



Hybrid Learning: The Path Forward

By Amy Bell, AIA, NCARB, NCIDQ, and Madeline Gibbs, AIA, NCARB, WELL AP

Hybrid education rose in popularity during the pandemic and likely will continue into the future.

Hybrid education, an outgrowth of the recent pandemic, holds promise for the future as schools combine traditional learning and new technology. One of the foremost challenges, however, is bringing the best resources to students while still being conscious of the budget.

“As districts build educational environments, they are limited by the upfront costs,” according to Cassie Beckwith, project manager with Goodwyn Mills Cawood. When the pandemic forced districts to adopt this model, they often turned to outside experts.

“For the Savannah-Chatham County Public Schools, educational leaders asked a design team to research existing cutting-edge hybrid models because they believed this was the trend of the future, and they wanted a trusted advisor who would join them on the leading edge,” Beckwith says.

One of the positive aspects of COVID has been the rapid expansion of virtual opportunities for collaboration at school and at work. This has opened the door to global cultural and professional enrichment opportunities.

In addition to the broader exposure, virtual and hybrid models offer an unanticipated level of customized, one-on-one learning that meets students where they are. For example, in one case study, students with mild autism found that the virtual model opened opportunities through one-on-one interaction. At the same time, the advantage of flexible schedules benefits students with extracurriculars and other schedule constraints. The virtual model allows students and teachers to connect when convenient through various communication channels.

Learning + Models

Learning can now occur anywhere. The pandemic put a whole new spin on anywhere/

anytime learning. What will the future “classroom” look like? Discussions and planning are focused on technology flexible enough that learners can receive the lesson wherever they may be, as long as a robust IT infrastructure is in place.

With no defined precedent for hybrid learning, design teams must adopt concepts from similar models wherever possible. For example, flexible classrooms with movable furniture that can be reconfigured for different activities and learning styles embody the idea of adapting the environment to the distinct needs of individual students. Grouping students with others who are at the same level is another way the flexibility of a hybrid model is superior.

In the hybrid model, teachers create lesson plans and present the material, but students have flexibility in how they learn: in person in the classroom, online in real-time, or self-study, viewing the material later at their own pace.

The hybrid model prepares students for the post-pandemic business world they will enter while also granting them access to high-level professionals who can digitally connect and teach them practical skills and provide access to the wider world through virtual tours and collaboration.

Community involvement is critical to getting businesses on board to work in partnership with schools to broaden students’ horizons. For example, a virtual connection can make it easier for local businesses and organizations to partner with schools to introduce STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts, and math) models, going beyond what could be covered in a field trip.

Implementation + Benefits

As the preferred learning model shifts, the look and feel of the classroom must change accordingly. We must decide what future

hybrid learning will look like and how it transfers to brick and mortar, as well as how to fund it. Technology becomes the great equalizer, offering opportunities to students who might not have as many options for enrichment activities. The hybrid model can also address the teacher shortage when educators and professionals can enter the classroom virtually.

Lifecycle savings. Even if the technology is expensive at the outset, this model is inclusive and will save money overall. The per-student ratio and the lifecycle savings of capital infrastructure make a case for affordability and allow more funds to be diverted to teacher recruitment and retention. At Gwinnett Online Campus, part of Georgia's Gwinnett County School District, there is actually a waiting list of teachers.

Optimizing efficiency. In a hybrid world, brick-and-mortar schools will look very different from traditional schools in that they can be optimized for efficiency and designed around virtual activities. If not every student is attending in person every day, more students can use the same building—a significant cost reduction for school districts that are building and renovating facilities.

The buildings themselves can also be scaled down to only provide space for activities that require student attendance, such as science labs. The full cafeteria can be scaled down to a snack bar or break area, the number of classrooms can be reduced, and flexible schedules can allow more students to share the same spaces at different times.

Questioning benefits. Of all the challenges, perhaps the most daunting is implementing changes when teachers and parents are resistant or unsure of the benefits. To get their buy-in, education leaders must explain to teachers and parents why this approach will be more successful. Change is difficult, but the ones who are adaptable, engaged, and invested in the new program will be the most successful. Successful



The first step to implementing a hybrid program is for people to acknowledge that it can be done. Once they decide “we can do this,” the next question will be “how do we do this?” and then the real fun begins as they plan, develop, and promote the hybrid education concept in their communities and usher in the future.

models feature a scenario in which staff and community are bought into the discussion, rather than teachers feeling like they are forced into a situation in which they have neither input nor feedback.

Insights + Social Equity

Interestingly, teachers on the Gwinnett Online Campus said they often felt closer to their students in the virtual world, where instruction was more like a one-on-one tutoring session than a lecture. When teaching and learning can occur anywhere, the teachers no longer use their classroom as a base. Instead, ownership comes in the form of pedagogical craft and the mission to educate students. Teachers are no longer isolated from one another; as they teach online, they can sit together and learn from one another as they see others' techniques and increase the quality of teaching and learning through collaboration.

Optimizing social equity. Another benefit of the hybrid model is equity. If every student in the district has access to the same technology, it will level the playing field within school districts and across the country. The same content and lessons can be offered to everyone in the district at

a reduced cost because it is created once and then widely distributed.

Navigating extracurricular activities. There are some logistical questions, such as how to offer athletics and other extracurricular activities if the students aren't physically on campus on a regular basis or if space is not readily available. Athletics require substantial acreage, and land is expensive, especially in metro areas, but if district schools share acquisition and maintenance costs of facilities and scheduling is done with the latitude allowed under hybrid instruction, it could be a win for everyone concerned.

We Can Do This

The first step to implementing a hybrid program is for people to acknowledge that it is desirable and possible. As they plan, develop, and promote the hybrid education concept, stakeholders applaud its growth in their communities in the future.

Amy Bell is vice president, architecture, with Goodwyn Mills Cawood. Email: amy.bell@gmcnetwork.com.

Madeline Gibbs is design architect at Goodwyn Mills Cawood. Email: madeline.gibbs@gmcnetwork.com.