After COVID-19 — will blended learning become the new normal?

The COVID-19 pandemic forced most US schools to make a quick transition to remote learning. Some districts were ready to make this move, others struggled. But all gained a new perspective on remote learning as an element of the overall learning environment.

Looking forward, it’s clear that education as usual isn’t going to return anytime soon. Schools of all levels and sizes are evolving rapidly as the new normal becomes more normal. They’re recognizing the potential of blended learning, which combines traditional on-site and online components.

Here are just some of the reasons why blended learning is expected to continue to take hold in the post-COVID 19 era:

1. **Schools get the best of both worlds.**
   Blended learning offers a middle-ground option that many education experts see as a clear path forward. Some subjects or projects are best taught live, in person. Others are more suited for an online approach. With blended learning, educators can pick the approach that matches the needs of the students and the specific subject matter — versus moving exclusively to an all-online environment.

2. **Blended learning keeps schools prepared to move online again, if necessary.**
   No one thinks that COVID-19 represents an isolated event. At some point in the future, a new health, environmental, or other issue will require a fast transition to online learning. By keeping one foot in the online world with blended learning, schools can transition nimbly to an all-online approach to education if and when they have to make that move. As a recent article from the John Hopkins School of Education put it, “...districts will have to assume that immediate, lasting disruptions will become more commonplace. In response, districts will have to plan for and develop blended learning plans in which schools can seamlessly transition between face-to-face classroom instruction and online environments when disruptions occur.”

3. **Schools need to stay modern and competitive.**
   In a recent Forbes article, education innovator Enrique Dans highlighted blended learning as a competitive advantage and the choice for the future. “Online teaching will no longer simply be an option,” he wrote. “Next year, institutions that are unable to offer a blended methodology that seamlessly integrates face-to-face and online teaching will increasingly find themselves left behind, until they are simply out of the race.”

4. **Blended learning leverages the considerable investment triggered by COVID-19.**
   During the pandemic, the sudden move to online learning required new investment in devices, learning platforms, connectivity, training, and more. Continuing ahead with blended learning takes advantage of this investment even when the need isn’t urgent. By continuing to use their devices and online tools, students stay comfortable with technology as part of their education — while educators can continue to explore the potential of online learning. Like speaking a new language, the more educators and learners practice using remote learning, the more confident and comfortable they will become with it.

5. **Blended learning can move schools closer to equal access.**
   The rush to online learning cast a harsh light on the proverbial digital divide, making it clear that a sizable percentage of all K-12 students lacked the connectivity and devices that would enable them to learn at home. If schools return to their bricks-and-mortar past, progress to address this critical issue will slow. Blended learning keeps the momentum going by allowing for new progress, better connectivity, and more advocacy for all students.
6. Students who thrive online continue to benefit.
One of the observations that educators made during the pandemic is that certain students thrived in an online learning environment. Shy students, students with disabilities, students who were easily overshadowed by their more vocal and extroverted peers—these students and more suddenly found themselves on a very level playing field, educationally. On the other hand, social students suffered during the lockdown. But with blended learning, both of these groups get an opportunity to excel in the context that suits their learning style.

Blended learning offers potential—and raises challenges
These are just some of the many reasons that blended learning offers potential. But like any change, it also comes with a significant set of challenges. For blended learning to work, all students need to have the technology and connectivity they need, including assistive learning technology for disabled students. Educators need to evaluate and adjust their methodologies and curriculums for a blended learning environment. And districts will have to continue to evolve and invest.

That said, the future of education is looking blended. According to a recent eLearning Industry article, “Newfound proficiency with eLearning and appreciation for its potential points to the real future of learning—a blend of approaches that best meet the needs of each specific learner population.”

It goes on to offer this advice to educators still reeling in the wake of COVID-19: “While also meeting immediate needs, take a deep breath and think about future options and how a blended solution can offer your learners the best of both online and in-person learning opportunities.”

During uncertain times, taking a deep breath is always good advice—as is considering the potential of blended learning.