A blended learning high school uses technology to increase teacher–student interaction

Hawaii Technology Academy

The Challenge

When Leigh Fitzgerald became the executive director of Hawaii Technology Academy (HTA) in January of 2012, the school was in state turnaround status. HTA, which opened in 2008, was a supported virtual school with a predominantly online curriculum. Teachers provided face-to-face support for only a few hours a week.

Fitzgerald was charged with revamping the school’s academic program. Her goal was to increase students’ face time with teachers, both to motivate students and to provide personalized support. Over the next few years, the school gradually transitioned to an enriched virtual model of blended learning, which combines face-to-face classes, synchronous virtual instruction, and independent online course work.

In order for this shift to succeed, the school needed a flexible digital curriculum, which would be appropriate for HTA’s multiple sites. Since its inception, HTA has grown to include thirteen sites on five islands. In addition, the school makes use of remote learning centers—learning spaces provided by community organizations so that students do not have to travel far to meet face-to-face with teachers.

HTA also sought to revise its schedule to help teachers build connections with their students. Its goal was to increase student engagement and enable students to focus more intently on each class.
A Blended Learning Solution

Students attend HTA for a variety of reasons. Struggling students are seeking a personalized learning experience to help them succeed. Other students want the opportunity to accelerate their studies. Still others—athletes and actors, for example—appreciate the flexible schedule, which allows them to pursue their interests. To succeed in HTA's blended learning environment, all students need to be self-motivated and able to ask for help.

On Oahu, the largest of HTA's sites, most high school classes in the blended learning model have three components. Students attend face-to-face classes two days a week, participate in live virtual classes one day a week, and engage in independent virtual learning from home two days a week.

In its blended learning model, HTA relies on both technology and face-to-face sessions to increase what Donna Therrien, director of pedagogical practices, refers to as the “human element.”

During his live virtual classes for math, Marc Collins uses a program that allows him to watch his students complete a worksheet in real time. If he sees a student struggling, he can meet with that student in a virtual breakout room and provide individualized support.

If students are struggling as they learn independently at home, they can either work virtually with their teacher and receive immediate, personalized support or meet their teacher face-to-face in a learning center.

During the 2013–2014 school year, HTA conducted a large-scale search to replace its digital curriculum. The previous curriculum lacked rigor, and teachers could not modify lessons or change assessments. The school sought a program that gave teachers the flexibility to design activities, lessons, and assessments. It also wanted to be able to house all curriculum materials in one place. Ultimately, HTA selected GradPoint®, a set of online courses and services now part of the Pearson Connexus™ suite of offerings, because it gave teachers control over the curriculum, implementing the program in the 2014–2015 school year.

According to Fitzgerald, the program’s wide range of courses has enabled HTA to increase its course offerings. The school has been able to offer such subjects as forensic science and criminal justice, which it would not have had the resources to do otherwise. In addition, because teachers control the curriculum, they have been able to create courses such as Modern History of Hawaii, a state requirement, and include them in GradPoint.

The faculty’s ability to customize existing GradPoint lessons helps teachers connect with their students. Students “hear the teacher’s voice in the lesson, even if he or she isn't physically there,” remarked Therrien. “It’s not just some questions that are on the computer.”
GradPoint helps both the faculty and parents monitor student progress. Teachers appreciate the embedded assessments and checks for knowledge and understanding. And parents appreciate having access to lessons and data. GradPoint “arms parents with the tools that they need to have robust conversations on learning,” Therrien said.

Tyanna Kaaialii, an 11th grader at HTA, has greatly benefited from the program. “I absolutely love GradPoint,” she said. Tyanna values the way lessons are broken down, pointing to the helpful introductions, note-taking sessions, and reviews before quizzes. She also appreciates the opportunity to take quizzes multiple times. “Sometimes I may get a good grade, but I keep taking the quizzes just to see the different questions and see how I can better myself in a subject,” she explained.

In addition to replacing its digital curriculum, HTA changed the school’s schedule to support the goals of its blended learning model. This year, HTA instituted a block schedule. In the past, students had to juggle six or seven classes all year long. Now students take three or four classes a semester. Face-to-face and virtual classes meet for eighty minutes three times a week, and students gain a year’s worth of credit in half a year. The block schedule has given teachers time to develop relationships with their students, as well as to explore lessons in depth.

The Results

HTA is currently classified as a focus school under the Strive HI Performance System due to low graduation rates, not academic indicators. Its students are performing well in comparison to the charter school and state populations.

On the 2014–2015 Smarter Balanced Assessment (SBA) for English Language Arts (ELA)/Literacy, 72 percent of 11th-grade HTA students scored at Level 3 or above, surpassing the figure for charter schools by 17 percentage points and for the state by 19 percentage points. On the SBA mathematics test, the percentage of HTA 11th graders scoring at Level 3 or above exceeded the percentage for charter schools by 6 percentage points and equaled the state percentage (see Figure 1).

The percentage of HTA students who met or exceeded proficiency on the Biology I End-of-Course Exam (EOC) surpassed the percentages for students in charter schools and across the state on the last two administrations of the test. In May 2014, the figure for HTA was 32 percent versus 29 percent for charter schools and 30 percent for the state. In the fall of 2015, 48 percent of HTA students met or exceeded proficiency versus 43 percent of charter school students and 30 percent of students across the state.
HTA has succeeded in using technology to increase the connection between teachers and students, something which the school acknowledges might seem ironic.

“Someone might hear of a blended learning program and think it’s kind of depersonalized because we’re using technology,” commented Collins, who is the GradPoint administrator in addition to being a math teacher. “But I think it’s the opposite in that technology is utilized so that the teacher is more available to connect with students individually and provide support to those who specifically need it.”

According to Fitzgerald and Therrien, students feel teachers care about them and are working for them. As a result, students seek out support more frequently and choose to work with teachers in the learning centers. Fitzgerald noted that students who previously struggled to produce work at home on their own are performing better now that they have more elective as well as required face time.

Anna Raduziner, an 11th grader, enrolled in HTA this year. She chose HTA because the school offered a variety of courses and she could focus on classes that would give her the credentials to get into the Air Force Academy. The flexibility of the schedule appealed to her as well because she is enrolled in a JROTC course and participates in a youth and government program at the YMCA.

Previously, Anna had been in honors courses and at the top of her class. When she enrolled in a public school in her sophomore year, her grades dropped and she did not find the teachers supportive.

HTA has “met my expectations 100 percent,” Anna said. “Teachers here really care about their students. If I ever have a question or need help, they’ll video conference with me and they’ll make sure that I am where I’m supposed to be.”

“I’m on the right path to where I need to be,” Anna remarked. “My grades are back to where they were.”

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