

Proof Points: Blended Learning Success in School Districts

INNOVATIONS EARLY COLLEGE HIGH SCHOOL

Salt Lake City, Utah

INTRODUCTION

The Salt Lake City School District's three high schools were collectively losing 10% of their students every year; most of that attrition was the result of students being referred to alternative schools or dropping out. In response, the district created a new blended-learning high school called Innovations Early College High School. The school, now in its third year, uses blended learning to personalize education and allow students to learn in their own manner and at their own pace. It has been successful in retaining and graduating students. In the 2013–14 school year, the school's graduation rate was substantially higher than the average graduation rates for the district, state, and nation.

KEY ASPECTS OF BLENDED LEARNING PROGRAM

- The school uses the Flex model of blended learning, with a goal of creating a personalized education for every student by allowing students to work at their own pace and with a higher level of student agency than is customary in most schools.
- Students attend the school every day, but control their time at school. They work directly with teachers in small-group and individual settings. They can access online content at the school and often at home or other locations.
- Teachers establish mentoring relationships with students; these relationships are a key element of student success.
- Students personalize their schedules and may take up to eight courses at a time at Innovations Early College High School, the district's other three high schools, the district's career and technical center, or the local community college.
- School administrators initiate communications with a wide range of students, particularly minority students, to advertise the school and ensure that the school population mirrors that of the rest of the district.



District Profile

Salt Lake City School District,
Salt Lake City, Utah

25,000 K–12 students in a wide range of schools including magnet and charter schools

58% of students are minorities—mostly Latino but also African American, Asian, Native American, and Pacific Islander

Students who were at risk of dropping out or had already dropped out often said that they felt disconnected and that instruction was moving too quickly or too slowly

Blended Learning Success Proof Point

- ✓ The graduation rate for Innovations Early College High School for the 2014 graduation cohort was 89%,* which was significantly higher than the graduation rates for Salt Lake City School District and for the state.

**Current Utah state data records for the school year do not reflect this number. Innovations Early College High School leadership attribute this discrepancy to a reporting error.*

BLENDING LEARNING AT INNOVATIONS EARLY COLLEGE HIGH SCHOOL

Since finding that its three high schools were collectively losing 10% of their students each year, the Salt Lake City School District has sought to keep more students in school and ensure that its students graduate college and career ready. School leaders recognized that many of their students were leaving school because they felt disconnected, that instruction was moving too quickly or too slowly, or that the usual approach to school “just doesn’t work for me.”

To address these issues, district leaders and Principal Kenneth Grover created the Innovations Early College High School (Innovations), a new blended-learning high school that opened in Fall 2012. The school aimed to engage students who would respond to a personalized learning environment in which they would have a greater level of control over their courses, schedules, and learning path and pace than at a traditional brick-and-mortar school.

The school uses the Flex model of blended learning to provide this flexible learning environment. Students work with school counselors to create a personalized education plan by setting career goals and choosing online courses offered by Innovations or face-to-face courses offered at the district’s other three high schools, the district’s career and technical center, or the local community college. Students attend the school, or classes at another school, for six-and-a-half hours per day. The school is open between 7am and 5pm, and students are free to arrive and leave based on their preferences. Buses run between Innovations and other district high schools to allow students easy access to classes elsewhere, as well as to extracurricular activities that may not be offered at Innovations.

Students work on district-developed online curriculum with eight in-person teachers (six full time and two part time) who provide individual and small-group instruction. Students work on group projects, in teacher-led skill and study groups, and independently on online courses. Teachers play a critical role because they establish a mentoring relationship with students, which is as important as their instructional role. The school provides computers to many students, and other students bring their own devices, which allow the school to maintain a one-to-one student-to-computer ratio.

School administrators believe that most students work best when managing four or five courses at a time, but allow students to complete courses at their own pace. Students can choose to complete a course with a “pass” or continue until they have achieved an “A” or other letter grade. Once a student has completed a course, she can focus on finishing her other existing courses or add a new course to her schedule. Teachers and the school counselor follow students’ rates of credit acquisition to make sure they are on track to graduate on time.

Based on its calculations for the class of 2014, Innovations is raising district and state graduation rates, as its 89% rate is substantially higher than the graduation rates of the district and state as a whole. The school is growing and nearing capacity, particularly for junior- and senior-level classes, as more students across the district learn about Innovations. In addition, other high schools in the district are interested in adopting some of the blended-learning elements that have made Innovations successful.

Most of the improvement has come from math scores. Changes in ELA scores have been mixed: some grades have improved, but others have stayed flat or declined. Looking to the future, the district will refine its blended-learning program to improve ELA scores and will determine how to bring blended learning to its other high schools as well.

“We asked [students] what interests them, and they told us that they want more control, more flexibility, more access to teachers. So we created a school to give them these things. We don’t have bells because there’s no need for them. Scheduling bells are a system to tell students where to be. Our students decide for themselves where they need to be.”

— Kenneth Grover, Principal,
Innovations Early College High
School
