



A new education model is giving students the ability to learn at a comfortable pace using technology and more personalized learning.

Do you ever think about how things are and how you wish they could have been different when you experienced them the first time? Maybe you encountered something with a multitude of people and others in that grouping had an outcome that was either better or worse than your experience. *Have you ever had these thoughts about your school experience?*

If you have not heard, education is changing. No, they are not necessarily putting a lifetime ban on homework. If you are thinking you got through school with all you needed, think of what could you have done if given the chance to work ahead of your classmates and learn more? Or better yet, what could you have done if given the chance to spend the extra amount of time necessary to get a concept.... before being hurried to the next item on the list to cover for testing purposes?

It is no big secret -- not everyone learns at the same pace. But what befuddles many, is the idea that a good portion of educators are still doing the same thing year in and year out to reach kids who are becoming increasingly diverse in their learning abilities. There *are* schools trying new approaches to help students succeed in their academics. One such school is Locust Grove Middle School where they are using a *blended learning model*.

How does it look? Well, first you do away with the mundane six or seven class periods in a day for middle school students. Also, you do away with a set schedule of topics to be covered over a quarter or semester. Instead, insert three, two-hour blocks of time and the ability to work at your own pace on various subjects. Now you have the beginnings of a blended learning model!

Do not get confused. Students still take the core courses, and they still have their electives, but now they get to spend part of their day learning through advanced technology methods and spend another part of their day receiving no more than a 1 to 12 teacher-student ratio for more focused help from an instructor.

This method is providing positive results for approximately 400 students at Locust Grove Middle School in just its first year of implementation. According to Principal Tony Townsend, the program is proving valuable for what amounts to roughly half of the school's student population. "We are already seeing our blended learning students outperform their peers who are still in the traditional model," said Townsend. Mr. Townsend also noted the program is the result of a lot of hard work and planning by members of the school's faculty and staff, basically since the school first opened.

"Our original vision statement spoke to individualizing and customizing education for each student so we could meet them where they were. For the past few years, we have been restricted by time, space and tools. With our current county administration, we have been given the flexibility and resources to take learning outside the walls of a traditional environment and be more specific with how we offer personalized education. There are very few schools that are organized the way we are and those schools are mostly private or magnet programs. We are one of the only public schools in the nation to re-imagine education like this."

One such student benefiting from this learning model is 7th grade student Jasmine Bruner. This stellar student not only excels at her school work, but is a key member of her competitive cheerleading squad. Between all she has on her plate, she still found the time to make excellent grades in the classroom.

When this new model was introduced to the Locust Grove Middle School community, Jasmine and her mom liked the sound of its promises enough to enroll in the inaugural group. What many students, including Jasmine, did not realize is just how different it was going to be compared to the traditional way of doing things.

"It was difficult at first," said Bruner. The degree of difficulty around this change had this straight-A student and her mom questioning the choice they made to try the new learning model. "The grades I was making early on were not what I was used to, and I didn't want that to keep happening and stay on my record."

Jasmine and her mother, Heather, made the decision that they probably needed to move Jasmine back to the traditional education model. "Change for people is tough," said

Heather Bruner, "but we fortunately talked with the principal one more time before making the final decision to back out of the program." The decision to get more information on

the program proved to be beneficial for everyone, and plans to back out were quickly changed. "Mr. Townsend did a great job of listening to our concerns and answering our questions. We are very pleased with the program now."

Pleased would be an understatement. Not only did Jasmine avert her fears of falling below her normal excellent grades, she was able to end the first semester of school with her normal straight A's and find an accelerated pace of learning in many subjects. Now she's looking for repeated success in the second semester and would tell anyone considering the program to give it a try. "It may be different at first for people, but they can do it. You have a lot of control over your own progress and that is pretty cool."

As Principal Townsend puts it, "The classroom is no longer driven by a single lesson plan for all students, but instead driven by the needs of each individual student. We want to personalize education for each student, moving away from the industrialized approach we currently use to put students through school."

While the needs of students are diverse and complex, success can be achieved for everyone in this new model. When students are given a level of ownership not seen in education before, it is proving to keep them more engaged and focused on their content mastery, and that enables successful learning and achievement to occur.

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