provide Systemic Support Structures for All

The four school districts who participated in this pilot all recognized the need for intentional supports for teachers. While many teachers and district leaders mentioned the attention and need for technology and student devices, there was a crucial reflection from the district leadership. The devices are not the driver for change in any district; rather, the instructional strategies and knowledge of how to use the technology effectively is what makes a difference for student learning. This recommendation focuses on the importance of providing the instructional help for all educators in a district as they are making the shift to personalized and blended learning.

The increased support for blended learning goes beyond devices and bonds; it's about the people that can help the devices, resources, and tools make a difference for learners. District leaders and teachers need increased support for coaching models from the state and federal agencies. This coaching support includes both informal support from colleagues as well as formal support from experts and official district positions.

Based on the context above, key recommendations include:

- Both teachers and district leaders need to get as close to experts as possible. This may mean finding a neighboring district who has lessons to share about implementation. It could also mean contacting statewide educational organizations (e.g. MACUL, MEMSPA), intermediate

school districts, regional education service agencies, or non-profit organizations to provide consultation and coaching support.

- Districts and implementation teams should seek out alternative and creative ways to get teachers the technical support they need to tackle their just-in-time need. For example, schools have activated armies of tech-savvy students (e.g. EdTech Ninjas) to serve as helpful resources for the teachers.
- District leadership should continue to find ways to support in-district and, if possible, building-level coaching positions. Even with increased access to experts, teachers will need consistent support from someone close to their work to help out with day-to-day decisions and implementation support.

Continuing the Conversation

While this report has spotlighted the work of four partner school districts and the work in blended learning implementation over a two-year period, this is a very small sample of school districts and teacher populations. Intentional work and attention needs to continue to focus on effective integration and implementation of blended learning strategies throughout Michigan. The development and delivery of professional learning experiences must also begin to shift to a system that values informal learning and alternate modes and models of learning. As the education system is pushing for increased adoption of personalized learning for K-12 students, the same push should advocate for personalized adult learning.

Following the national conversation around professional learning, funding, and systemic support for educators, it is a significant to note the proposed changes to the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and Title II funding. ESSA authorizes essential professional learning programs and strengthens Title II by establishing new evidence requirements and a more rigorous definition of professional development. Additional cuts to Title II, specifically Title II, Part A would disrupt many state's ESSA implementation, including Michigan. Title II, Part A provides critical funding to states for the purposes of preparing, training, recruiting, and retaining high-quality teachers, principals, assistant principals, and other school leaders (George, 2017). Any further reduction in Title II funding would greatly reduce the amount of support for professional learning processes throughout Michigan, having a direct impact on additional adoption of personalized and blended learning strategies and pedagogy. A fully supported ESSA and Title II addresses the significant need for effective professional development, which is intensive, ongoing, and aligned with school improvement goals.

The implementation and integration of blended learning strategies in an entire system is a complex and continuous process that will have an impact on student achievement. The learning process must involve adequate supports for all stakeholders, a common, coherent, and aligned vision for blended learning, and a degree of local control and autonomy for local districts and their teachers. This focus will provide a necessary foundation for teachers to design learning experiences that use technology effectively to reach the needs of all learners.

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