



Education Jennifer D. Jordan Saturday, May 30, 2015

The town that's revolutionizing education in Rhode Island



This story was written by [the Hechinger Report](#), a nonprofit, independent news organization focused on inequality and innovation in education.

WEST WARWICK, R.I. — With pictures of dominos attached to the front of their shirts, 21 first graders buzz around Sandra Cappelli's classroom at Horgan Elementary School.

Their job is to find their match — a student wearing the exact same number of dots — and join their partner on the rug at the front of the room. Cappelli asks each pair to stand when called, and the class sings a short song about each number. “9+9 is 18,” they chant.

Cappelli, an elementary school teacher for more than 20 years, has fine-tuned this math warm-up over time, making it fun and active.

But her next words reflect the new reality of teaching first grade in West Warwick, a gritty former mill town in the middle of the nation’s smallest state.

“You can all go to your computers and open Google Classroom,” she tells them. “Click on the red classroom, Double Fact Dominoes, and give me a thumbs-up when you are there.”

The 6-year-olds race to their laptops and log on, entering the virtual classroom and math game their teacher has designed for them.

“Today, you will be creating your own double facts,” Cappelli says.

The students dive into the lesson, dragging empty domino shapes from the bottom of the screen and placing them at the top, where they add dots and create equations.

Some students get the concept of “double facts” straightaway, adding $10+10=20$ and $4+4=8$ in fairly rapid succession. Others work more tentatively.

A quick trip around the room gives Capelli an immediate impression of how well her young students have grasped the lesson’s objective, as well as how diverse their math skills are. It also provides a crash course in what “blended learning” — a combination of teacher-led instruction and self-paced student learning online — can look like.

Tonight, she will be able to review her students’ math lessons on her own Chromebook, a small, inexpensive laptop designed to work primarily on the Internet. But a close inspection is hardly necessary. The technology has already helped her figure out where each student is, and this knowledge will help her plan tomorrow’s math lesson.

The technology is also providing these 6-year-olds with what West Warwick's educators hope is an environment of empowerment and creativity that they will explore over the next 12 years. Blended learning, they believe, will help the district achieve its goal of customized learning for every student, at the pace and in the style best suited to each child.

"You have to be fearless," Cappelli said of embracing blended learning this year. "I love it because I see how well it works. And I am just always looking for the next learning experience."

Embracing Change

This current school year, West Warwick became the first district in Rhode Island to put a computing device in the hands of every student and teacher, from kindergarten through 12th grade — a step that drew praise from President Obama last November.

The blue-collar district is at the forefront of Rhode Island's ambition to become the first fully blended learning state in the country. Nearly all of the state's public school districts and charter schools are experimenting with technology in classrooms to some degree.

But no other district has embraced blended learning as rapidly or as whole-heartedly as West Warwick. Based on the strength of its vision to help its 3,400 students "communicate, collaborate and create content" more effectively, the district received an \$80,000 grant for 2013-2014 from the state Department of Education. It purchased several hundred Google Chromebooks, at \$267 apiece, for one of its elementary schools and a few other pilot classrooms scattered throughout the district. The results of that pilot program were so promising that the superintendent decided to expand blended learning district-wide in 2014-2015. So far, the district has spent \$646,000 of its budget on devices.

Yet it is unclear how effectively blended learning in West Warwick is improving student achievement — and may remain unclear for another year or two. With just a year of

district-wide experimentation behind them and a new testing regime this year tied to the Common Core standards, it may be difficult to assess this dramatic shift's impact on test scores for quite some time.

State education officials praise West Warwick as “early adopters” and say already students are getting a more personalized approach to learning than they would have otherwise. At the same time, they acknowledge, some teachers need more support to be successful with it than others, and the challenges of constantly improving teaching and learning don't disappear just because technology is integrated into the classroom.

The district has a track record of doing well by its students, most of whom come from working-class homes. West Warwick's standardized test scores and high school graduation rates are significantly higher than those in other economically distressed communities and urban districts in Rhode Island.

In recent years, the district's elementary and middle school students have lagged state average scores on math tests, but have met them in reading across all grade levels. And by high school, West Warwick's students are essentially caught up in both subject areas, even though more of its students are classified as low-income when compared with the state overall.

West Warwick's administrators and teachers were ready to take the leap to district-wide blended learning this year because they understand “it isn't about the device,” said Holly Walsh, who oversees instructional technology and e-learning for the Rhode Island Department of Education. Instead, West Warwick is doing something a lot harder and ore profound, she said. “It's about changing the ways teachers teach and students learn.”

“If your plan is centered around the technology, you won’t get a return on your investment,” Walsh said. “West Warwick was already experimenting, and they were just ready to change the traditional model and make something that looks completely different.”

Education researchers across the country agree that integrating technology into the classroom alone isn’t sufficient to improve student achievement. Larry Cuban, emeritus professor of education at Stanford University, says there’s no evidence that shows blended learning is more successful than traditional teaching.

“Blended learning does not produce higher test scores,” he said. “That’s hype.”

Education author and journalist Peg Tyre said the algorithms in blended learning can be useful for hierarchical learning subjects such as mathematics or foreign languages, but have less utility in topics such as English or history. And like Cuban, she says there’s a lack of evidence that it’s an effective teaching method. (Disclosure: Tyre is a contributor to The Hechinger Report.)

“I worry that there’s a lot of tax dollars being spend on so-called innovation without any basis in research, without any attention being paid to sustainability or the cost of training people to actually use that technology,” she said.

According to Cuban, blended learning raises many red flags, from too much unmonitored screen time that leads to distractions, to too little emphasis on teachers.

“What really matters is how the teacher teaches,” Cuban explained. “Not the device, not the tablet, not the software, but how the teacher employs the device and the software to reach his or her goals.”

Districts leaders in West Warwick agree. “It will kill me if kids are on screens all day. It has to be for a purpose,” said Jim Monti, West Warwick’s director of information technology

and instruction. “What’s exciting is to see a classroom with some kids working on Chromebooks, some not, and some with the teacher. It means it’s really individualized.”

A prominent example of blended-learning-gone-bad is the Los Angeles Unified School District’s iPad blunder in 2013. The district rushed to spend \$1.3 billion on iPads for all students, without properly preparing resources or planning for the implementation of the devices in classrooms, according to a federal review.

Such short-term vision is the Achilles’ heel of blended learning that experts see.

And it’s these that the West Warwick district has worked hard to avoid, and it’s why experts point to the district as a model for bringing technology into the classroom in a more thoughtful way.

Shawn Rubin, director of blended learning for the Highlander Institute (a nonprofit that provides professional development and guidance to school districts), has spent time in West Warwick classrooms and applauds the planning and leadership there. He also credits the district with being farther along than most in its professional development and support for teachers.

“In West Warwick, they’ve definitely put the thought into building a vision for blended learning, and a lot of places don’t do that,” Rubin said. “Jim [Monti] and the teachers there have a vision that students are in charge of their own learning, including the pace of that learning, and that the technology helps them do that.”

Making it work

It’s 9 a.m. in Chris Allen’s fourth-grade classroom at Greenbush Elementary School. Allen is working on fractions with a group of four students at a small table at the front of the room. They all have their laptops with them. But they are working on paper at the moment. He scans the room every so often.

Groups of two or three students cluster at desks, working together on math problems and conferring quietly. Some are using color tiles to build fractions and compare them, while others are using “virtual” tiles on their computers to perform the same task. A few students are narrating how they solved a particular equation, recording their explanation on their devices using an application so that Allen can listen to it later.

Allen is a master, even apart from his strength in technology. With nearly a quarter-century of experience, he is recognized as a superb math, reading and writing teacher, immersed in curriculum development and a willing collaborator with his colleagues. He and his students regularly present their work at blended learning conferences.

Rubin travels around the country observing teachers and students using technology in classrooms. He calls Allen “the best blended learning teacher I’ve ever seen and probably one of the best in the country.”

As the students prepare to switch from math to social studies, Allen introduces a new educational game they haven’t tried before, “Kahoot!” They quickly sign into their Chromebooks, using nicknames, and begin answering rapid-fire fraction questions that appear on a white screen.

As each student answers, the class can see how many chose A, B, C or D. It is a fun way to wrap up the lesson, and keeps the energy level high. Later, though, Allen says he’s not sure he’ll use it again. While it gave him a quick snapshot of how much they’d absorbed, he didn’t like how the game ranked the five highest scorers.

But he feels comfortable sharing new approaches with his students, even approaches that aren’t entirely successful.

“I read about new ed-tech tools that come out every day,” Allen said. “They are coming out fast and furiously. I find out about most of them on Twitter.” He knows he can’t keep up with it all, but he doesn’t let that overwhelm him.

For Allen, blended learning is “the great differentiator” for all students, from the ones who struggle to the gifted children.

“We often differentiate for students who need more support with the curriculum,” he said.

“But with blended learning and the ed-tech tools, all students get what they need, even the ones who are exceeding the standards.”

Leveling the playing field

Financial hardship first opened the door to blended learning in West Warwick. The district has sustained deep budget cuts in recent years, and was at risk for a state financial takeover. Monti, the district’s technology director who also oversees instruction, got teachers to start using free Google Apps for Education in 2008. It was a cost-saving measure, as the district searched for cheaper ways to collaborate with teachers on curriculum development and get rid of a costly computer server that was always breaking down.

The minute teachers realized that the apps enabled them to edit and receive feedback on their work in real time, they began clamoring for their students to have access to the tools, too.

“It started to spread like wildfire,” Superintendent Karen Tarasevich said. By 2010, every West Warwick student had a Gmail address.

The state also helped move things along by passing a technology bond that brought wireless infrastructure to every school, and by increasing state supplements to the federal e-rate program that helps to pay for high-speed Internet access to schools and libraries.

These steps freed district leaders to focus on purchasing devices and providing teachers with training and support.

The West Warwick Teachers Alliance was also on board, and understood that teachers would remain in charge of the curriculum and have plenty of face-to-face time with their students.

“Teachers have been leading the conversation since the beginning,” said Sean Doyle, the union president. “The administration didn’t direct us to use the technology in a certain way. And it was clear that none of it was going to replace the relationship between teacher and student.”

For Monti, the decision to give everyone a device this year was guided by a desire for equity for West Warwick’s children, starting in kindergarten.

“How could we justify just giving middle school or high school students the opportunity to be 21st century learners?” Monti said. “That isn’t fair.”

A district that could not afford updated textbooks can now provide an endless stream of content through the Internet. Students with learning disabilities can more easily participate as they work at their own pace on the computers. And quiet kids who hate to raise their hand can shine on Web-based learning games and programs.

“When you think about West Warwick, you think about an economically depressed community,” said Monti, who grew up here and returned to teach in 1989. Life isn’t easy for most families in West Warwick, where nearly 14 percent of adults were unemployed at the height of the Great Recession and 52 percent of students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, compared with Rhode Island’s statewide average of 47 percent.

“But people are recognizing that we have some really neat things going on educationally,” he said. “Parents feel proud their kids are in the school system. And our kids are in classrooms

exhibiting the same skills as CEOs. They are negotiating, collaborating, innovating. Technology has helped make opportunity more available.”

Catching the vision

In West Warwick, the district’s vision be seen playing out in Chris Allen’s classroom. On a recent Friday morning, his fourth-graders turn to their research projects. Each has selected a topic — the Titanic, donuts, whale sharks, chocolate. Some students are already selecting photos, maps and charts to accompany their texts, and integrating videos. Without much direction, the students break up and reconfigure themselves in new groupings. They alternate between working independently and asking their classmates for help.

Tariq Wrensford, 9, is learning about whale sharks. He has access to Raz-Kids, a website that provides elementary school students with a wider range of texts than had been previously available to West Warwick’s students. He also uses Google to figure out whether whale sharks are mammals or fish that lay eggs. Two of his sources disagree on this point, and Tariq wants to find the right answer.

“Great job,” Allen tells Tariq for finding the discrepancy.

Tariq is working on an online document Allen has designed called “Two Column Notes.” Instead of being handed a list of questions to answer, Allen’s students develop their own questions and answers, then use the data to write their reports. Allen can hop online and check out Tariq’s work, as can his classmates.

Allen calls this “constructing your own knowledge.” It’s a far cry from the way Allen was taught, when teachers expected him to passively receive information and regurgitate it later. In those days, teachers asked all the questions and there was usually only one right way to answer them.

Just as technology has enabled Allen to more efficiently customize his teaching for each of his 26 fourth graders, it has also empowered his students to take charge of their own education by exploring their interests and finding a learning style that works best for them.

“I lay the foundation and create the environment,” Allen said. “I am a facilitator.”

A year into full-scale blended learning, Allen said he could never imagine returning to any other way of teaching.

“As teachers, we often hold kids back because of a lack of resources and because there is only one teacher in the classroom,” he said.

Now, he said, his students are unrestrained. They can move through lessons at their own pace. They can use online applications to absorb information and create content in the ways they prefer — using videos, images, narration and other tools. They can work together, share projects and help each other.

“My students have gone above and beyond what I thought they could do,” Allen said. If he hadn’t embraced blended learning, “I would have limited them.”

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