

# Visionary blended learning creates opportunities for all



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- Amy Creeden, Principal of RTT-D, Enlarged City School District of Middletown

## BUCKING THE TREND FOR LOW-INCOME COMMUNITIES

The Enlarged City School District of Middletown knows how to make things happen. In this economically challenged school district, where more than 74 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, high school graduation rates have increased from 51 to 82 percent over the past nine years. And despite its small size and limited resources, Middletown was the only district in New York to win federal Race to the Top-District (RTT-D) funding in 2012. Now, aiming to drive achievement and student engagement even higher, Middletown is implementing blended learning.

Superintendent of Schools Dr. Kenneth Eastwood believes blended learning will help teachers better meet the needs of students. “Blended learning,” he says, “takes differentiation from the small group level down to the level of the individual child; it takes us to a personalized learning environment.”

It was this personalized learning environment that Middletown sought as one way to boost academic proficiencies in ELA and math in order help them meet the demands of the new Common Core standards. According to Assistant Superintendent of Schools Richard Del Moro, students from low-income families, who often lack the frames of reference and vocabulary of their more advantaged peers, are challenged by the deeper level of comprehension and analysis required by Common Core. Del Moro says, “Blended learning helps us expand the role of teachers and get down to the students’ strengths and deficiencies on a very one-to-one level to meet these new expectations and standards.” In other words, blended learning solves some of the major challenges teachers face with the Common Core.

## NAVIGATING THE FIELD OF DIGITAL CONTENT PROVIDERS

Middletown’s blended learning initiative spans four elementary schools, with 33

### DISTRICT LOCATION

- Orange County, New York

### NUMBER OF STUDENTS

- 7,361

### NUMBER OF TEACHERS

- 553 (K-12)

### SOURCE OF FUNDING

- Race to the Top-District (RTT-D) grant

### NEEDS

- Boost proficiency in ELA and math.
- Increase student engagement.
- Partner collaboratively on blended learning design and implementation.

### DIGITAL CONTENT

(accessed through Education Elements’ cloud-based platform)

- Achieve3000
- DreamBox
- i-Ready
- Lexia
- MyON
- Schoology

### INITIAL RESULTS

- 33 teachers opted into phase one.
- Many other teachers have asked to join the blended learning initiative.
- Students are more excited about their classwork.

teachers. It is an immense undertaking, with a myriad of moving parts and countless decisions that need to be made to ensure a successful implementation. Amy Creeden, principal of RTT-D, was responsible for creating the environment that allowed the teachers and Education Elements to design and develop the blended learning models. She says that vetting content providers was one of the major challenges that drove them to seek advice from Education Elements.

“Education Elements’ expertise, coupled with their digital content rubric, showing the relative strengths and weaknesses of each provider, were invaluable resources during the digital content selection process,” she says. “These resources afforded us a unique opportunity to dive deeper into a review of digital content, in order to accommodate the specific learning needs of our students.”

#### **BUILDING BLENDED LEARNING FROM THE TEACHERS UP**

Middletown outlined an ambitious goal in its RTT-D application to eventually have all students in grades K-5 in a blended learning environment by the end of the grant period. The district recognized that teacher buy-in was going to be a key driver of success and decided to allow teachers the chance to opt in for the first two years. Their best guess was that 15 teachers would choose to be part of the first phase, so when 33 first- through fifth-grade teachers opted into the blended learning initiative, they knew there were on to something!

The transformation to blended learning picked up speed as the Education Elements team of former educators and administrators gathered teacher input on pedagogical and classroom management preferences, as well as advised on the role that digital content should play in the classroom, through a series of collaborative workshops and professional development sessions. It was important that the expertise and experience of the Middletown teachers were reflected in the final design and selection of digital content. After all, they would be the ones implementing it and moving the initiative forward.

“I think a lot of companies come to you with a one-size-fits-all approach,” Creeden says. “That is definitely not a philosophy we adhere to in our district. It is our belief that resources, materials, and partners we work with need to accommodate the individual needs of our district. “With Education Elements, we were able to collaborate on a very detailed level to determine exactly how we wanted all phases of design, resource selection, and implementation to look.”

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For the 2013-14 school year, Middletown selected *Achieve3000*, *MyON*, *Lexia* (now part of Rosetta Stone) and *i-Ready* for ELA; *DreamBox* and *i-Ready* for math; and the *Schoology* learning management system to upload content and assessments and assign work to students. The Education Elements cloud-based platform provides students, teachers and administrators each with a single entry point to all of their selected digital content, while providing detailed performance data that users need to guide instruction and learning. Teachers also access Open Educational Resources (OER) tools *Gooru*, *Knowmia* and *Khan Academy* to search for and assign content to students.

In addition to access to the platform, Middletown benefits from on-going professional development from Education Elements, which supports the leadership teams and teachers by leading observation walkthroughs and training on targeted needs. The district sees this as another critical component for success.

#### **EARLY SUCCESS BREEDS CONFIDENCE**

Since its launch, the blended learning initiative has increased student engagement and attracted the attention of many other teachers in the district, who are clamoring for inclusion in the program. They are seeing the results teachers are getting and are excited about them. Creeden is not surprised: “Teachers who have opted into blended learning have realized the value and positive impact that the digital content has on all levels of student achievement,” she says.

And it’s not just the teachers who are impressed. Soon after the launch, Middletown received separate visits from Charles E. Schumer, United States Senator from New York, and State Board of Regents Chancellor Merryl Tisch. Witnessing the blended learning classrooms Middletown designed and implemented in partnership with Education Elements, Schumer says, “Middletown School District is a shining example of a struggling school district being able to dramatically turn around its lowest achieving schools—which prompted me to support their bid for \$20 million in federal Race to the Top Funds—by combining administrative innovation, teacher dedication and community involvement with state-of-the-art technology for student use.”