CREATING A K-12 SYSTEM of Excellence
Functioning as a collaborative teaching and learning community, E-Learn is a place for educators to share ideas, insights, perspectives, and practices for the purpose of improving student success.

Want to participate? We'd like to hear from you.
Share your experience, perspective, or field of expertise through an interview, column, or article. Suggest our next topic of focus, get in touch with the E-Learn team.

Email elearn@blackboard.com for further information.

From the Editor

WE ARE ALL EXPERIENCING THE IMMENSE CHANGES that the education landscape has gone through in the last few decades. This is particularly true for students in their K-12 years, where many points of support are now needed in order to make their educational journey successful. With schools feeling great pressure from numerous directions — parents, alternative education models, technology adoption, and students’ increased exposure to threatening activities, to name a few —, all these changes are making educators’ jobs more challenging than ever.

At Blackboard, our commitment to supporting a successful student journey is at the very core of everything we do — particularly when it comes to connecting all the points of support today’s students need. After more than 20 years working to help over 100 million students succeed, Blackboard is uniquely positioned to partner with schools and districts and build a system of excellence centered around the student and their unique needs and experience.

By engaging and connecting the community, delivering teaching and learning, and keeping schools and students safe and secure, we can help support K-12 schools in all crucial areas.

We’ve had an incredible experience speaking with K-12 leaders and instructors to find out how they are navigating today’s unique educational challenges, many of whom were among this year’s winners of the Blackboard Catalyst Awards which honor innovation and excellence in our global community of practice.

For instance, we sat down with Davidson Academy, the first free public school for gifted students in the U.S., and found out how students are thriving through their innovative online model. Over at Vestavia Hills City Schools, in Alabama, students are promoting school spirit and unity through a mobile app they envisioned. Downloaded more than 1,300 times in just a year, the app has greatly improved communication between the school and its students. At Obridge Academy, a virtual school that supports many non-traditional students like those with disabilities and accommodation needs, an initiative called Accommodation Station is fostering student success by letting students learn at their own pace and connect through technology.

Explore how Tyler ISD, the largest independent school district in Northeast Texas, is achieving student success by focusing on teacher and campus leadership development. Similarly, find out how Calcasieu Parish School Board, a school district in Louisiana, supports and develops educators to create technology-driven learning opportunities that keep students engaged. Special thanks to Montana Digital Academy and the District of Columbia Public Schools for also sharing their valuable experiences and insights with us.

We hope this issue will inspire you to create the necessary initiatives to support today’s students — We are here to support you every step of the way.

Sincerely,
The E-Learn Team
The education landscape has dramatically changed over the last few decades. That is especially true in the K-12 years. While schools continue to perform the same fundamental functions and goals remain similar across education systems, what used to be considered uncomplicated has now become a complex system with different moving parts that have to work together.

There are now more school options available for parents to choose from, larger classes, multiple teaching models, and a deep technology adoption by schools and students alike, to name just a few. Moreover, schools are having to deal with a wide range of safety threats such as drug use, gang activity, weapons, bullying and cyberbullying. There is also increased media pressure, with marketing and public relations teams across education boards having to manage multiple communication channels.

These changes are making educator jobs more challenging than ever before. Today, a successful student journey must be supported by a multitude of factors both inside and outside school walls, such as quality instruction, extracurricular activities, parental involvement, and school and home environments.

All of these points of support are often disconnected, making things even more difficult for both the student and the individuals involved in the process – parents, educators, and school leaders – who are working hard to support the student in his or her educational journey.

That’s where Blackboard comes in. After more than 20 years working to help more than 100 million students succeed, Blackboard is uniquely positioned to partner with schools and districts to connect points of support and build a system of excellence, centered around the student and their unique needs and experience.

Blackboard is dedicated to student success by helping students prepare for graduation and beyond.
Engaging and connecting the community.

Parents expect open dialogue and free-flowing information about their child’s academic activities, on their terms. And schools need to deliver those messages efficiently — without endless copying and pasting into different systems. Our Community Engagement Solution handles it all with one powerful platform. It streamlines communications between administrators, teachers and parents, providing the personalized information parents expect with the efficiency that administrators need.

Delivering teaching and learning.

Students thrive when they are excited and engaged in the classroom, and teachers excel when students learn and progress. However, creating this environment isn’t easy when classrooms are crowded, student needs are everchanging, and teachers don’t feel like they get the tools or support they need to succeed. Our digital learning environment simplifies life for teachers and gives students an exciting and interactive way to learn. It gives teachers easy-to-use digital tools to engage students and monitor their progress. Most importantly, it allows students to learn without limits — giving them access to class from anywhere, at any time.

Keeping schools and students safe and secure.

Creating a safe school environment for students is critical. It requires striking a delicate balance between maintaining security standards within a welcoming atmosphere. Our Safety & Security solutions empower your staff to develop incident response plans, act on them if needed, and deliver information quickly to the community — keeping students safe and supported at every stage, without making them feel afraid.

Blackboard in K-12

With tightly integrated products and services, Blackboard is a true partner that supports schools and districts in each of these crucial areas.
Creating Lifelong Learners THROUGH DIGITAL EQUITY

District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) operates 116 primary and secondary education institutions in the United States capital. With nearly 49,000 students and more than 4,000 teachers, DCPS has been investing in technology integration in the classroom and blended instruction to accelerate student learning, increase graduation rates, advance the lowest performing schools, and create lifelong learners.

ENSURE THAT STUDENTS REACH THEIR FULL POTENTIAL through rigorous and joyful learning experiences provided in a nurturing environment: That is the mission of DCPS, where blended learning was first used in 2012, and is now seen as a key lever to reach their goals.

Six years ago, there were very few computers in the district’s schools and almost none where to be found inside the classrooms, especially at the elementary level, according to Dewayne J. McClary, director of Digital Learning & Innovation at DCPS.

DCPS’ initial goal was to provide a computer for every three students. This was accomplished in time for the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) testing in 2015. The next goal is to provide a computer device to every student in grades K-12.

“We understand that the iPad of today is the three-ring binder of yesterday. It does not replace the teacher; It is a tool the teacher uses to advance students and provide them with future-ready skills,” says McClary, who manages large-scale educational technology projects within the district.

“Every student has access to a digital citizenship course. They also start receiving keyboarding training in kindergarten. By the time they reach middle school, they use a digital learning environment and Office 365 to complete assignments, communicate with teachers, and build their digital portfolios,” the director affirms.

Blended Learning

Over the past six years, DCPS has made a significant investment in blended learning as a key lever to accelerate student achievement, according to McClary. In turn, they have seen more and more schools meeting district-wide academic goals.

“The blended learning in District of Columbia Public Schools has moved beyond a 1.0 station-rotation model to include a robust portfolio of digital tools that empower both the teacher and learner to make gains in a flexible instructional model,” says McClary.

The director notes that while in the past blended learning was limited to adaptive literacy and math programs meant to fill gaps in knowledge, it now supports a student-centered instructional vision through a wide variety of digital classroom innovations, including productivity suites, multimedia online textbooks, numerous and varied digital content programs, digital learning environment courses, and even a blogging platform.

“We have seen success and areas of growth across the board. Successes include teachers managing and organizing courses within our learning management system, and students using productivity suites to create, share, and collaborate on authentic work products,” explains McClary.

In addition, more teachers are regularly incorporating digital content into instructional planning and delivery because of the ongoing collaboration with the Digital Learning & Innovation and Content teams, aligning standards and units to the modules within the digital content so that the blended learning software is not viewed as a separate and additional task.

McClary shares that an ongoing area of growth is consistently building teacher knowledge in utilizing their classroom data available from digital content to inform instruction.
“Through piloting new programs and adapting them based on feedback and data, blended learning has become an integral instructional practice utilized throughout the district to accelerate learning, measure student achievement, and meet academic goals.”

A Capital Commitment

In 2017, DCPS released a five-year strategic plan called ‘A Capital Commitment,’ developed with the participation of 4,500 students, parents, educators, and community members. The plan established goals and strategic priorities for the period 2017-2022.

The strategic plan highlights equity as one of the core values at District of Columbia Public Schools. In order to meet the educational needs of each student, the use of technology combined with teaching excellence allows students to learn at their own pace.

“Technology also provides deep and granular data that helps guide the teacher in understanding student gaps. A teacher can pull up a report and see precisely what type of support the student needs,” says McClary.

Parents receive reports to show how they can best support students at home, and students themselves become more engaged and empowered to track their own instruction, according to the director.

“Students see their personal goals and work hard to meet them. Much of the PARCC progress we’ve seen over the past few years occurs in schools using technology-infused instruction. Students have progressed two to three years in many cases. Over time, our students have increased proficiency,” says McClary.

Training the Trainers

At DCPS, a combination of training tools has helped teachers comfortably integrate technology into classroom instruction.

For instance, the district collaborated with City Bridge Foundation to allow fellows to participate in a year-long Innovative Learning program, where teachers learn and share their new expertise with others.

“This program and other similar ones have provided a ‘train the trainer’ model,” says McClary.

In addition, the Digital Learning & Innovation team conducts an annual tech conference called iDC Institute. Teachers, coaches, and school leaders come together for two to three days of hands-on tech learning.

The Institute focuses on Office 365, training with individual digital curricular providers, and technology integration principles. It also promotes idea sharing between teachers.

“Lastly, site-based training and coaching occurs continually throughout the year. We remain flexible and responsive to schools’ needs. One school may request in-class modeling or work with students; Another school may meet with coaches and trainers in grade bands so they can delve into student data and program intricacies,” McClary explains.

DCPS now also wants to increase the summer tech camp to a full week, allowing teachers to be paid so they don’t lose vacation time for attending. They also want to have a full-time technology instructional coach embedded in each school.

“With this capacity, all teachers will have access to continual innovative teaching resources,” McClary concludes.

SOURCES


Technology has been an integral part of instruction at the Calcasieu Parish Public Schools for almost three decades. According to Dr. Sheryl Abshire, chief technology officer, ongoing assessment practices indicate that technology integration has produced a significant and reliable impact on student achievement.

“We realize that technology cannot be treated as a single independent variable, and that student achievement is gauged not only by how well students perform on standardized tests, but also by students’ ability to use higher-order thinking skills, such as thinking critically, analyzing, making inferences, and solving problems,” says Abshire, who has been working at the school district for the past 44 years.

According to the chief technology officer, school district evidence indicates that when used effectively, technology applications are supporting higher-order thinking by engaging students in authentic, complex tasks, within collaborative learning contexts.

“Our educators use the accumulating knowledge regarding the circumstances under which technology supports the broad definition of student achievement and are making informed choices about which technologies will best meet the particular needs of specific learning goals,” affirms Abshire.

At Calcasieu Parish School Board, a school district in Louisiana, educators have been provided with continuous professional development (PD) for more than 17 years. The school district’s Technology Training Center offers a plethora of PD strategies, adapting to the changing needs of today’s learners. For its initiative of supporting and developing educators capable of creating new technology-infused learning opportunities to engage students, Calcasieu Parish Public Schools are among the winners of the 2018 Blackboard Catalyst Award for Training & Professional Development.

ST: Priscila Zigunovas
LACKE CHARLES, LA., UNITED STATES
Technology to Advance Education

The CPSB Technology Department has a team of education technology professionals committed to maintaining the highest standard of service and support to the students, employees and community.

According to Abshire, their mission, “Advancing quality education with technology-connected learning,” is represented in all processes and procedures.

The department believes that technology-proficient teachers and 21st century tools for learning are critical for increasing student achievement. For the past 17 years, CPSB’s Technology Training Center (TTC) has successfully implemented and provided opportunities for professional development.

TTC’s team is responsible for providing continuing professional development that enables educators to restructure learning environments to create new technology-infused learning opportunities to successfully engage students.

In order to do that, the center works collaboratively with the district’s Curriculum and Instruction department, as well as several universities across the state. Over 350 training opportunities are available yearly for departments, administrators and teachers throughout the school year and summer, and include Tech Training Center Classes, customized School-Based Training, and courses for principals and administrators, to name a few.

The Tech Training Center Classes are aligned to the International Society for Technology in Education (Iste) standards and district-wide needs. Designed to meet the needs of all employees and raise the level of technology proficiency and integration practices, these classes are offered year-round.

Technology summer classes provide opportunities for district teachers to collaborate, learn new tips and techniques, improve classroom management strategies, and focus on ways to ensure student success.

According to Abshire, to accommodate the many learning styles, professional development is offered through multiple methods: online, face-to-face, webinars, and hybrid classes, with all materials and resources housed in Blackboard Learn.

Supporting Teaching and Learning

Since 2000, CPSB uses Blackboard Learn as the hub to drive professional development throughout the district.

In an effort to make the digital learning environment even more effective across the district’s over 90 schools and departments, TTC staff have trained 15 Blackboard mentors across grade levels to assist teachers in creating and maintaining websites within the platform.

“Blackboard mentors add one extra level of support to teachers in the classroom,” says Abshire.

In addition, according to the chief technology officer, all the schools and departments utilize Blackboard solutions for Professional Learning Communities, book studies, surveys, and more.

“Even our superintendent of curriculum and instruction utilizes Blackboard for professional development for principals and assistant principals. It is a proven, effective tool for interactivity and input from all stakeholders,” says Abshire.

To the chief technology officer, digital learning is a key component for preparing students for the world of work and future educational opportunities.

“Our long-standing use of Blackboard Learn has been the essential element to ensure our students are prepared for their next steps, whatever they may be. That is why we refer to Blackboard as the DNA of our district.”

Tools for Development

As the CPSB digital learning program continues to grow, the district is using solutions such as Blackboard Learn, Blackboard Mobile Learn, Blackboard Collaborate and Blackboard Web Community Manager:

“Our long-standing use of Blackboard Learn has been the essential element to ensure our students are prepared for their next steps, whatever they may be. That is why we refer to Blackboard as the DNA of our district.”

The Tech Points Incentive Program

One of the most innovative and effective best practices of the CPSB has been the implementation of the Tech Points incentive program.

In this program, teachers earn Tech Points by participating in professional development classes and activities during after-school hours. Tech Points can be redeemed at the Tech Point Store and traded for classroom equipment (see graphic). Over 28,000 points have been earned in less than two years.

The Tech Points Incentive Program

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<tr>
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<td>Promethean Board (80 Points)</td>
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“Through the use of Blackboard solutions and Tech Points, participation in professional development in Calcasieu Parish has grown tremendously. In fact, there was almost a 60% increase in participation after the first year of implementation, and the numbers have raised even more this year,” says Abshire.

To the chief technology officer, when educators are equipped with teaching and assessment strategies that provide opportunities for students to work collaboratively, actively engage in learning, discover and research new learning via the vast array of technologies available, students are highly motivated and produce projects that are a clear evidence of high levels of learning.

“This project has made such an impact. The learning process in the classroom is significantly richer as students have access to new and different types of information, can manipulate it in new and innovative ways, and then communicate results both locally and globally,” concludes Abshire.
In 2006, the Davidson Academy opened as the first free public school of its kind for profoundly gifted middle and high school students in the United States. In 2015, the institution began offering online courses and made its exemplary education more accessible for learners across the country. Due to its innovative online model that allows students to have meaningful interactions not only with teachers, but also with their same-age intellectual peers, Davidson Academy is one of the winners of the Blackboard Catalyst Award 2018 for Teaching and Learning.

By: Priscila Zigunovas

ASSUMING THAT GIFTED STUDENTS HAVE AN EASY time in school and get high grades without studying is a common misperception. In reality, they need to be challenged with an education that is appropriate for their abilities, strengths and interests, rather than just their age. That is the mission of the Davidson Academy, located within the University of Nevada, Reno campus.

The Academy offers two educational options designed to meet the needs of profoundly gifted students: An online campus for those living anywhere in the country, and a day school for local residents. To attend either option, students must score in the 99.9th percentile on IQ or achievement tests, approximately three standard deviations above the norm. Academy classes are organized by ability, not by age or grade.

"While it’s clear that students at this level have unique intellectual needs, what is often overlooked is their social and emotional needs," says Stacy Hawthorne, director of online programs at the Academy.

To Hawthorne, this is where the institution’s online campus is most unique. “We offer students real opportunities to connect with their intellectual peers of similar age so that they can truly be themselves.” These interactions improve students’ social and emotional development.

According to the director, researchers advocate for online learning platforms for gifted students that are rich in asynchronous and synchronous communication. “The ability to create personalized and rich asynchronous and synchronous online experiences in Blackboard Learn is the centerpiece of our online model. Without this level of interaction, our students wouldn’t be the learning community that they are today,” affirms Hawthorne.

All core courses have two 90-minute online sessions per week. During these live sessions, students and their instructor are required to have their video camera on and their microphone ready to go.

To Hawthorne, these live sessions are what foster some of the most meaningful parts of a Davidson Academy education. “No other online program offers so much real-time interaction, and the results are showing themselves everyday with our students’ enthusiasm for online learning.”
Putting Students First

Before launching their online learning model, the institution spent several years in the design phase, in order to ensure they were building a model that would truly benefit their students.

“What we see in many other online programs is a model that neglects to take advantage of all that online learning has to offer. In some cases, online learning can seem more like a correspondence course where work is delivered and returned digitally. Schools that want to integrate online learning in a more meaningful way need to capture the power of online learning to personalize education. At the Davidson Academy, we truly put our students first in everything we do,” says Hawthorne.

To illustrate that, she provides one example: The academy has only one online student who needs to take Calculus III next year. At most schools, the course would be cancelled, or the student would have to take an independent study course. But not at Davidson.

“We researched and purchased a telepresence robot so the student could take the course on our Reno campus with other profoundly gifted students. For this one course, he attends a traditional class with the aid of the telepresence robot. For the rest of his classes, he takes online courses with his online classmates,” explains the director.

The Personalized Learning Plan

At the Academy, each student is placed in courses based on their abilities and academic needs in each subject, instead of following a prescribed curriculum.

This happens through a Personalized Learning Plan (PLP) created by the student along with their parents, a school guidance counselor, and the curriculum team. The plans are formally reviewed and revised at least once per year.

“The purpose of the Personalized Learning Plan is to deepen and strengthen the learning experience for all Davidson Academy Online students. PLPs are consistent with our philosophy of treating students as individuals who are invested in their own learning,” Hawthorne explains.

According to the director, the PLP is an adaptable document used to guide students through a rigorous core curriculum, and it helps them make elective decisions based on their interests and commensurate with their ability, achievement and motivation levels.

“Students, with adult guidance including staff and parents, propose ideas for the personalization process. Personalization is not ‘doing your own thing’ or altering the core requirements; it is the core experience with a variety of options based on student interest and competence,” says Hawthorne, adding that personalization also refers to adapting individual classroom experiences to provide students with a pace and depth appropriate to their abilities and interests.

At the Davidson Academy, students are placed in the appropriate level of core courses first, and then the institution creates a master schedule to ensure each student takes the courses they need, while at most schools the master schedule dictates which courses a student can take.

“For example, at Davidson students can take Calculus and Algebra at the same time, or the student would have to take an independent study course. But not at Davidson. Most schools, the course would be cancelled, or the student would have to take an independent study course. But not at Davidson. At the Davidson Academy, students are placed in the appropriate level of core courses first, and then the institution creates a master schedule to ensure each student takes the courses they need, while at most schools the master schedule dictates which courses a student can take.”

6 Core Values of All Davidson Academy Courses

1. **Critical Thinking** — Courses will provide opportunities for participants to think critically, form and support opinions, and experience a variety of perspectives.

2. **Rich Discourse** — Courses will rely on a rich and authentic two-way discourse between all participants.

3. **Collaboration** — Courses will contain synchronous instructional elements that require collaboration among participants.

4. **Flexibility** — Courses will have a flexible learning plan so that they are responsive to the needs of individual students.

Supporting Student Success

The academy offers a variety of support services for online students including technology, counseling, advising, and college admissions services. Learn next how this support system works:

- The **counselor** meets with all students regularly, spends time getting to know students, and helps faculty to understand each student on a more personal level.

- Students meet at least once per semester with their **advisor** who helps to keep them on track for graduation.

- Each high school student has a **college placement counselor** who works closely with them to ensure they have a high school resume that makes them attractive for their desired university or post-high school plans.

- **All staff members** are available through the internal instant messaging system any time a student has a question or wants to talk.
Empowering Teachers and Campus Leadership: Tyler ISD’s Recipe for Student Success

At Tyler ISD, the largest independent school district in Northeast Texas, every decision is made with the students at the center. Being student-centric serves this school district well, as their main goal is to prepare them to become productive citizens who contribute to the region’s economic growth and are community-oriented.

With ambitious campus improvement plans set to be accomplished by 2021, Tyler ISD is focusing on teacher and campus leadership teams to drive student success.

By: Lilianna Camacho
Tyler, Texas, United States

Empowering Teachers and Campus Leaders Through Professional Learning

At Tyler ISD, the ultimate goal is generating successful student outcomes, which are fueled by the quality and satisfaction of its teaching staff. According to research done by the school district, teachers’ professional development is the key to student progression and success.

Hiring the best teaching talent and keeping them engaged through professional learning and development is an essential part of their continuous improvement strategy. As a result, building a healthy learning environment that is designed to attract, engage and retain teachers is a primary driver for Tyler ISD’s success in preparing students beyond K-12.

By providing teachers with the right tools and opportunities to learn, they will feel more satisfied in their roles, keep student engagement high, and deliver the targeted student...
Promoting teacher self-efficacy and collaboration is largely achieved through the effective use of technology. Tyler ISD has partnered with Blackboard Classroom to provide teachers with a virtual professional learning community. Due to the district’s size and reach, having an online platform that enables peer collaboration is a factor in the success of Tyler ISD’s professional learning initiative. Blackboard Classroom is Blackboard’s solution for K-12 that enables personalized learning anytime, anywhere. Teachers are able to exchange ideas, give and receive feedback, and support each other to improve their craft. Dr. Hanson explains, “Through our partnership with Blackboard Classroom, we are able to provide a virtual professional learning community among district teachers. They are able to collaborate about their content, offer suggested activities and lessons, and give direct feedback about the written curriculum and/or assessments.”

One of the keys to student success is curriculum – its design and personalization can be a game changer for student outcomes. Dr. Hanson points out that in order for any curriculum to be effective, “a culture of continuous professional learning is essential.” And while school districts have to comply with school board objectives, Tyler ISD is placing its focus on transforming professional learning as a fundamental part of students’ continued improved performance, instead of having an approach to curriculum that is driven by compliance measures only. This is attained by “engaging teachers in the professional learning experiences at the district level and campus level,” says Dr. Hanson. “We place a strong emphasis on professional learning communities and are creating an additional layer of professional learning through our partnership with Blackboard Classroom.”

The Importance of Effective Curriculum Delivery

While creating a solid written curriculum is important and the first crucial step for student success, it only comes to life through the quality of the teaching staff delivering it. Effectively implementing a curriculum is what “creates the learning opportunities for students,” affirms Dr. Hanson. Through professional learning, teachers are able to develop and perfect their craft, and as Tyler ISD has found, collaboration is a key component to delivering engaging, impactful, and meaningful learning experiences for students – with technology as its biggest partner.

According to Dr. Hanson, “When teachers are able to hone their teaching craft through collaboration with other teachers, curriculum staff, master teachers, and instructional specialists, they produce engaging learning for their students. Blackboard Classroom provides the platform for such collaboration to exist.”

Blackboard Classroom provides a systemic approach for campus leaders to participate in the collaborative process. For example, a school principal can have “easy accessibility to live content; he or she can participate in collaborative discussions and ask key questions that lead to high levels of student engagement,” comments Dr. Hanson.

In addition, Dr. Hanson explains that Tyler ISD knows that teachers learn best from their colleagues who are handling similar contents, grade levels or fields. For this reason, teachers play an important role when it comes to curriculum creation and professional learning experiences alike. “Our teachers go beyond ‘giving input’ toward the design of the written curriculum–they are the curriculum designers and developers. Teachers are also the main contributors of the professional learning experiences. They are collaborating virtually in Blackboard Classroom: they post ideas, interact online, and assist one another across the district.”

Dr. Hanson adds, “Through this collaborative approach with Blackboard, campus leaders are also able to have some campus autonomy while maintaining consistency to the instructional leadership systems across the district.”

To illustrate the power of collaboration, Dr. Hanson shares that ‘Teacher Experts’ at Tyler ISD designed a curriculum that resulted in improved growth for students during the 2017-2018 calendar year, compared to the previous year. For example, 3rd grade reading scores on the state assessment improved by 10% and 10 out of 17 campuses in Tyler ISD improved their 3rd grade reading scores by at least 3%. There was also an 8.3% increase in the percent of students that passed in 2018, relative to 2017. In addition, Tyler ISD students take the NWEA MAP™ assessment in the beginning of the year, the middle of the year and the end of the year. See below the results for kindergarten, grades one and two.

### Improved Growth During 2017–2018 Calendar Year

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<th>INCREASE %</th>
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* NWEA (Northwest Evaluation Association) runs assessments called MAP – Measures of Academic Progress to measure a student’s progress or growth in school.

Now, the independent school district has Teacher Expert teams in every core content at each grade level. “These teams are able to collaborate face to face and virtually through content horizontally and vertically; provide essential feedback about curriculum and assessment; and engage in improving the teacher practice. Blackboard Classroom will allow these Teacher Expert teams to work together virtually, which creates a highly efficient system of designing and implementing high quality curriculum,” shares Dr. Hanson.

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**Blackboard Classroom**

Blackboard Classroom offers a comprehensive digital learning environment for K-12. Students and teachers can benefit from its simple, powerful, and personalized learning experience.

- State-Of-The-Art Learning Management System
- Cutting-Edge HD Virtual Classroom
- Rich Digital & Interactive Content
- Unique Personalized Learning Designer
- Analytics & Data Visualization
- Complete Mobility – Access anytime, anywhere

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Preparing Students for Life Beyond K-12

Tyler ISD is committed to preparing students for life after their K-12 experience. The goal is to continue the district’s tradition of “producing citizens for Tyler who are actively engaged in the community through service and career. We are committed to helping students have full exposure to high quality content and extra-curricular activities that builds well-rounded adults,” affirms Dr. Hanson. In order for this vision to come to life, teachers, campus leaders and staff are at the heart of it all – collaborative, engaged, and satisfied educators are the key drivers to shaping resilient, self-directed, creative, and improvement focused members of society. As Dr. Hanson puts it, “The school board, superintendent, district administration and campus personnel keep the student(s) at the forefront of every decision. We know that with a solid academic foundation, students of Tyler ISD will become productive citizens of East Texas who contribute to the economic growth and are service oriented toward the community.” Through effective instruction, students should be ready to tackle post-secondary education, enjoy productive work and careers of their choice, and face their lives and future confidently.


At Tyler ISD, teachers and campus leadership development is the key to successful student outcomes, with technology as a central partner to achieving professional learning across the independent school district’s multiple locations.

SOURCES

A virtual school for grades 6-12 based in Hicksville, New York, Obridge Academy attracts many non-traditional students, including those with documented learning disabilities and accommodation needs. Due to its initiative to use technology to reach those who need differentiated instruction and support services in the virtual environment, the institution is among the winners of the 2018 Blackboard Catalyst Award for Student Success.

**OBRIDGE ACADEMY’S “PERSONAL TOUCH”**

Boosts Student Success

A virtual school for grades 6-12 based in Hicksville, New York, Obridge Academy attracts many non-traditional students, including those with documented learning disabilities and accommodation needs. Due to its initiative to use technology to reach those who need differentiated instruction and support services in the virtual environment, the institution is among the winners of the 2018 Blackboard Catalyst Award for Student Success.

**By:** PRISCILA ZIGUNOVA

**HICKSVILLE, N.Y., UNITED STATES**

OBRIDGE ACADEMY IS A SMALL, PRIVATE, ONLINE school where students who faced a variety of issues at traditional brick-and-mortar institutions can attend a self-paced, AdvancEd accredited, diploma-granting program.

Some of its students have spectrum diagnoses, have endured bullying or equally substantial stressors, and others deal with depression, social anxiety, or mood disorders.

“We see every student as an individual who is entitled to learn at their own pace, with guidance from teachers and support staff when needed,” says Kristin Bestler, director of student services at Obridge Academy.

According to Bestler, Obridge’s program is best suited for learners who enjoy and succeed at working independently, and is ideal for those who find that the regular school pace moves too quickly or too slowly through the curriculum.

The school now has approximately 30 students with a range of documented and disclosed learning differences. “Since our disability services are still very new, we hope to reach many more in the coming year,” says the director.

Through a recent initiative, the Accommodation Station, Obridge students are thriving, with enrollment and retention numbers on the rise.

“Student success is very important to us. Regardless of whether a student attends Obridge Academy for all of high school, one year, or even one course, we want to do our best in providing the support services that he or she needs in order to achieve their goals,” says Bestler.
Supporting All Students: The Accommodation Station

Although the school attracts many students with disabilities, it was soon discovered that retention for this student population can be a challenge, and support efforts could be improved. Despite the self-paced structure and convenient online platform, many learners showed indicators that additional support was needed.

Obridge courses have always been designed to be accessible and inclusive. They offered captions, enlarged and multicolored text content, and mixed media embedded in most modules.

However, something was still missing. The “personal touch” that several of these students lacked in their home districts was something they were seeking in the online environment as well.

That’s when the Accommodation Station came in; a Blackboard Learn “course” designed for students who have disclosed a disability and the need for support services.

The Accommodation Station provides students with access to request forms for Virtual Testing Accommodations, academic advisement and counseling sessions, and tutoring services, along with information on external resources that may benefit the students.

It also has a Discussion Board that allows the students to communicate with the support staff and with each other. A Student Spotlight tab allows students to share and showcase their success stories.

“The goal of Accommodation Station is to enhance student success, which is a result of a powerful combination of accommodation access, connection to the school and support staff, as well as a group of supportive peers,” says Bestler.

“Our most popular component so far is the Academic Advisement, scheduled face-to-face sessions during which the support staff discuss one-on-one with a student or parents an academic plan to get the student on track for course completion and grade improvement,” she adds.

Another Blackboard solution that the institution uses to support students is the web conferencing application Blackboard Collaborate.

“Blackboard Collaborate heavily influences our goal to provide student support. Students need to feel comfortable in order to ask for help, and most students feel comfortable when they connect a name with a face, making virtual sessions with a student so important for what we do,” says the director.

Fostering Student Success

Bestler believes that the school’s best practices in promoting student success include the ability to see each student as an individual and the use of personalized approaches for each learner.

“Our support staff is accustomed to supporting many different types of students with a variety of needs. Whenever we determine that there is a significant unmet need in our student population, we do our best to provide access to support services. We truly want each student to be successful and to reach his or her own academic goals,” she explains, adding that the dedication that is put towards supporting each student is definitely strong.

According to Bestler, the students that take the opportunity to access school services benefit from the experiences by establishing a sense of connectedness, which is often difficult to achieve through online learning.

Family engagement is also a crucial factor to student success. Many families disclose that their children have some form of disability as early as during the enrollment process and want to make sure the student attends a school that will best cater to their needs.

“If our school is a right fit for them, we make sure to keep them informed on their child’s progress and remind them that the student should be using their accommodations,” Bestler explains.

The school also invites parents and any other family members to attend advisement sessions, so everyone is on the same page.

What Students and Parents Say

*“This is my son’s third attempt at middle school. I have never seen him so comfortable and happy with doing his assignments.”*

Mother of 7th grade student with autism.

*“I would like to start an LGBTQ club. How do I start it in Blackboard?”*

An 11th grade student with social anxiety who feels comfortable enough using the virtual environment to start a club.

*“I never knew these existed. I can do all of my work without getting headaches now. Thank you so much!”*

A 10th grade student with deuteranopia who gets migraines while looking at her assignments. She has improved significantly with the anti-glare glasses recommended by the school.
Improving Education Access
IN RURAL MONTANA

Montana Digital Academy, created in 2009, is the state online program that serves all 146,000 K-12 students in Montana through their local public school. The academy offers various online programs that have greatly benefited students across the state, including a learner-focused credit recovery program, which has positively impacted graduation rates in the schools of 89% of surveyed principals. Due to enhancing access to courses and content for all students in Montana, regardless of location or resources, Montana Digital Academy is one of the winners of the 2018 Blackboard Catalyst Award for Teaching and Learning.

by: Priscila Zigunovas
Missoula, Mont., United States

With an economy based primarily in agriculture, the state of Montana, in Northwestern United States, is the 4th largest in area and the 3rd least densely populated, with just over one million people, 65% of them living in rural areas.

Located at the University of Montana, Montana Digital Academy (MTDA) was created by the 2009 state Legislature to deliver distance learning programs in different formats to meet the needs of students in local public schools across the Big Sky Country. Since 2010, the Academy have had over 50,000 enrollments.

“A driving factor in our program is access. Many students in rural Montana are at smaller schools that don’t have the resources to provide access to advanced placement and dual credit courses, or electives like Psychology that are not offered at their local school, or summer programs that can allow a student early graduation,” says Dr. Jason Neiffer, assistant director/curriculum director at Montana Digital Academy. “MTDA is an essential tool for enabling all students in Montana, regardless of location or resources, to access courses and content based on their needs and desires.”

Programs at Montana Digital Academy

• The original credit program offers cohort-style distance learning courses in over 70 subjects, including core classes like Geometry and World History, as
well as elective courses like Criminology and AP Environmental Science.

- The credit recovery program serves students that have previously failed a face-to-face course and need a credit to continue with their school program and ultimately graduate.

- The middle school Multi-Language Sampler gives middle school aged students the opportunity to be introduced to a new language.

- EdReady is a personalized learning system for learners ranging from upper elementary to adult basic education.

Boosting Graduation Rates: The Credit Recovery Program

One of the most successful MTDA initiatives is the credit recovery program, which offers learning alternatives to students who have failed a face-to-face core course. By studying online, these students can recover the credits they need while continuing with their school program, and eventually graduate.

According to Neiffer, Montana Digital Academy has offered credit recovery courses since 2011, based on data from schools that suggested that students who qualified for a credit recovery course found the original credit format was not meeting their needs.

“The credit recovery program provides a more flexible environment that utilizes a team approach to build a support system around this unique student population,” affirms the director.

According to Neiffer, in order to implement the program, MTDA initially adopted an all-in-one vendor-based solution, with content and learning management wrapped up in one system. However, they ultimately outgrew the solution.

“While it allowed us to roll out the program quickly to meet demand, over time, we found that the solution didn’t allow for customizations and adaptations to best meet the needs of our students,” he says.

After evaluating other credit recovery-focused solutions available in the market, MTDA ultimately decided to develop its own system utilizing toolsets that they had already adopted for the initial program. This was done within Blackboard Classroom.

In 2013, MTDA participated in a grant program called SHAPE P-20, an initiative by the Dennis and Phyllis Washington Foundation to fund innovative programs in the Missoula County Public School and University of Montana.

“Under the leadership of MTDA Executive Director, Bob Currie, MTDA successfully applied for seed money to redevelop our credit recovery program to meet the needs of our students. Over the next 24 months, our staff engaged teachers, site facilitators, and academic researchers to rebuild a new credit recovery program that increased student satisfaction, increased flexibility without diminishing learning outcomes and effectiveness, increased communication to stakeholders, and provided data to local schools about student progress to highlight the need for increased support,” says Neiffer.

After many prototypes were designed, built and tested internally, the program was ultimately released in Fall 2015, completely replacing the previous platform.

Supporting Student Success

The new credit recovery program has resulted so far in nearly 5,000 semester credits recovered by Montana students statewide. The program has many new features that help drive student success. See below the main ones:
A Learning Pathway

Students have a learning pathway with course designs inspired by mastery learning, “Students must master material before moving forward, and the ones that struggle are offered additional remedial activities and access to resources to facilitate learning. This design addresses an issue with the previous program where students would spend time jumping from activity to activity without completing assignments or assessments,” the director explains.

According to him, following a learning path way increases the likelihood that students will gain an understanding of the content.

Just-in-Time Communications

The new learning model utilizes the Blackboard Classroom Personalized Learning Designer (PLD) to provide ‘just-in-time’ communications to all interested parties, including students, teachers, and the teachers and counselors at the student’s local school to increase transparency.

Turning Students into Better Learners

For Montana Digital Academy, teaching and supporting online students is a team effort. The director often tells schools that “It takes a village to teach an online student,” something that, according to him, has proven to be right repeatedly at MTDA.

According to the director, while some students adjust well to distance learning programs, enrolling and successfully completing classes with little assistance, for all others, a team approach is the “X-factor” that can make the difference between success and failure.

“After our initial release, in 2015, we received an incredible degree of feedback from all of our stakeholders, including a desire of our local support personnel to have customized reports that help track student progress over a semester. We were encouraged by these requests including a desire of our local support personnel to have a credible trove of feedback from all of our stakeholders, to develop dynamic progress reports and visualizations.

“We use an external tool to parse that email and feed the information into a Google Suite for Education spreadsheet. We then created custom algorithms that predict whether or not a student is likely or not to be on the pathway to finish the course. That data gives local facilitators more nuanced information so they may act on behalf of the student,” Neiffer explains.

Data Reports

The possibility to analyze data to track student progress is an important feature of the new program. Neiffer explains that the new course format sends out regular “data pings” with progress information to MTDA’s internal systems to develop dynamic progress reports and visualizations.

“The new learning model utilizes the Blackboard Classroom Personalized Learning Designer, MTDA created an infrastructure where each course sends out regular data updates on student progress via email into their reports system.

“We regularly review research for ideas to pilot available student feedback and research on distance learning and brain-based pedagogy. We regularly review research for ideas to pilot, and then integrate the student feedback before we roll out more widely in our program."
At Vestavia Hills High School, students wanted to promote school spirit and unity through a mobile app they envisioned, designed to improve communication among peers. Facilitated by high school leaders, the VHHS student life app was launched in September 2017, and has been downloaded more than 1,300 times so far. For their initiative of encouraging youth leadership, Vestavia Hills City Schools are among the winners of the 2018 Blackboard Catalyst Award for Community Engagement.

“Every spring, freshmen are invited to participate in a training retreat as a requirement for entrance into the program. Once they participate in the training, they become a member. Every year, more than 200 freshmen students are trained through the program, which has created a critical mass of students who are working intentionally to change the climate of the school,” says Kym Prewitt, leadership teacher & sponsor at Vestavia Hills City Schools and a VHHS graduate herself.

Once they are in the program, students are eligible for other YLVH activities, including leadership and service opportunities and leadership classes. According to Prewitt, at any

A MOBILE APP
Created to Connect Students, by Students

VESTAVIA HILLS IS A SUBURB OF THE CITY OF Birmingham, Alabama, with a population of 34,000 inhabitants. Established in 1970, the school district of Vestavia Hills serves the region with five elementary schools, two middle schools and one high school, enrolling 7,000 students, of which 2,000 attend grades ninth to 12th. In 2004, as Vestavia Hills High School grew and became more diverse, the Youth Leadership Vestavia Hills (YLVH) program was created with the tagline ‘Be the Difference’ in order to train high school students to become leaders in their community and help them connect with one another.
The Possible Project

In the fall of 2016, students from YLVH were looking for ways to promote school spirit and unity among the student population. "This project created a great sense of pride among the students, and a better understanding of the concepts they had studied as they actually experienced leadership in action," says Prewitt.

According to Prewitt, students in the Youth Leadership initiative learn that leadership comes from integrity, and that there are non-obvious ways to lead, such as providing a good example as a friend or neighbor. "We all have the potential to be leaders, so choose to be a good one. Lead everyday wherever you are — in the classroom, on the field, in the community. How you interact and treat others is the foundation for all the rest," Prewitt affirms.

"This app has made general communication between the school and the students much easier. So much information is now at our fingertips in a medium that we can easily use. It also highlights student achievements and celebrates the amazing things that the kids in this school are capable of. I check this app like I check Instagram!" Sloen Zieverink, student

"This project created a great sense of pride among the students, and a better understanding of the concepts they had studied as they actually experienced leadership in action," says Prewitt.

According to the leadership teacher, after the app was launched, the students have continued to play a leading role in the management of the app and its ongoing development.

Small Groups, Big Changes

Kym Prewitt points out that the challenges schools face today are universal. "Bullying, depression, anxiety, isolation, violence, and coping by using drugs and alcohol are all too common. There is great pressure to sext, to be perfect, to be someone you are not. That is the common culture in which our teens operate."

The leadership teacher believes that nothing can change the culture of an educational institution like a critical mass of students having the mindset of making the school a better place by reaching out to help or connect with one peer at a time. "When enough students believe they can 'Be the Difference,' and they act on that belief intentionally, as true change agents, that is when the culture shifts."

Prewitt mentions the book "Communities: The Structure of Belonging," by Peter Block, to explain the ideas that are at the foundation of the community work being done at VHCS.

"One premise of the book is that communities are transformed through small groups, which is how we structure our training for students. We teach students to consider the perspective of others as much as their own to learn how..."
to better connect with people who may be different in some way from themselves,” she explains, adding that in larger schools, particularly, being intentional about connecting with others is essential to creating a culture in which everyone feels welcomed and valued and has a sense of belonging.

“We instill in students a sense of ownership of their community. We started this long before ‘student voice’ was the buzzword. We have always strived for students to engage in their communities with their positive ideas, their respectful actions towards others, and acts of service,” Prewitt concludes.

**Student Engagement Initiatives**

The Youth Leadership Vestavia Hills program offers many ways for students to engage with their community.

“In the Leadership class that is available to juniors and seniors in the YLVH program, we focus on four pillars: communication, confidence, empathy, and initiative. All of our activities are designed to improve these skills and characteristics of each student,” says Prewitt.

Learn next some of the program’s initiatives, which continue to expand every year.

- **Bridges Panels:** In this initiative, students receive training on bullying and then visit middle schools to share their own stories and experiences in this area with younger students.

- **Help the Hills Student Team:** A select group of junior and senior students who represent the school and the community in the fight against drug and alcohol use and abuse.

- **New Student Committee:** A student-led committee responsible for making new high school students feel welcome. The committee pairs each new student with two Young Leadership students who have something in common. It also promotes many new student group activities during the year, including a welcome pizza party.

- **Leadership Classes Level I and II:** A year-long, project-driven course on leadership training, communication skills, and community service, open to juniors and seniors who have completed Youth Leadership training.

- **RISE:** A community-wide fundraising event for select local charities, planned and executed by YLVH. It’s the highest-attended event of the year, with the participation of 75% of the student body.

- **Service Opportunities:** YLVH promotes community service through a point system, in which members are required to earn points by participating in events, committees, and through community service.

The **Student Life App**

Conceptualized by students of Vestavia Hills High School, developed by Blackboard, and launched in September of 2017, the app has 1,362 downloads.

More than 60 information sources or feeds were added to the app, including website feeds, school calendars, teacher Twitter accounts and sports score streams, ensuring constant updates throughout the day. Students can also use the app to access their grades.

The Chalkable page is by far the most popular with 22,300 views. The second most popular is Calendar with 7,399 views, and the third is the News Feed with 6,374 views.

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“Through our partnership with Blackboard Classroom, we are able to provide a virtual professional learning community among district teachers. They are able to collaborate about their content, offer suggested activities and lessons, and give direct feedback about the written curriculum and/or assessments.”

Dr. Christy Hanson
Assistant superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction at Tyler ISD

“The ability to create personalized and rich asynchronous and synchronous online experiences in Blackboard Learn is the centerpiece of our online model. Without this level of interaction, our students wouldn’t be the learning community that they are today.”

Stacy Hawthorne
Director of online programs at Davidson Academy

“The Student Life App, conceptualized by students of Vestavia Hills High School, developed by Blackboard, and launched in September of 2017, has 1,362 downloads.”

Kym Prewitt
Leadership Teacher & Sponsor at Vestavia Hills City Schools