INTRODUCING PSD GLOBAL ACADEMY

Located in Fort Collins, Colorado, Poudre School District (PSD) Global Academy opened in August 2009 to provide the district’s students with an innovative online/hybrid learning environment that strives to blend face-to-face learning in school with online learning from home. Each of the 150 K–12 students enrolled at PSD Global Academy attend live classes on campus 2–3 days per week to do hands-on, collaborative projects, explore science in lab settings, and participate in fine arts and physical education classes. The remaining 2–3 days per week are spent at home or off campus working on individualized or self-paced online curriculum with the support of their parent as a learning coach. In their home settings, the students control the learning path, pace, time and place—and develop strong independent learning skills in addition to course content knowledge. With a goal to provide a “Global Education in a Local Community,” PSD Global Academy provides the best of both worlds for their students by leveraging education through innovative learning models.

To support their blended learning programming, PSD Global Academy uses a variety of FuelEd curricula across all grade levels. In the elementary school program, courses from FuelEd's content partner, K12 Inc., is used for math, language arts and history. In grades 6–8, students use FuelEd's middle school curriculum for math and language arts. High school students are tapping into various types of content for core subjects, as well as courses for electives and world languages.
WHAT IS THE PROOF OF PROGRAM RESULTS WITH BLENDED LEARNING?

To develop a case for the impact of the blended learning environment within PSD Global Academy, we examined three components common in the assessment of academic outcomes: student proficiency (in both course content and skill development), student growth data, and teacher effectiveness. While each metric is a significant marker for identifying success in traditional classroom settings, the combination of the three factors represents a new approach to evaluating blended or online learning implementations.

Student Proficiencies

PSD Global Academy teachers identified four key student outcomes that they attributed to the blended learning experiences afforded their students.

- Students are applying their knowledge to practical problems.
- Students are developing critical-thinking and problem-solving skills.
- Students are taking greater ownership of their learning.
- Students are developing a growth mindset where failure is an opportunity to learn.

These outcomes served PSD Global Academy students well this past year as demonstrated in the standardized test scores from two different types of assessments taken in the spring.

On the Northwest Evaluation Association’s Measures of Academic Progress® (MAP®) assessment, PSD Global Academy students tested in grades 2 through 8 scored at or above the proficient level for both reading and mathematics. Chart 1 demonstrates the average PSD Global Academy grade level score in reading compared to the scoring level for proficiency on a national scale. Chart 2 does the same for the math scores.

The MAP scores correlate to the reporting levels on the existing Colorado state standardized tests (identified as partial proficiency, proficiency, and advanced) for content knowledge and skill in application of that knowledge. As noted in Charts 1 and 2, PSD Global Academy spring 2014 scores exceeded the national spring scores for all grades. It is also noteworthy that:

- At least one group of students in six of the seven grades tested scored at the advanced level in reading.
- One student cohort in grade 3 scored at the 6th grade advanced level in reading; one student cohort in grade 5 scored at the 10th grade advanced level in math.
- The majority of the students at the partial proficiency levels were within 10 percent of achieving the proficiency level.
About the MAP® Assessments and Scores

Measures of Academic Progress® (MAP) are interim assessments that measure growth, project proficiency on high-stakes tests, and inform how educators differentiate instruction, evaluate programs, and structure curriculum.

Computer adaptive MAP assessments reveal precisely which academic skills and concepts are acquired and what they’re ready to learn. MAP assessments are grade independent and adapt to each student’s instructional level.

Every item on a MAP assessment is anchored to a vertically aligned equal interval scale, called the RIT scale for Rasch UnIT—a stable measurement, like inches on a ruler, that covers all grades.

Source: https://www.nwea.org/resources/map-overview-brochure/
About the CMAS Assessments and Scores

The Colorado Measures of Academic Success (CMAS) is the state’s large-scale assessment designed to measure student performance in the Colorado Academic Standards in Science and Social Studies. These new online assessments were implemented for the first time in spring 2014 in science for grades 5 and 8, and in social studies for grades 4 and 7. Performance is classified at four different achievement levels: distinguished command, strong command, moderate command, and limited command. The top two levels indicate a student is on track for college and work.

Source: Colorado Department of Education

The Global Academy saw similar results this year with the Colorado Measures of Academic Success (CMAS) assessment in science and social studies. In all subject areas across the four tested grades the percentage of students from PSD Global Academy scoring at the strong and/or distinguished achievement levels exceeded the district and state averages as noted in Chart 3. Especially noteworthy is the achievement by the 8th grade students in science, a content area that is often difficult in many learning environments. More than twice as many PSD Global Academy 8th graders scored at the highest levels of “distinguished command” and “strong command” of content knowledge on the science assessment (75 percent) than all of the students in Colorado (32 percent).

Chart 3: PSD Global Academy CMAS Scores

Percentage of students scoring at the strong and/or distinguished achievement level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>4th Grade Social Studies</th>
<th>5th Grade Science</th>
<th>7th Grade Social Studies</th>
<th>8th Grade Science</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>PSD Global School Average</strong></td>
<td><strong>District Average</strong></td>
<td><strong>State Average</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80

4th Grade Social Studies | 5th Grade Science | 7th Grade Social Studies | 8th Grade Science |
While the proficiency data provides a strong proof case for the blended learning implementation within PSD Global Academy, the school principal, Heather Hiebsch, believes that the real measure of a school’s success is within an examination of student growth data. This focus on growth data as a valid metric is a relatively new concept within some states, though Colorado has endorsed it as a meaningful assessment measure. While some see the value of evaluating growth as only applicable for lower-performing students where standard proficiency measures are ineffectual, Hiebsch sees validity in it for all students. PSD Global Academy aims for one-year growth for each student, no matter where they start on that scale. Correspondingly, PSD Global Academy places a high emphasis on both teacher effectiveness and specific, targeted interventions to help students achieve that growth goal.

Using the state’s Transitional Colorado Assessment Program (TCAP) results, the impact of the innovative blended learning approach at PSD Global Academy is recognized in the students’ growth metrics in reading, writing, and math, as well as the school’s overall growth measures from 2012 to 2014. At the student level, PSD Global Academy outranked every school (including traditional schools, charter schools, and online schools) in student growth during the 2013–2014 school year. An examination of the school’s overall median growth measures over the past three years illustrates a similar trend in outpacing other district schools or schools throughout the state of Colorado in student growth. Chart 4 illustrates the improving trajectory of student achievement growth.

About the TCAP Assessments and Growth Metrics

As schools update their curricula to reflect the new Colorado Academic Standards, a transitional version of the state assessment, called the Transitional Colorado Assessment Program (TCAP), was adopted. In 2014, the TCAP exam assessed only Reading, Writing, and Math. The exams assessed student proficiency levels and compared those levels to prior years to indicate growth in student learning. The resulting school scores indicate the growth rate of their students compared to students statewide.
On the front line for student outcomes at PSD Global Academy is a cadre of dedicated and innovative teachers who are selected to provide instruction within this blended model. When asked to comment on how the blended/hybrid model of teaching and learning has impacted their effectiveness as a teacher, the top responses focused on both the change in the learning environment for their students as well as how the model afforded them unique opportunities to transform their practice. Listed below are their top answers to the question: "How has your instructional effectiveness improved because of the blended learning environment?"

- I am creating more interactive and relevant lessons.
- I am facilitating more student-centered learning.
- I am facilitating more student collaboration learning experiences.
- I am able to give my students more personalized attention and spend more time with individual students who need help understanding the content.
- I have more time to differentiate my instructional plans.
- It is easier now for me to assess how my students are doing and to know who is having problems within the class.

This chart demonstrates specifically how the student growth at PSD Global Academy increased from 2012 to 2014. A score of 50 indicates typical annual student growth; scores above 50 indicate additional growth. As an example, in 2012 the growth rate for the students at PSD Global Academy was 51, meaning that the growth rate for students at this school was 51 percent higher than other students statewide. By spring 2014, that growth rate jumped to 70. In the most recent TCAP testing, PSD Global Academy students were 70 percent higher than their peers statewide in reading, 81 percent higher in writing, and 52 percent higher in math. While single year scores are interesting, the upward trend of continuing growth year over year is more impressive and consistent with the school’s focus on student growth and a holistic approach to meeting the needs of each student on a personalized basis. A key aspect of that approach is obviously the effectiveness of the teaching and support staff to deliver on that promise.
WHY IS PSD GLOBAL ACADEMY’S BLENDED LEARNING APPROACH SUCCESSFUL?

As is typical with most school-based programs, it is often difficult to define a single element that drives the success of a program. However, PSD Global Academy’s transformational leader, Heather Hiebsch, identifies five unique approaches they implemented as key to their program’s positive results.

1. **Parents are treated as paraprofessionals.** Educators need to suspend their egos and realize that parents can be an invaluable asset within a blended learning school model as they provide a way for every student to be in a 1:1 learning environment when they are at home. PSD Global Academy provides parents with a full week of specific professional development to supplement their expertise and enthusiasm for supporting their children’s learning process. While the endorsement of the “parent coach” was a significant shift in thinking for the school district, Hiebsch believes that it was a key determinant in driving the growth in student achievement.

2. **Relationships matter and failure is a call to action for improved relationships.** Too often, educators view a student’s lack of success with academics as an outcome, without any means for changing the trajectory of that process. At PSD Global Academy, failure is a call to action with a deeper examination of behavioral and truancy issues, and a revamped student advising program that takes a holistic approach to each student. Student advising for high school students at PSD Global Academy is more focused on non-cognitive skills (grit, perseverance, positive mindset, relationships) than ever before as those affect both the students’ self-efficacy for learning and their motivation for future success.

3. **One size does not fit all even with blended learning.** Rather than lock in on just one blended learning structure or framework, PSD Global Academy is open to different formats of blended and hybrid learning to meet the various needs of students, course content, and teacher preferences. Currently, the school is utilizing a mix of enriched virtual learning, a rotation model of blended, and a flexible online class structure. Moreover, they are reserving the right to modify that mix as needed to meet the goals of the school and the needs of their students.

4. **Individualized learning is at the heart of PSD Global Academy.** It is often easier in education to espouse or endorse a new learning theory or instructional model than it is to implement that theory or model in real classrooms with real students and teachers. The long-held promise of blended learning to provide the mechanism for personalizing or individualizing instruction for every student is realized in PSD Global Academy, and it shows in the academic results. Small learning environments, targeted interventions, and focused approaches for specific student needs are all examples gleaned from the PSD Global Academy model concerning how to effectively implement individualized learning with fidelity.

5. **Leveraging the right digital tools and resources for the right tasks is a critical component.** No matter how beautiful and fast that shiny new car may be, without the right fuel it is not going anywhere! The same is true for blended learning implementations. The effectiveness of the staff is dependent upon the quality of the content and curriculum being used within the program. According to Hiebsch, leveraging the right digital tools, content, and resources to truly personalize the learning process for each of their students is the “magic bullet” behind their academic success.
WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THE PSD GLOBAL ACADEMY CASE STUDY?

What lessons learned from PSD Global Academy can help education leaders implement blended learning with the same success metrics? From the front lines of this implementation within the Poudre School District, the following three takeaways will both resonate with school and district leaders, and provide assurance that success is possible in your school too.

**Listen carefully.** Understand the needs of your school community stakeholders, including parents and students. Develop your strategic implementation plans with the needs of these stakeholders in the forefront. Nurture relationships and maintain a spirit of inquiry. Listen carefully as needs may change over time, especially as the field of blended learning continues to mature.

**Don’t get stuck.** A model that you read about in an online article or hear about at a conference may or may not work for your school. Don’t be afraid to break new ground and create a new customized plan or model if that is what is right for your students. There is more than one recipe for blended learning success—the key is to create the right mix of structure, talent, content, and tools that will work for your community.

**Embrace change.** While change in education is inevitable, it is sometimes difficult for school leaders to change course midstream. While PSD Global Academy started out as an online school, the decision was made to ultimately become a fully blended school. That change took courage—but it was a change that was grounded in what the school team felt was in the best interests of their students, parents, and staff. And the results have paid off this year with higher academic achievement levels. Give yourself permission to evaluate impact and plans regularly, and make changes as needed to meet both student and school goals.

About Project Tomorrow
Project Tomorrow®, the national education nonprofit organization dedicated to improving learning opportunities for all students, prepared this program case study for Fuel Education as part of a larger evaluation of online and blended learning models. Project Tomorrow has 18 years of experience in the K–12 and higher education sector, and regularly provides consulting and research support to school districts, government agencies, businesses, and higher education institutions concerning key trends and research in digital learning.

About Fuel Education
Fuel Education partners with schools and districts to fuel personalized learning and transform the education experience inside and outside the classroom. We provide innovative solutions for pre-K through 12th grade that empower districts to implement and grow successful online and blended learning programs. PEAK—our open, easy-to-use Personalized Learning Platform—simplifies administration and enables teachers to customize courses using their own content, FuelEd content, third-party partner content, as well as open educational resources. We offer the industry's largest catalog of flexible digital curriculum, certified instruction, professional development, and educational services tailored to district and student needs. FuelEd has helped more than 2,000 school districts to improve student outcomes, better serve diverse student populations, and expand educational opportunities by leveraging the new power of technology-enabled learning.