

Proof Points: Blended Learning Success in School Districts

POUDRE SCHOOL DISTRICT GLOBAL ACADEMY

Fort Collins, Colorado

INTRODUCTION

Poudre School District launched the Poudre School District (PSD) Global Academy in Fall 2009 to provide a flexible school option for its students. The school currently serves 160 students in grades K–12. Students alternate between days at school working face-to-face with teachers and other students and time at home taking online courses while communicating with teachers online. This blended approach allows students to work at their own pace at home and optimize their time at school. PSD Global Academy has achieved outstanding student outcomes in terms of both proficiency and growth. Based on student growth measures in several different grade levels and subject areas, PSD Global Academy is ranked among the top schools in the district and in the top 5% of all K–12 schools in the state.

KEY ASPECTS OF BLENDED LEARNING PROGRAM

- Students spend two to three days per week working on online courses at home and at least two days per week learning with face-to-face teachers at the brick-and-mortar school.
- Working from home gives students flexibility to complete online courses at their own pace. The time at school focuses on hands-on projects, group discussions and debates, science labs, arts, physical education, and other aspects of learning.
- The same teachers provide online and face-to-face instruction, which ensures that teachers have deep knowledge of their students and can personalize instruction.
- Courses are designed to allow students to progress based on mastery, not seat time.
- The school follows the district calendar for semester start and end dates, school closures, and other scheduling issues.



District Profile

Poudre School District, Fort Collins, Colorado

27,000 students who live in a broad geographic area of more than 1,800 square miles

Fifty-nine schools, including 14 schools that are alternative, charter, online, or choice schools

The student population is 74% white, 18% Latino, and 3% Asian; 31% of students qualify for free and reduced-price lunch, 8% are in special education, and 7.5% are English Language Learners

The district is high performing, with an 86% graduation rate and 89% of students completing at least one post-secondary class prior to graduation

Blended Learning Success Proof Points

PSD Global Academy is among the top schools in its district and in the top 5% of all K-12 schools in Colorado based on student growth as measured by the 2014 Colorado state assessment.

	Elementary	Middle School	High School
Poudre School District			
Rank among the district's schools	1st in Reading 2nd in Math	1st in Reading 1st in Writing	1st in Reading 1st in Writing
Colorado statewide			
Percentile of all schools in the state of Colorado	98th percentile in Reading 95th percentile in Math	97th percentile in Reading 99th percentile in Writing	99th percentile in Reading 99th percentile in Writing

BLENDING LEARNING AT PSD GLOBAL ACADEMY

Pioneering blended-learning programs are often found in districts that are wrestling with high levels of poverty, large numbers of at-risk and low-income students, and relatively low levels of student achievement. These districts are seeking new approaches to instruction because current methods have not achieved desired results. Blended-learning implementations, however, are not limited to districts with poor student outcomes. Some high-achieving districts are shifting toward using blended learning as well. Educational leaders recognize that even in the most successful districts, student outcomes can be further improved—particularly when working with students who are struggling in traditional schools, even if those students make up a small percentage of the total number of students in the district. Poudre School District is among these high-achieving districts that are implementing blended learning. Students in the Poudre School District, which covers a broad area of Colorado, including the city of Fort Collins and a large surrounding rural region, have historically performed higher than the state averages in all subjects tested by the state assessment. Despite this success, district leaders collaborated to create and launch the PSD Global Academy in 2009, with a goal of providing a flexible learning environment to meet the needs of 21st-century learners.

Initially, PSD Global Academy competed with online schools that could attract students from anywhere in Colorado and had students accessing online courses from home. Over time, however, the school's leaders recognized that student performance would benefit from combining online learning with a brick-and-mortar component to maximize the benefits of both online and face-to-face learning. As a result, they shifted the school's model to the Enriched Virtual model of blended learning. In this model, students access online courses at home and work at their own pace; they can select from more than 150 core and elective courses. Students' time at school maximizes face-to-face interaction with their teachers and peers by allowing for group projects, science labs, and interventions that focus on specific student's individual needs. PSD Global Academy's 18 teachers work with students in both the online and face-to-face settings and use the school's technology platform to communicate consistently with students when they are working from home. In addition, PSD Global Academy recognizes the value of parents serving as learning coaches and provides extensive professional development for them so that they can play an instrumental role in coaching their children during their work at home, particularly for younger students.

This blended approach has resulted in outstanding student outcomes. In a district that is high achieving, one would expect high student proficiency scores—and PSD Global Academy has delivered. For example, PSD Global Academy students in 2nd through 8th grade have exceeded national averages on the Northwest Evaluation Association's Measures of Academic Progress. More importantly, PSD Global Academy students are also excelling in terms of student growth compared to district and state averages. Based on the 2014 Colorado state assessment, the elementary school is rated second in the district in math and first in the district in student growth in reading and has higher growth scores than 95% of Colorado's schools in math and 98% in reading. The high school is first in the district and at the 99th percentile for the state in student growth in both reading and writing. The middle school is the highest performing in the district in reading and writing, which places it at the 97th percentile for the state, for student growth.

"[PSD Global Academy] offers a personalized learning opportunity for kids who still want to be connected to a school community. Our focus on individual growth, strong relationships, and a positive community make the tech innovation of blended learning so much more powerful for kids, teachers, and parents."

— Heather Hiebsch, Principal,
PSD Global Academy
