

It's Time to Commit



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From the business perspective, we all know the reasons for independent schools to embrace technology for the delivery of education. Online learning extends the reach of gifted teachers beyond the bricks-and-mortar classroom to eager new students elsewhere. Online learning empowers students to view lectures and watch videos on their own time, reserving their valuable classroom time for discussing ideas with peers, discovering their own conclusions and otherwise learning (if not mastering) new knowledge and skills. Online learning enables teachers to become facilitators, provocateurs and connectors—key behavioral hallmarks of 21st century teaching.

Perhaps most importantly, online learning can simultaneously mitigate the financial pressures facing our schools and reinforce our ability to personalize the learning experience. This is a distinction that the independent education sector has always owned, and that new players in the preK–12 market are now laying claim to as well.

So why is there still so much resistance to online learning? Why do so many leaders reject the notion that online learning is viable, let alone complementary to the classroom-based educational experience we have delivered so well for so many years?

Moreover, why is there still this sense that online learning *might* do as a short-term fix... when the challenges we face are systemic and long term?

I recently learned of a day school that had the foresight to partner with a provider of online learning to offer a particular course. The primary impetus was the fact that a few of the school's students were interested in the course—but not enough to justify paying a teacher or dedicating a classroom for it. The course went well, the school's students were engaged and everyone was happy. Fast-forward to the following year, and a few more students from the school enrolled in that course. The decision was made to drop the online learning course and add a new teacher to lead it in the classroom.

Is this how the majority of independent schools view technology and the promise of online learning? Is it just a stopgap until we feel it's safe to retreat to our traditional, cost-intensive, 20th-century comfort zone?

On the other side of the coin, I came into contact with the leader of a boarding school that is strongly committed to limiting its classroom student:faculty ratio to 12:1. Acknowledging how expensive this model is to support, the school turned to blended/online learning as a mechanism for honoring that commitment to small class size. By building a consortium with peer schools, this boarding school found a creative and sustainable way to live up to its educational ideal. Not only has this model been successful and financially viable for the schools involved, but they envision expanding their online learning partnership.

Here's what I found even more promising about this particular example: It turned out that the 24/7 nature of the boarding school environment provided greater scheduling flexibility for online learning to be a valuable programmatic option.

From where I sit, it's time for independent schools to make a real commitment. Online learning can help us deliver on the promises we've always made—and, in many cases, can mitigate financial pressures as well. It's not a temporary "fix," it's part of our future.

Do you agree or disagree?
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TOP OF MIND WITH JEFF

Q: What do you see as the key leadership traits of schools that successfully embrace online learning?

A: *I think it's similar to any change initiative: You should do your due diligence and act in the best interest of the school. But understand that you may not succeed 100 percent, and be willing to learn from your failures and move forward.*

Q: What's your response to the contention that students will get distracted if they're left to their own (pun intended) devices?

A: *I have a nine-year-old. If she is interested in something, like K.C. Undercover (a Disney Channel reference), there is no distracting her. The promise of the personal device as a learning tool far outweighs fear of distraction.*

Q: Does all of this ever make you nostalgic for film strips and overhead projectors?

A: *How about GE's "Show 'n Tell" or the Fisher Price "ViewMaster"...now I'm really dating myself.*

Q: Any new technology tools you are into right now?

A: *I got an Apple Watch for Father's Day, and let's just say that we are still getting to know each other.*