COLORADO DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

BLENDED LEARNING INITIATIVE (BLI)

KEY STAKEHOLDER CONVERSATIONS

Listening & Learning to Inform District Supports & Strategy

Throughout the Fall of 2023, leaders of the Colorado Department of Education (CDE) Blended Learning Initiative (BLI) continued their work to better understand stakeholder perspectives about the use of Blended Learning Courses and Online Learning in Colorado schools. In partnership with the Center for Education Policy (CFEP) at Keystone Policy Center (Keystone), the BLI team sought input from families, students, educators, system leaders and other involved stakeholders to assess their perspectives about the use of Blended Learning.

December 2022 Report from the Online & Blended Learning Listening Sessions and accompanying online survey.

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CENTER FOR EDUCATION POLICY

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Introduction & Report Overview

Throughout the fall of 2022, Keystone has worked in partnership with the Blended Learning Initiative (BLI) team at the Colorado Department of Education (CDE) to design and manage a multi-platform stakeholder engagement process regarding statewide educator, system leader, parent and student perspectives on the use of online and blended learning. The process specifically sought input on several key areas with differing types of input from the different stakeholders:

1. What is the level of understanding of the differences between online learning, blended learning and the use of technology to assist brick and mortar instruction;
2. What are the effects on the educator workforce of the use of blended learning including teacher satisfaction and feelings of preparedness or readiness for blended learning instruction;
3. Educator, guardian and student perception of the effectiveness of blended learning instruction on student academic progress *and* on general student growth;
4. System leader perspectives on the expansion of blended learning including amount of time relative to total instructional time, appropriate level of teacher time, the readiness at the system or school level for the expansion of blended learning and the fiscal implications thereof.

To gather input on these topics, Keystone and the CDE BLI team developed a stakeholder engagement plan that included:

1. In-person sessions with system leaders at the Western Slope and Southern Superintendents Conference(s) on October 18 and 27 respectively;
2. An online survey with sections for and promoted to system leaders, educators, parents/guardians, students and other stakeholders;
3. Online video focus groups with educators held on October 21;
4. Online video focus groups with guardians and students on October 24;
5. In-person teacher focus group at the November 4 Commissioner's Teacher Cabinet meeting.

Stakeholders were provided the following definitions as context:

- Blended Learning - A formal education program through which a student learns at least in part away from a physical school building or in part through digital content at a supervised physical location that is not the student's home.
- Online Learning - Learning that is provided by a full-time online school or program offered through a school district. Students may access online learning as part, or all, of their academic schedule. Also referred to as "primary online" throughout this survey. A list of Colorado online schools and programs can be found at: https://www.cde.state.co.us/onlinelearning
- Blended Learning Courses - "Blended learning courses" are courses taken by students enrolled in a brick-and-mortar school in which some of the instruction is regularly received in-person, on-site and some of the instruction is received regularly off-site, digitally.
- Supplemental Online Courses - "Supplemental online courses" are courses taken by students enrolled in a brick-and-mortar school in which all of the instruction is received off-site, digitally. In the survey, you may not see the term "supplemental online" used, but instead "primarily online". In those instances, assume that the situation described would be for a student enrolled in a brick-and-mortar school whose academic schedule is comprised mostly of supplemental online courses.

What We Heard

Key Themes

- ❖ *Empower Local Leaders to Expand the use of Blended Learning*

- ❖ *Reform Policies as Needed to Increase Fundability of Blended Learning*

- ❖ *Ensure Appropriate Guardrails, Oversight and Protections to Ensure Quality Outcomes*

- ❖ *Support Educators with Training and Aligned Staffing Models*

- ❖ *Support Families with Technical and Other Resources*

- ❖ *Provide Supports to Students and Families to Ensure Equitable Access and Opportunities*

Digging Deeper: Perspectives by Stakeholder Group

System Leaders

We met with superintendents at the Western and Southern Superintendents Conferences to gather their input at each meeting. During each 45 minute session, we engaged attendees on three questions:

- How much time (of school day/week) should be eligible to be structured as online and blended learning for a brick and mortar student?
- How much real-time teacher involvement should be required for online and blended learning courses?
- How well equipped are you to expand use of blended and online learning?

For each of these questions, superintendents placed a sticky note on chart paper hung in the room along a spectrum from zero to one-hundred percent with the current guidance for each indicated (40% for time structured and 20% for teacher involvement). After placing a sticky note to indicate their perspective, all participants were invited to verbally share the reason for the placement and any underlying thoughts.

On the question of how much time should be structured as blended learning, more than half of the superintendents said it should be more than the current guidance of 40% but less than 100%. Approximately one-third placed their note at the 40% level and one was just below. In discussion, most superintendents felt they should have greater flexibility and autonomy to structure as much time as possible with a broad consensus that the guiding factor should be student outcomes and individual student needs. In general, they indicated strong belief that they should have autonomy locally to decide how much blended or online learning is appropriate for an individual student rather than having firm rules or limits. It is important to note that a number of superintendents expressed concern that without proper oversight, some leaders or systems could either take advantage of the independence or that some students could "fall through the cracks." Participants during this discussion raised concerns about the existing funding systems and structures, count-days and seat-time requirements as barriers or areas of significant concern for them in determining how much to expand the use of blended learning.

In sharing views on how much teacher involvement there should be for blended learning, slightly less than one-half felt the current guidance of 20% was appropriate, one fell just below that point and slightly fewer than one-half felt there should be significantly more teacher involvement. During the associated discussion, many participants expressed the view that the amount of time was a more complex answer as they would want to see educators able to differentiate the level and extent of engagement based on the individual student, the grade level, the subject and stage of the course.

Superintendents at the conference all described themselves and their educators as being generally equipped to support the expansion of blended learning with most votes aggregated around the "Moderately" point on the spectrum. In the discussion, comments did return to questions about funding structures, professional development available to teachers and equitable access to both the requisite technology as well as the out-of-school environments and support systems.

Educators

Despite heavy promotion by CDE's communications office, members of the BLI team, Keystone and associated outreach, attendance at the two educator focus groups on October 21 was less than 20. Attendees who engaged in the conversation (several stayed off camera and did not speak) were strong advocates for the expansion of blended learning and the majority of participants currently work in schools or systems that are primarily online or that support home-schooling through some technology and/or through the (recent) addition of one or two days of in-person instruction. The majority view of these participants was that blended learning was a beneficial complement to at-home learning and online instruction. All participants felt that the online component was most effective for grades nine through 12 and all shared significant concern about the expansion of online delivery of instruction to students below seventh grade citing concerns with understanding how to navigate the technology platforms. Technology (software) was a primary area of concern and frustration among the participants. Many said they had never received instruction during teacher preparation or as part of professional development courses in either the technical aspects of using these platforms or in the instructional styles, shifts and approaches necessary to effectively translate in-person instruction to online instruction. Participants also noted frustration with a number of the widely used platforms and the use of multiple platforms which in their opinion created additional burdens for educators struggling to learn them and complications for students using them.

In discussing the pros or potential opportunities for students as well as the potential risks, several themes emerged that included:

Opportunities and pros:
- Exposure to the mixed forms of interaction can help prepare students for future experiences including higher education, job interviews and the future workforce;
- Expanded use of blended an online learning could increase the courses offered to students where opportunities may be limited, particularly in smaller school systems;
- Multiple forms of instructional delivery can create greater likelihood that more students experience an education that meets their unique needs or learning styles;
- Blended and online learning can establish greater flexibility in student and family schedules;

Risks and concerns:
- Instruction with less in-class time could allow struggling students to fall further behind or could be used to mask truancy or other issues;
- For some students (particularly younger students), there could be negative consequences in social emotional development with less peer or teacher contact;
- Inequities could be increased without adequate access to technology including high-speed internet, devices and technical training for families and guardians;
- Potential that some system leaders could use the option as a budget saving strategy and that some students who don't thrive in out of classroom instruction could be forced into it;
- Without adequate and timely oversight including appropriate accountability systems, attainment and opportunity gaps could be exacerbated.

In exploring the potential impact on the teaching profession of expanding the use of blended or online learning, teachers noted:
- The additional challenges and time demands placed on teachers if the structure of the workforce is not adapted to reflect the new or additional roles inherent in delivering both in person and online instruction;
- The potential to attract more professionals at varying points in their career to the profession by providing additional roles or teacher workforce structures;
- Concern that some educators might leave the workforce if their system leaders required them to become both in-person and online or blended teachers rather than providing choice;
- The need to recognize the different skills and time associated with serving online and in-person students including the need to make appropriate professional development available and to structure teacher days, weeks and school responsibilities accordingly;
- The potential to expand the reach of great teachers to students beyond their own classroom, school or even school system with supportive changes to policies and the state and local levels.

Families

Despite extensive outreach, participation in focus groups among parents, guardians and families was low with fewer than 20 at each of two online focus groups. In both focus groups, parents or guardians of students who are primarily home-schooled with in-person time as a supplement were over-represented compared to statewide numbers with those participants making up nearly half of the attendees. Notwithstanding that fact, nearly all attendees found broad agreement.

After being presented with a background on CDE's Blended Learning Initiative and the definitions shared earlier in this report, the conversation invited participants to explore and share their views on:
- Advantages, risks & opportunities for students through Blended Learning;
- Their experience with Blended Learning;
- Supports needed for success in Blended Learning.

Participants overwhelmingly supported the expansion of both blended and online learning with strong preference for limited state constraints on local decisions for the use of blended or online learning and by broad majorities believed all forms of blended and online learning should be eligible for funding similar to in-person instruction. There was general alignment in both groups that younger students should have more in-person time, particularly elementary age students. All participants appealed for more technical resources (broadband, devices) and access to technical support or training for families.

What We Read

Survey Findings

The online survey open for completion from August - October was completed by 309 respondents including 46 system leaders, 33 building leaders, 68 teachers, 100 parents or guardians and 33 students. 29 responses were received from other school staff. The survey overall shows strong support for the use of online and blended learning and an appreciation of its value for students among teachers, guardians and students. There are some areas relating to teacher job satisfaction and its intersection with blended learning's use that require further discussion and should be monitored.

Survey responses showed a generally high level of awareness of online and blended learning and desire to see its use in their school. 52% of respondents correctly identified blended learning as courses that are a mix of in-person and online instruction while 28% believed that all forms of instruction with anything online OR everything online also fit the definition. With that lens, the following are responses to the question:

SURVEY RESPONDENTS
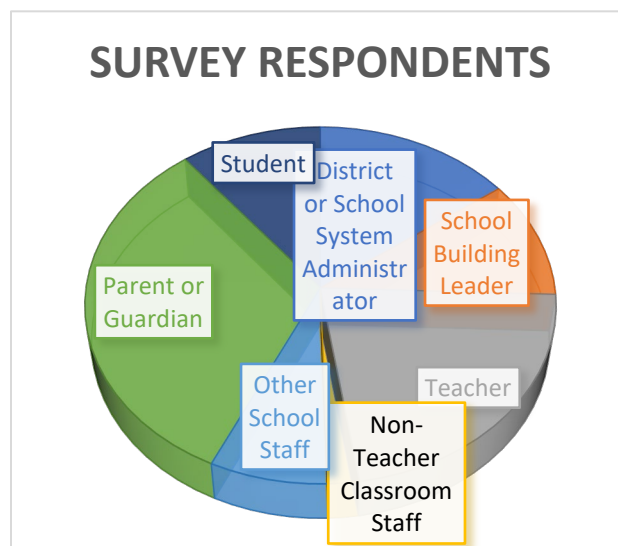
"Which of the following instructional models would you like to see at your school?"

Courses a student can take online that also include live teacher support	58.05%
Courses a student takes strictly online with no live teacher support	22.48%
Courses that are in-person with assignments, syllabus or materials available online	41.95%
Courses that are in-person with online submission and grading of assignments	33.89%
Courses that are a mix of in-person and online instruction	61.74%

52% said they believe Blended Learning is Very Positive for student learning and 30.6% said Somewhat Positive. Only 9% felt it was Somewhat or Very Negative.

In questions about different instructional models effectiveness for students and the levels of support for each, 52% said they believe Blended Learning is Very Positive for student learning and 30.6% said Somewhat Positive. Only 9% felt it was Somewhat or Very Negative. On the same question about Online Learning, views declined to 24% Very Positive, 38% Somewhat Positive and 23% Somewhat or Very Negative.

When the question was phrased slightly differently later in the survey and respondents offered the opportunity to respond both to how they "see the overall value of Blended Learning or Online Learning" when "thinking holistically" about their child and then "specifically about academic outcomes," perception remained high as is shown below.

Thinking holistically about your child about whom you are focused in completing this survey (academic, safety, well-being, post-graduation preparedness), how do you see the overall value of Blended Learning or Online Learning?

Very Positive	46.34%
Somewhat Positive	23.17%
Neutral	9.76%
Somewhat Negative	9.76%
Very Negative	10.98%

Thinking specifically about academic outcomes, how do you see the value of Blended Learning or Online Learning?

Very Positive	42.68%
Somewhat Positive	24.39%
Neutral	9.76%
Somewhat Negative	10.98%
Very Negative	12.20%

84% of respondents said they would be Very (68.7%) or Somewhat (14.9%) Supportive of allowing schools to enroll students in more Blended and Online courses IF resources, training and support were available to educators. Only 10% were Somewhat or Very Opposed.

On the implications of expanded online and blended learning on job satisfaction and teacher retention, there were mixed messages that, as noted above, require monitoring and further exploration. Asked specifically about job satisfaction in the event of increased use of blended or online instruction, almost 63% said they would be Much More or a Little More Satisfied with 14% saying they would be Slightly or Much Less. However, asked about how the expansion would affect their plans to stay in the profession, 32% said they would be Somewhat or Much More likely to leave while 32% said they would be Much Less or Somewhat Less and 32% said their plans would be unchanged.

Asked what courses should be eligible for funding under the per pupil structure, respondents said:

Courses that a student can attend fully online with no direct teacher support	*54.70%*
Courses a student can take that are fully in-person with assignments, syllabus or materials available online	*87.18%*
Courses that a student can take that are fully in-person with online submission and grading of assignments	*82.91%*
Courses that a student can take for which the instruction from a teacher is partially in-person and partially online.	*94.02%*

Throughout the survey, open ended question showed broad support for the expanded use of online and blended learning while noting concerns about the decline of social-emotional development if in-person time is too limited, particularly at younger ages and general cautions about the risk of students with special or different needs potentially being harmed by less in-person instruction.

Next Steps

Neither this report nor the input received during this Listening Tour are intended to be presented or used as an exhaustive picture of the field perception or issues to be considered in the future of Blended Learning or Online Learning in Colorado. The information contained herein is intended to be incorporated and used to inform the broader, multi-year work of the Blended Learning Initiative. Additionally, it was noted throughout the Listening Tour that there are a number of other initiatives, task forces and working groups addressing different issues in Early Childhood Education (ECE), K-12 Education and Post-Secondary Education that have intersections with or common elements and that coordination of these various efforts will likely strengthen each including the future of Blended Learning.