



Manassas City Schools Build Instructional Capacity with BetterLesson

BetterLesson & Manassas CPS



“Our work with BetterLesson aims to provide a professional development experience for our teachers that is personalized, purposeful and sustainable in our digital environment. It has been just the “grow from within” approach our emerging blended learning environment needed.”

—Dr. Melissa Saunders, Executive Director of Student Achievement

Manassas City Builds Capacity with BetterLesson

After changes to accreditation standards put two Manassas City schools in jeopardy, district leaders rallied together to create a comprehensive plan to overhaul the status quo and use blended learning to improve educational outcomes for students. In 2014, the district began its first phase of the program, providing 2,000 devices to high school students, but even with the new technology and accompanying training programs, students were not showing the growth expected. After revisiting the implementation, the district identified a need to support teachers not just in the use of technology, but in shifting toward a more student-centered practice.

A New Initiative in Personalized Learning

Manassas City is a Northern Virginia suburb where 60% of students are receiving free or reduced lunch, and 33% are English-language learners. Already fighting to overcome the effects of the 2007 recession, the city was further challenged when, in 2012, the Virginia Department of Education adopted more rigorous accreditation standards and put two of the district's schools in jeopardy.

As a result, Manassas City became eligible for a state-sponsored grant program that would help them regain accreditation. City officials, committed to improving the school system, applied for a matching funds grant that would help make Osbourn High School (OHS) a 1:1 school over four years. Investing in blended and personalized learning would provide students with a more collaborative learning environment and close the existing gap in resources among students.

More than Just Devices

The State E-Backpack Grant required school officials select a tablet and put together a comprehensive five-year training and professional development plan for the devices. Manassas City district officials created a mastery-based badging program that awarded teachers as they increased their skills and competencies with the tablets. The underlying assumption was that giving teachers access to devices and providing complementary training would result in a shift in their practice.

The launch of the OHS e-backpack initiative in August 2014 deployed over 2,000 devices to reach every ninth and tenth grade student in the school system. While largely successful logistically, the technology implementation did not appear to be changing instructional practices. Participation in the badging system was limited, and true instructional design shifts were rare.

“Our vision is that every student leaves Manassas with three opportunities for college and/or three work opportunities. Our job is to prepare them to take that next step in life.”

Dr. Melissa Saunders
Executive Director of
Student Achievement.

A More Comprehensive Solution

Dr. Saunders, and her team recognized teachers needed more targeted support in order to make the paradigm shift to 1:1 technology. Amanda Wagner, the district's Coordinator of Professional Development, discovered BetterLesson's Blended Master Teacher Project site, where she found numerous examples of successful blended learning implementations. She reached out to BetterLesson to learn more about their approach to blended learning.

Instead of a one size fits all solution, BetterLesson took the time to learn about the specific challenges of the district and develop a plan personalized to the needs of Manassas City. Together, the district and BetterLesson developed a multi-year plan to address the challenges of transitioning to a new student-centered culture of learning, supported by the use of technology. Participating teachers would be matched with a blended learning coach and meet virtually every other week to discuss classroom challenges, implement strategies and determine the impact on student learning.

92%

OF TEACHERS

said BetterLesson Coaching had a positive impact on student outcomes

3.24x

GROWTH

seen by teachers in student ability to demonstrate a key skill

95%

OF TEACHERS

said BetterLesson Coaching was personalized to the needs of their classrooms

Creating a Student-Centered Culture

In year one, 21 early adopters piloted the program to ensure alignment with district goals. The success of the pilot prompted the creation of a second cohort of 82. With the second group, entire PLCs received coaching to provide momentum for cultural shifts.

At the end of year two, Manassas City saw clear cultural shifts in classrooms of teachers supported by BetterLesson. "My students are having in depth conversations and actually listening to each other speak without judgement. They are also able to write better and elaborate on each other's writing which is something that I have not experienced in this grade level before," noted Amanda Webb.

Middle school teacher Garcia Frances, also saw changes in student engagement. "The structures Romain helped me create were focused on individual goal setting, individual work time, and individual data tracking. My class did very well on our standardized writing test, and I feel that this was due in a large part to students having that individual practice time with the different grammar standards."

Device integration also flourished as a result of the partnership. BetterLesson Coaches' work with district Instructional Technology Training Specialists (ITTS) helped improve collaboration with teachers and increased effective technology usage. ITTS Muffin Wilcoski noticed student's attitudes towards technology had improved, "I think the kids get so much out of the technology with the PD I have had. The students are some much more engaged and truly love what they are doing!"