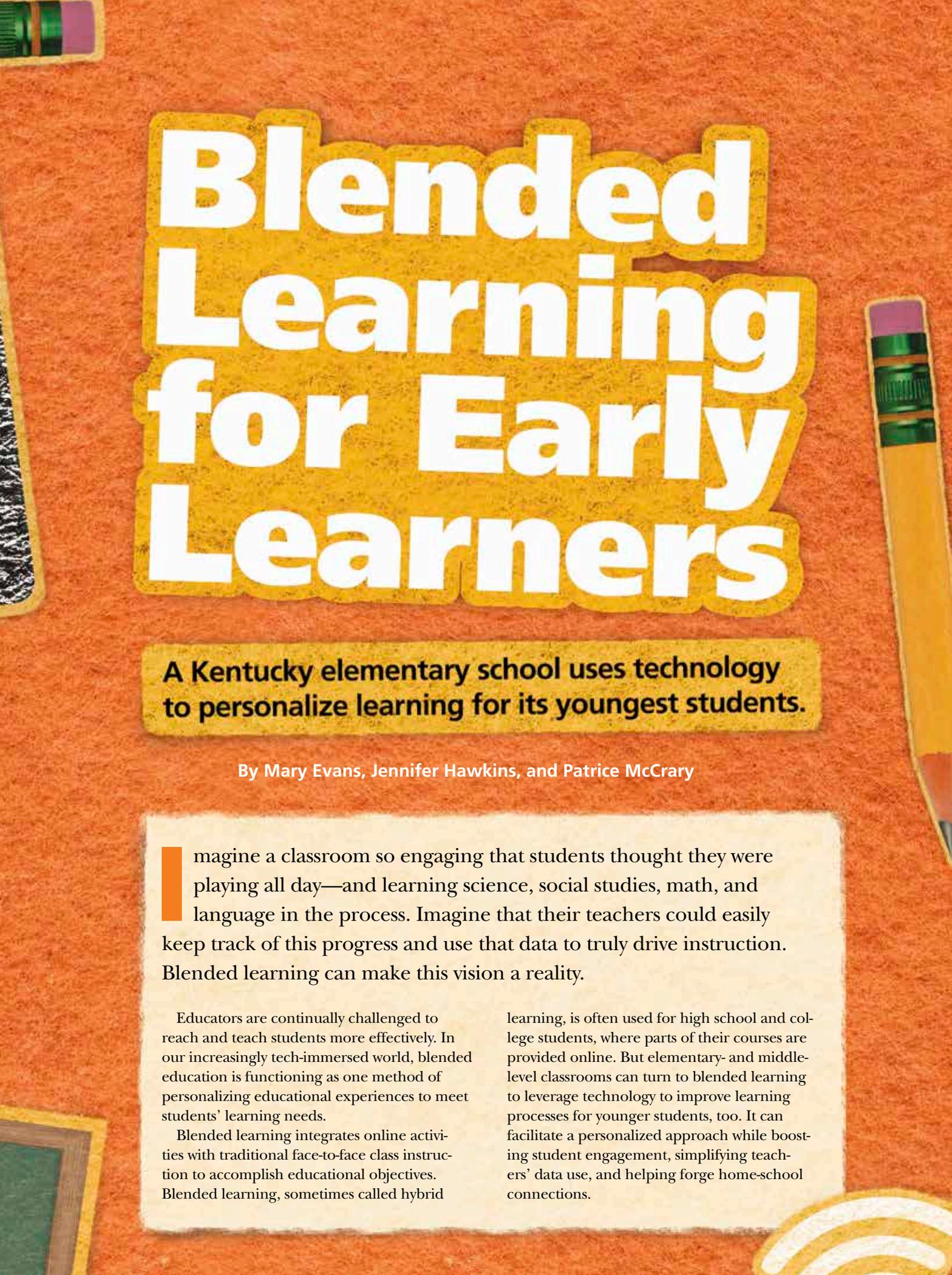




## STRONG START

This article is the second in a series focused on aligning early learning communities.





# Blended Learning for Early Learners

**A Kentucky elementary school uses technology to personalize learning for its youngest students.**

By Mary Evans, Jennifer Hawkins, and Patrice McCrary

Imagine a classroom so engaging that students thought they were playing all day—and learning science, social studies, math, and language in the process. Imagine that their teachers could easily keep track of this progress and use that data to truly drive instruction. Blended learning can make this vision a reality.

Educators are continually challenged to reach and teach students more effectively. In our increasingly tech-immersed world, blended education is functioning as one method of personalizing educational experiences to meet students' learning needs.

Blended learning integrates online activities with traditional face-to-face class instruction to accomplish educational objectives. Blended learning, sometimes called hybrid

learning, is often used for high school and college students, where parts of their courses are provided online. But elementary- and middle-level classrooms can turn to blended learning to leverage technology to improve learning processes for younger students, too. It can facilitate a personalized approach while boosting student engagement, simplifying teachers' data use, and helping forge home-school connections.

## An Elementary Model

Among the several models of blended learning, the rotation model is well suited to elementary learners. In this model, students rotate between learning modalities that include at least one online option. Other modalities include full-class instruction, group projects, or individual tutoring. Within this model, there are four iterations, according to the Christensen Institute, an education innovation think tank:

1. **Station rotation**, where students rotate through all of these modalities within the classroom;
2. **Lab rotation**, where students spend part of their time in a computer lab;
3. **The flipped classroom**, in which students learn online at home and receive face-to-face instruction in the classroom; and
4. **Individual rotation**, where students have an individualized plan and don't necessarily visit all stations.

Many teachers are successfully adapting these models in their classrooms and for their students' specific needs. There are, however, two key differences between younger and older students when it comes to blended learning: Younger students may need more guidance and structure when using online tools, and younger students need developmentally appropriate online programs. The best software programs for young children are highly visual, often

set to music, use kid-friendly voices, and require students to move objects either with a mouse or by touching the screen.

## Individualizing Instruction

Students learn in many different ways. Successful early childhood education programs (such as "Sesame Street" and "Dora the Explorer") recognize this and are designed to appeal to auditory, visual, and kinesthetic learners. Online learning modules can do this, too. It is very common for teachers to have a classroom of students with varying levels of comprehension and skill. Blended learning can meet a variety of learning styles and needs.

One way it can do this is by giving teachers the opportunity to provide small-group instruction. One group of students, for instance, can work with the teacher, receiving direct instruction, while other students can work on computers and iPads. On these devices, students can move at a level and pace that is most appropriate for them. They can work more slowly if needed, or move quickly through a section of problems to reach more challenging material.

The software program provides ongoing information to the teacher, so he or she knows what students have mastered even if he or she is not able to watch them solve the problems. If one-to-one access to computers is not possible, students can be strategically matched to work on lessons together. This blended learning arrangement effectively reduces the student/teacher ratio and provides more personalized attention to each student. The teacher can then use the formative assessment data generated by the software to pull students for individual or small group mini-lessons on concepts with which they are struggling.

This individualized learning is particularly helpful for English-language learners and students with special

needs. At our school, students in these populations work in a program called Imagine Learning, a language and literacy software that uses videos, graphics, and interactive games to teach academic vocabulary and reading skills.



## Data Collection

At the beginning of each school year, teachers welcome a class of students with varying skill levels and gaps in learning. Online learning can help teachers address these challenges beginning with pre-assessment.

Assessing with iPads and computers can be less laborious than using paper/pencil tests, and can quickly pinpoint a child's learning level and move a child forward into new concepts. For instance, our school uses STAR Early Literacy/STAR Reading, a computer-adaptive diagnostic assessment, to determine early literacy progress for K-3 emerging readers. Teachers can assess students' early literacy skills in just 20 to 30 minutes.

A typical kindergarten class at our school will have kindergartners whose achievement levels range from pre-literate to second or third grade. Students performing below grade level take the STAR test seven to nine times per year for progress monitoring. The assessment drives instruction on topics with which students need additional help, such as beginning and ending sounds, syllables, and vowels.

Further, technology in a blended classroom supports targeted and personalized instruction by enhancing a teacher's ability to keep track of student achievement data. Software programs collect formative assessment data in real time while students work. There is no need to interrupt the flow of classroom instruction. The teacher is ready to offer differentiated coaching because he or she immediately knows which students need intervention and which students are ready to move ahead.

## Principal ONLINE

Access the following Web resources by visiting *Principal* magazine online: [www.naesp.org/NovDec14](http://www.naesp.org/NovDec14)

Access NAESP's new standards document, *Leading Pre-K-3 Learning Communities: Competencies for Effective Principal Practice*.

The Teach Thought website features "37 Blended Learning Resources You Can Use Tomorrow," including free courseware, online texts, and video resources.

## Boost Engagement

Young learners are naturally curious and love exploring new games or devices. Why not use this natural passion to help them learn language, social studies, science, and math?

Students are excited to play games, and hone their skills in the process. ClassVINCI Technology, for instance, has a student tablet with handles that are easy for small hands to hold. Its 3-D animated games encourage students to be persistent because the games are so much fun the students want to keep playing.

Teachers consistently report that when students are able to use technology, they are more focused and eager to perform learning tasks. Behavior problems are reduced because of the high level of student engagement with the learning software. Plus, implementing blended learning at the elementary level can help prepare students for complex, technology-enhanced instruction in middle, school, high school, and beyond.

## Extending the Learning Day

An added benefit of blended learning environments is that many software programs can be used at home, too, extending students' learning time. For instance, our school uses Lexia Reading software, an Orton-Gillingham based program that provides multisensory practice in phonemic awareness, phonics, and contextual analysis. It also provides lessons in word recognition, comprehension, and vocabulary. The software program loops back to review and reteach as the child's performance indicates.

Lexia Reading aligns with the three-tier Response to Intervention (RTI) model. On-level and advanced students work on the program twice a week for 20 to 30 minutes. Tier II students practice their reading skills in Lexia Read-

ing three or four times a week for 20 to 30 minutes. Tier III students need extended practice and work in Lexia Reading five times a week for 20 to 30 minutes, but it is difficult to consistently find this time during busy school days. At home, students can spend 20 minutes each evening on a reading or math program for homework.

These programs can also help exercise students' minds on weekends, during summer vacation, or on snow days. Preschool and kindergarten teachers at our school encourage parents to help their children log into online programs such as ABC Mouse, StarFall,

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and Lexia Reading during breaks from school. This is a great way to combat boredom and keep skills fresh.

## Home-School Connections

Blended learning classrooms also help build strong home-school connections. Armed with real-time data from the software programs, teachers can send notifications to parents with personalized information about what their children are learning each day. They can also send along recommended activities for children to complete at home.

Our school uses several online outlets to give parents a window into the world of school. These include individual teachers' websites, the text messaging program Remind (formerly known as Remind101), the mobile app SchoolWay, Twitter, electronic newsletters, and the video app Flipagram. These tools give parents enough infor-

mation so that they can hold their children more accountable if they claim they learned "nothing" at school today.

## Takeaways for Principals

Blended learning represents a shift in teaching and learning, and the most critical task for a principal is to be supportive of that shift. Craft a vision for technology use and blended learning in your school. If teachers want to try a new blended learning method, support them by providing training and time to plan with other like-minded professionals. Recruit your teacher leaders to set an example and your tech-savvy teachers to be blended learning mentors to teachers who are new to it. Then, get out of their way. Give them the time and space to do what they do best: preparing children to be life-long learners. But be prepared to have ongoing discussions about what's working and how to improve the blended learning model.

Blended learning works and is transforming education. In our world that demands critical thinking and collaboration, and students must be engaged and take ownership for their learning. Children want their learning at school to be more like their learning outside of school—vibrant, interactive, self-paced, and challenging. This is the strength of blended learning: It moves education from "sit and get" to "follow your passion for learning and have fun!" 

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