

Proof Points: Blended Learning Success in School Districts

WASHINGTON COUNTY SCHOOL DISTRICT

St. George, Utah

INTRODUCTION

The Washington County School District in St. George, Utah, launched blended-learning programs in 2013 that built on its success with the Utah Online School, a virtual school that serves students in the district and across Utah. The district first established a virtual elementary school in 2004 and added a virtual high school in 2011. Leveraging the digital assets and know-how it built over the previous decade with the Utah Online School, it now runs blended-learning programs that offer both “recovery-content” and original-content courses to students across the district. The district focuses on helping students master content, as opposed to earning credits (hence, the reference to recovery content, instead of the more popular term credit recovery), to ensure that students graduate college and career ready. The district’s blended-learning programs have helped boost graduation rates. Dixie High School, which has implemented the most recovery-content courses, has had the largest increase in its graduation rate compared to other high schools in the district.

KEY ASPECTS OF BLENDED LEARNING PROGRAM

- Students take A La Carte online courses as recovery-content or original-content courses.
- Through the district-created Utah Online High School, the district provides 15 online teachers and 20 on-site mentors. It also provides a district blended-learning facilitator and nine administrative and support personnel who also run the virtual schools.
- Mentors are important in helping students keep pace with their online and brick-and-mortar course loads. They are responsible for tracking student progress, meeting with academic counselors regarding student completion rates, and setting up online meetings for students with online content-area teachers.
- The district purchases online courses from Edgenuity; it also creates some of its own online courses, which are primarily used as elective courses.
- Because of the combination of the virtual school and district technology, the district uses multiple learning management systems (LMS) and student information systems (SIS). It uses the Edgenuity LMS for the courses it acquires and Schoology as the LMS for the courses it builds. To integrate the student user experience, students access the Schoology LMS via a shell course created in the Edgenuity system. The virtual school syncs Schoology to the PowerSchool SIS that the district uses.



District Profile

Washington County School District,
St. George, Utah

28,400 students

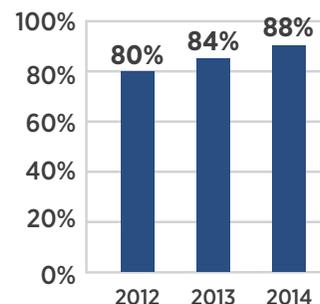
54 schools, including seven preschools, 25 elementary schools, six intermediate schools, six middle schools, seven high schools, one post-high school, and two virtual schools

The student population is 80% white, 13% Hispanic, 2% Native American, and 2% Pacific Islander; 43% of students qualify for free and reduced-price lunch, 6% are English Language Learners, and 3.5% are homeless

Blended Learning Success Proof Points

The district’s graduation rate has improved from 80% in 2012 to 88% in 2014, and the high schools that have implemented the most recovery-content courses, including Dixie High School, have shown the largest increases in graduation rates.

Graduation Rates



BLENDING LEARNING AT WASHINGTON COUNTY SCHOOL DISTRICT

The district's programs that are using blended learning include the following:

- **Recovery-content courses.** The district's first blended-learning program offered recovery-content courses—first at Dixie High School and then at Pine View High School. Students enroll in a class called Basic Academic Skills to work on recovery-content courses with an online teacher and an on-site mentor. The recovery-content courses give students the option of testing for mastery, and many students demonstrate competency through pre-testing so that they can just focus on the content areas they need to master.
- **Original-content courses.** During the 2014–15 school year, the district began offering A La Carte online courses for original content to students in traditional high schools and middle schools. Students may take online courses either in a school lab during school or remotely outside of the traditional school day. The latter option enables students to take a full course load during the school day and additional courses before or after school; about 550 students took A La Carte online courses on top of a full course load during the 2014–15 school year. An on-site mentor who is responsible for tracking student progress, contacting students and parents about student status, facilitating end-of-level testing, and partnering with the online teacher to create a successful learning experience, supports these students.
- **Summer school.** The district created a summer school program in the 2010–11 school year that runs from June 1 through mid-July for recovery-content courses and June 1 through the end of August for original-content courses. The summer school program enables special education and at-risk students to meet graduation requirements; it also gives students scheduling flexibility during the regular school year by freeing up course requirements. Students participating in recovery-content courses meet at least once per week with an on-site mentor who is responsible for proctoring tests, counseling students regarding progress, conferencing with parents, and developing strong professional relationships with students.
- **Transition program.** Students often have issues that prohibit them from attending a traditional brick-and-mortar school for a short period of time. The transition program allows students to move between a traditional brick-and-mortar school and the virtual school with ease and course integrity. Traditional teachers within the district partner with online teachers to match content and ensure a smooth transition from one education setting to the other. Transition students also work with an academic counselor and an at-risk specialist, a highly qualified teacher who is responsible for helping to facilitate the movement between schools and monitor student progress.
- **Super Seniors program.** Super seniors are students who did not graduate in the spring with their graduating class. In Utah, if these students finish their graduation requirements by the end of September following their senior year, then the state will give them a high school diploma and count them as part of their original graduating class. The district created a program with the Utah Online School—similar to the summer school program—in which super seniors work with a mentor on recovery-content and original-content courses the summer after their senior year in order to complete graduation requirements.

Blended-learning programs at Washington County School District appear to be contributing to the district's improved graduation rate by allowing students to recover content and receive flexible learning options. During the 2014–15 school year, the district's students completed more than 850 recovery-content courses with an 83% completion rate and 2,902 original-content courses with an 84% completion rate. The Super Seniors program is still small and has served fewer than 10 students in each of the past two years, but it is a valuable option for students who might otherwise drop out. During the 2014–15 school year, the transition program allowed 51 students to stay on track academically despite injuries, illnesses, and other issues. Nine of the 10 seniors in the transition program were able to graduate on time with their class. In Summer 2014, students completed more than 200 courses with a completion rate of approximately 89%. The district's graduation rate has improved from 80% in 2012 to 88% in 2014. Dixie High School, which has implemented the most recovery-content courses, has had the largest increase in graduation rate (from 76% to 93%) of the high schools in the district.

“Blended environments create personalization and customization that enable students to take more ownership of and accountability for their education and their future. We want students to extend past the minimum standards and expand their options for college and future careers. Having a blended district allows our students to self-plan and measure their own educational outcomes—learning their way at their own time and pace.”

— Laura Belnap, Director,
Utah Online School
