

# Blended Learning Partnerships for Community-based Organizations <sup>1</sup>

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Blended learning – blending online and site-based learning – could dramatically change the education landscape. Although community-based organizations (CBOs) are making essential contributions to education, most have been sitting on the sidelines of this nascent blended learning revolution. On July 27, 2011, the U.S. Department of Education and The After-School Corporation (TASC) convened a meeting to help address this challenge.

The small working group brought together practitioners and thought leaders from a variety of sectors, including national and community-based nonprofits, schools and school districts, parent organizations, philanthropy, and business. (Full list of participants is in the appendix.) Participants discussed key issues and began to devise an action agenda on improving learning opportunities through CBO-school partnerships that leverage blended learning. They focused on translating ideas into actions that could lead to higher achievement, deeper student engagement, an infusion of human capital, and the next wave of education entrepreneurship.

Conversations about blended learning are sometimes clouded by unclear definitions and disagreement on terms. For these discussions, participants used this definition from [Innosight Institute](#): “Blended learning is any time a student learns at least in part at a supervised brick-and-mortar location away from home and at least in part through online delivery with some element of student control over time, place, path, and/or pace.”

Digital learning skeptics argue that students won’t learn what they need by themselves in front of a computer. Blended learning solves this challenge with the additional component of personal guidance and instruction, but doesn’t require that support to come from a school teacher. It’s not tethered to school buildings or schedules, can be “anytime/anywhere,” and mixes formal and informal learning.

Blended learning is not an alternative to traditional schooling, but a way in which public education begins to connect all the assets—communities, families, youth development organizations, etc.—into learning opportunities that transcend physical boundaries. For students to succeed, particularly those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds, we need to engage as many community assets as possible to support their academic achievement and personal development. This could transform and propel student learning, but may also be very disruptive to traditional institutions and blur the lines between in-school and out-of-school.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was prepared by Michael Robbins, Senior Advisor for Nonprofit Partnerships at the U.S. Department of Education with review and input from Karen Cator at the U.S. Department of Education, Susan Brenna and Charissa Fernandez at The After-School Corporation, Terri Ferinde Dunham at Collaborative Communications, Bill Tucker at Education Sector, and the other working group participants. It was prepared for discussion purposes and does not necessarily represent the positions or policies of the U.S. Department of Education.

To use a technology metaphor, schools are only one node on the network of blended learning. Community-based organizations can be another vital node on that network, as the staff and structures in many CBOs are the missing pieces to make digital learning effective. CBOs can also serve as “routers” on the network of learning, helping to coordinate a student’s learning experience across multiple nodes such as libraries, museums, online communities, schools, and student homes.

Some CBOs are already making extensive use of technology to support learning, including creating new configurations for students to interact with adult mentors, developing badge systems and electronic portfolios, and helping more students be creators and collaborators instead of just consumers of media. Some CBOs don’t have the necessary infrastructure or may have digital tools that are not fully realized. Others are utterly on the sidelines, interested but not knowing where to begin, or unable to launch and sustain initiatives. Many treat technology as a club activity or as a way to increase students’ digital literacy but not as a tool to help them accomplish their learning and developmental goals in preparing young people to be 21st century citizens.

There are seven areas where blended learning can help CBOs strengthen education partnerships and improve learning opportunities and developmental experiences for students:

- Curriculum design and lesson planning;
- Alignment across nodes;
- Quality and rigor;
- Assessment;
- Student engagement;
- Human capital; and
- Community engagement.

**Curriculum design and lesson planning.** Curriculum design and lesson planning, which may not be core competencies for education-focused CBOs, can be embedded into blended learning systems. Curriculum specialists, teachers and other lesson designers can create portable lesson plans and “playlists” of internet-based content - both open education resources (OER) and paid content that CBO staff can integrate into their time with students.

*Heather leads a community-based after-school program at the local Boys & Girls Club. She has a master of social work degree and seven years of experience at the Club, but she’s not a curriculum expert and used to spend hours each week on lesson planning. Heather is thrilled that now each day she can log-in to her computer and personalized lesson plans for each student are ready to go, jump-starting her planning for the afternoon.*

**Alignment across nodes.** Blended learning systems can help align education efforts across schools, CBOs, homes, and other diverse settings. This alignment can facilitate community-wide networks of learning where students move seamlessly from one node to the next, making anytime/anywhere learning a reality. It can provide a common framework for conversations between students, teachers, youth development staff, and parents about a student’s goals and progress. These systems

can also embed parental consents required to share school records and education data between schools and community partners.

*Alexander's volunteer Big Brother used to greet him with questions that are repeated every day across the country: "What did you do at school today? What do you have for homework? What do you need help with?" Now instead of relying on Alexander's self-reporting, his mentor pops up his iPad and can see what he worked on today. There's even a note from Alexander's teacher recommending that he work on multiplying fractions along with a link to problem sets.*

**Quality and rigor.** Blended learning practitioners can use systems to help sort through the plethora of online resources to identify, promote, and use the highest-quality resources; ensuring that all students have access to best-in-class digital content and modes of learning.

*Alberto leads a Saturday morning tutoring program at his church for youth in the neighborhood. He has three eighth grade students that all failed their last science quiz on cells. A web search for "teaching about cells" turns up thousands of references but it's a challenge to discern which ones are the most relevant and high-quality interactive resources. Fortunately Alberto uses an online system that categorizes the top online content into course categories for his school district's curriculum. He can even see which web-based resources are most used and recommended by teachers across the country.*

**Assessment.** Assessment systems can be embedded into online instructional systems to give real-time feedback and target individualized instruction. Blended learning assessment can also include alternative credentialing systems (e.g., badges) and cloud-based electronic portfolios for tracking and certifying proficiency in both academic subjects and other competencies such as problem-solving and leading teams. This allows every institution that interacts with a student to contribute to that student's comprehensive learning evaluation. It also provides a path for students to earn credit in out-of-school time settings.

*Jenae spends Thursday afternoons this semester at the museum of natural history following a course of study that was jointly designed by her school science teachers and museum staff. Her work is organized in an online digital backpack that also includes logs of her activities, results of her online quizzes, and a digital portfolio of her completed work. The museum education coordinator reviews Jenae's work, enters evaluation notes in the digital backpack, and then marks off when Jenae has earned badges for demonstrating mastery of each course unit. When all her badges are completed, the school science teacher reviews the digital backpack and certifies that Jenae has earned her science credit for that semester.*

**Student engagement.** Blended learning can boost student ownership of learning, and increase the relevance of learning to potential careers. For many students, online and networked learning is already their primary mode of self-directed learning. Advances in both academic rigor and social

components are bolstering the effectiveness of online game-based learning. Students can also create their own games and networked environments that help engage and assist peers.

*Quincy spends most afternoons at the public library working on his homework. When he needs help working through a problem, he doesn't dig through his textbook - he searches for the answer using a library computer or texts his friends. The library staff has been trained on the school district's curriculum and they have access to the same online course materials that Quincy's teachers use. They check in with Quincy periodically to support his efforts, and he can instant message them if he needs assistance.*

**Human capital.** Blended learning helps to engage a differentiated force of teachers, youth development workers, volunteers, and family members all collaborating to boost student achievement. Blended learning systems can provide support and resources for non-school staff and volunteers, increasing the numbers of adults that are capable and effective in educating students.

*Katherine was a senior manager at an international technology company before she retired last year. Now she volunteers as a teacher's aide and tutor at a local elementary school. She has a PhD in physics and a MBA, but needed assistance helping kids learn to read. Fortunately, she is able to guide students through a high-quality online reading system that classroom teachers have customized for each student's reading levels.*

**Community engagement.** Blended learning can be a cornerstone for high-quality education partnerships between communities, families, and schools. It could increase engagement of CBOs in education at an unprecedented scale, leveraging after-school networks, national nonprofit organizations, and national and community service organizations. Blended learning, especially if it is linked to proficiency-based credit achievement in non-school settings, has the potential to unleash a new wave of educational entrepreneurship.

*Charles was a middle school teacher for four years and then worked at youth development nonprofits for over a decade. He's returned to his hometown to launch a new nonprofit education venture. For Charles, running a traditional after-school program wasn't enough and launching a charter school was too great an endeavor. He's chosen instead to create a new blended learning nonprofit in partnership with the school district to help eight grade students who are behind in school catch up and prepare for high school.*

Participants in the July 27 working group meeting discussed the issues presented above, and then conversation leaders addressed blended learning partnerships from six different perspectives: community-based organizations, parents and parent organizations, school districts and schools, philanthropy, education technology companies and investors, education policy and advocacy organizations. They highlighted the following key issues and ideas:

### **Community-based Organizations (Charissa Fernandez, TASC)**

- Blended-learning provides tremendous opportunity for schools and CBOs to partner more closely on improving outcomes
- We should build on the existing infrastructure: 30 statewide after-school networks and numerous citywide systems.
- The workforce of informal educators is 1 million strong, with CBO staff disproportionately young adults who are unafraid of technology. We need to translate ed tech to these potential partners and include them in professional development.
- The tolerance for risk is higher and barriers to entry lower among many CBOs compared to school systems, positioning them as potential R&D partners with industry and innovators.
- CBOs fertile ground for developing badges and electronic portfolios, adapting and broadening assessments
- CBOs are also de-centralized and hard to reach at scale, overwhelmed by possibilities and unsure how to identify quality.

### **Parents and Parent Organizations (Mark Malaspina, Computers for Youth)**

- Home is the place of untapped potential in education. Research in the US and UK confirms that strength of the home learning environment is a powerful predictor of academic achievement.
- In the relationship between school, home, and the community, parents are the most motivated actors in the equation.
- Parents need to know what is going on in schools and CBOs to be effective partners.
- Parents are the strongest advocates for their children, regardless of educational attainment or socio-economic status.
- Need to focus on parents and students as learning partners. Parents will often relearn things in order to teach their children.
- Online dynamic is changing for families as interventions are helping many low-income families to gain home broadband access; we see broadband adoption rates of 90% among our participating families in NYC.
- Free online educational activities are powerful tools for both families and CBOs; new PowerMyLearning learning platform funded by Gates can enable easy use.

### **School districts and Schools (Arthur Vanderveen, New York City Department of Education iZone)**

- The promising practices and examples don't exist yet, but there is a huge amount of potential.
- NYCDOE has invested in a learning platform that enables schools to incorporate external resources. While there are technical challenges, we should explore how CBO partners can participate.
- Need to build the infrastructure to support schools and CBOs in collaborating around the instructional core—including aligning curriculum, instruction, and assessment and working together to achieve shared, explicit academic outcomes.

### **Philanthropy (An-Me Chung, MacArthur Foundation)**

- There are various perspectives in philanthropy and she just brings one.
- Recommendation is to focus on learning first and cost-savings second. Investment and development should support quality education and not how it makes operations efficient.
- Blended learning needs to be focused on all digital devices and not just computers. The primary focus again should be improved learning opportunities and not reducing number of teachers and staff.
- The adult is still a critical piece of the equation
- Philanthropy needs to hear from the field about how they can help. What needs to get done? How can they convene the right partners?

### **Education Technology Companies and Investors (Phoenix Wang, Startl & Greg Gunn, City Light Capital)**

- There is a tremendous (and perhaps unprecedented) inflow of venture capital into education technology ventures
- There is significant concern that there is limited capacity for schools to absorb the technology. CBOs may provide an opportunity to augment that capacity to sustain promising technologies.
- Having access to users is essential in early stage development where things are so iterative for edtech companies. CBOs may be a valuable source for a variety of testing environments and we need to create some ecosystems to facilitate those partnerships.
- Edtech ventures are working on a variety of different focus areas, but one of particular interest is technologies that allow schools to become “team players” and incorporate the efforts of CBOs.
- CBOs working together may be able to aggregate their buying power.

## Education Policy and Advocacy Organizations (Bill Tucker, Education Sector)

- We want to promote innovation but also make sure that we are good stewards of education resources
- We need to be hard-nosed looking at outcomes, but not be unrealistic – some middle ground between holding programs accountable for changing standardized test scores and self-evaluations that lack rigor
- There are barriers we need to address around blending organizations with different staffing and pay structures, regulatory requirements, who pays who, who controls facilities, etc.
- Look at health care for potential analog models

The meeting then split into smaller groups to identify priority steps for an action agenda to advance blended learning partnerships between schools and CBOs. Participants identified the following priorities for action:

- Advance this conversation by writing on the meeting and subject (blogs, papers, etc.)  
Some follow-up items include:
  - Michael Robbins here: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2011/08/10/engaging-community-organizations-education-through-blended-learning-partnerships>
  - Tom Vander Ark here: <http://www.edreformer.com/blended-learning-community-based-organizations/>
  - Bill Tucker here: <http://www.quickanded.com/2011/08/a-nuanced-look-at-blended-learning.html>
- Establish a research agenda and develop taxonomies/models for CBO-school blended learning partnerships.
  - Practitioners, policy makers, and entrepreneurs need potential models to anchor off of.
  - Innosight Institute has developed a taxonomy for K-12 blended learning – possibly adding CBOs to that taxonomy <http://www.innosightinstitute.org/media-room/publications/education-publications/the-rise-of-k-12-blended-learning/>
- Cross-fertilize the edtech and nonprofit sectors through conferences and other gatherings – national nonprofits invite edtech and blended learning experts to their conferences, national nonprofits and CBOs participate in edtech and blended learning conferences.
  - National Afterschool Association having blended learning as one of the top themes for their conference next year.
  - Possibly incorporate this issue into one of the International Association for K-12 Online Learning (iNACOL) committees or special interest groups
- Develop and deliver technical assistance to CBOs on how they can plan and implement blended learning partnerships

- TASC to continue to infuse blended learning into their work and discussions with the expanded learning time and out-of-school-time community/initiatives.
- Bring other people into the discussion, including teachers and a broader range of school administrators.
- Establish systems (technology, operational) so schools and CBOs can implement blended learning partnerships. Urge and assist the edtech sector to develop “gateway products” to facilitate blended learning collaboration.
- Facilitate an ecosystem for matching edtech ventures and CBOs to facilitate early-stage prototyping and adoption of demonstrated technologies.
  - Greg Gunn and Phoenix Wang may advance work on this.
- Set up collaborative web-based forum (possibly using Google sites) to share information from meeting and collaborate on next steps.
  - There was no push from participants to have another larger meeting, but instead to coalesce around specific follow-up items.
  - These notes along with the discussion paper will be the initial content on the site
  - Will link to web resources, blog posts, organizations
  - Should be set up outside ED to facilitate collaborative management

We encourage others that are working on these issues to share their ideas and examples. This document and updated versions will be posted at <http://www.ed.gov/about/inits/list/fbci/blendedcbo.pdf>

For feedback or questions, please email Michael Robbins at [edpartners@ed.gov](mailto:edpartners@ed.gov).



## Appendix: Working group participants

- Ivana Alexander- Sr. Public Policy Manager - Youth Development, YMCA of the USA
- Karla Ballard- Chief of Strategy, Development, Media, & National Partnerships, One Economy
- Kathrin Brewer- Executive Director, Austin Partners in Education
- Susan Brenna- Director of Communications, The After-School Corporation
- Jaime Casap- Senior Education Evangelist, Google
- Karen Cator\*- Director, Office of Educational Technology, United States Department of Education
- Gary Chapman- Executive VP, National Network, Communities In Schools, Inc.
- An-Me Chung- Associate Director of Education, The John D. & Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation
- Jennifer Cotter- Senior Associate, Collaborative Communications Group
- Charissa Fernandez- Chief Operating Officer, The After-School Corporation
- Lucy Friedman\*- President, The After-School Corporation
- Alan Gershenfeld- Founder, President, E-Line Media
- Greg Gunn- Entrepreneur in Residence, City Light Capital
- Ursula Helminski- VP, External Affairs, Afterschool Alliance
- Jeff Kasowitz- Senior Director, School Relations, City Year Inc
- K.J. Lavoie- Senior Director, Government Relations, Boys and Girls Club of America
- Mark Malaspina- Chief Officer, Operations & Strategic Partnerships, Computers for Youth
- Mary McMartin- Acting Chief Strategy Officer, TVTextbook
- Matthew Nelson- Chief Operations Officer, GreatSchools
- Larry Paska- Coordinator, Office of Educational Design & Technology, Interim Director of Curriculum Services, New York State Education Department
- Bill Reghr- Chief Technology Officer, National 4-H Council
- Michael Robbins\*- Senior Advisor for Nonprofit Partnerships, U.S. Department of Education
- Doug Rohde- Engineering Manager & New York Community Service Team, Google
- Jennifer Siaca- Manager of Policy Initiatives, The After-School Corporation
- Serge St. Leger, Jr.- Director of School and CBO Partnerships, NYC Dept. of Education
- Robert Stonehill- Managing Director, American Institutes for Research
- Eileen Sweeney- Senior Director, Motorola Mobility Foundation
- Lori Takeuchi- Director of Resarch, The Joan Ganz Cooney Center
- Bill Tucker- Managing Director, Education Sector
- Tom Vander Ark- CEO , Open Education Solutions
- Arthur VanderVeen- Chief of Innovation Strategy & Policy, NYC Dept. of Education
- Phoenix Wang- Co-Founder & Managing Director, STARTL
- Brian Waniewski- Managing Director, Institute of Play
- Matthew Wicks- VP Strategy and Organizational Development, iNACOL
- Denice Williams- Assistant Commissioner for Out-of-School Time, New York City Department of Youth and Community Development

\* Meeting leaders/facilitators