No Silver Bullets: Hybrid High Learns a Tough Edtech Lesson

How a school put teachers in charge of edtech and turned around a failing program
Ask education leaders and they’ll tell you: Hybrid High, the University of Southern California’s experimental two-year old charter school, is doing just fine. More than two-thirds of its original students are meeting their growth targets.

But peek behind the stats and you’ll discover a school that had a nearly disastrous encounter with technology in its first year—and only began to recover when school leaders put teachers back in control. A year ago, Hybrid High ninth graders scored lower on standardized tests than they did when they started at the school. Many teachers felt pushed to the side—and consequently some left the responsibility for student learning to technology.

Only after school leaders re-instilled in the teachers the sense that they are in command of the technology has the school begun to deliver for students and their families. This time, technology is the tool of the teachers—not the other way around. Here’s how it happened.

**The entrance to Hybrid High**

**High hopes, poor outcomes**

Hybrid High is a two-year old school located on the first floor of the Los Angeles World Trade Center that serves a diverse group of 205 9th and 10th grade students (68% Hispanic, 24% African-American, 3% Caucasian and 5% other). Of those students, 80% qualify to receive free/reduced lunch. A more promising stat: 99% of those students want to go to college, Hybrid High reports.

When Hybrid High first opened its doors back in 2012, faculty and the board had high hopes for a fruitful structure where students were the makers of their own learning. According to Hybrid High’s original charter petition, the plan was to “redesign the learning environment” with a focus on self-paced blended learning that delivered on one of USC’s research findings: “Increased time on the right instructional task increases academic achievement for at-risk students.”

“The philosophy of learning was that we were going to create a space where students could move at their own pace and be engaged in self-discovery activities that would allow them to gain a higher level of understanding,” explains Mide (“Mr. Mac”) Macaulay, who was named as principal of Hybrid High in January of 2014 after serving the first year as an earth science teacher.

The school leaders knew their incoming class had challenges. Only 25% of the incoming ninth graders to Hybrid High were “grade-level proficient” in math, according to fall 2012 MAP scores. About half were proficient readers.

The students came into a school where approximately 90% of class time that first year took place online with digital curriculum tool, Apex Learning, says Macaulay. “MacBook Airs were the device of choice,” reports Assistant Principal Jessica Cohn, who joined in July 2013. (Apex Learning referred questions back to the school.)

Yet despite high hopes, several issues emerged during the school’s first six months: the board and the faculty profoundly misread how much responsibility students would have to shoulder to succeed; the program did not provide enough structure to help students learn how to do that; and the school lacked both clear policies and enforcement around how teachers should report student performance data to accurately track how much learning was happening. (That included both data in Apex as well as teacher-graded assessments).

Andy Calkins, Deputy Director of the Next Generation Learning Challenges, one of the school’s initial funders, reflects that many of Hybrid High’s students “were not ready to immediately take on the roles that the school’s learning model assumed they would adopt--roles that called for them to collaborate with teachers in designing their own learning pathways.”

Additionally, Macaulay says that the school team “didn't lay the foundation in terms of how to manage students’ overall performance on a day-to-day basis.” He explains:

“We had no tracking tools to norm on and track student pace. We didn't essentially have a floor. Apex sets a pace for what students should be at, and some of the teachers maintained that calendar, but we didn't focus on what happens when a student falls behind.”

“Saying to students ‘you can self-pace yourself’ was clearly not working because we were not monitoring and giving them enough feedback,” says board member and USC School of Ed Dean Karen Gallagher.
Though faculty members report that many parents had an intuition that things weren't going all that well, parents were not aware of the depths of the problems. Macaulay reports that the first cumulative report cards weren’t issued until the end of the school year.

Even though Apex technically sent weekly reports to parents, school leaders say that parents may not have been able to interpret the data because the school didn’t explain to parents how to read these grade reports. In addition, in order for the reports to be accurate, teachers needed to update the Apex reports regularly with both computer-based test data and teacher-scored test data—something that not all teachers did.

Taking Action

In January 2013, the Hybrid High board began to see that there were problems. “We realized that the model and what was going on with students wasn’t matching,” says Gallagher.

In the spring, Gallagher invited Chicago-based Oliver Sicat (who’d been working as a Chief Portfolio Officer with Chicago Public Schools) to visit the school. After 60 hours of observations and interviews with the staff, students, and parents during March and April 2013, Sicat began to get a sense of what was going on. “It seemed like the year was taxing for the whole staff. I think there was a lack of clarity in the vision and purpose of the model. Given that lack of clarity, it is hard to know what to measure and how to define the success of the model. Everyone was working hard, but in many different directions.”

Sicat became CEO and president of Ednovate, the charter management organization that oversees USC Hybrid High School, on May 1.

When the first report cards for students were finally issued in June, the student outcomes were dismal. Students had actually regressed: According to MAP testing, the percent of Hybrid High students “proficient” dropped in every subject—from 24% to 22% in math, 37% to 27% in language arts, and a whopping fall from 52% to 27% in reading.

Apex results from June 2013 showed that about 50% of Hybrid students were also “credit-deficient”—meaning that half of the students did not finish the year’s coursework.

Scores of all current Hybrid High Students (regardless of when they joined the school)

![MAP: % Students Meeting/Exceeding National Average](source: Hybrid High)

Five early lessons

Sicat had already begun working on how to change the school. He identified five fundamental needs or “early lessons learned.” On his list of what was needed: other edtech tools and curriculum to supplement off-the-shelf providers such as Apex, clear behavioral expectations of the students, better classroom layouts to support learning, a teacher-created self-pacing “floor” for students (“It refers to working at your own pace where accountability matters,” explains Sicat), and, perhaps most vitally, “strong teachers and leaders.”

“You can’t disconnect the power of a strong leader and teacher from the students,” Sicat says. And Macaulay agrees: “The structure that we had almost de-emphasized the role of the teacher. That wasn’t the intent, but the structure did do that.”

“We relied on the Apex and the feedback loop to tell us that students were not progressing—but you need teachers, not the technology,” USC Dean Gallagher says.

At the conclusion of the school year, about half the staff—including the founding principal—left, either voluntarily or with a nudge.

Sicat began prepping for a class of 10th graders who were ill-prepared to be sophomores. “Of the students who were credit-deficient, those students spend one to three days after school in credit recovery this year,” reports Assistant Principal Cohn.

Teachers as choosers

Sicat also began changing Hybrid High’s model, shifting the focus to intentionally building school culture, and supporting teacher autonomy so that teachers felt in command of the edtech used in their classrooms.

For instance, he created a clear distinction between which edtech choices are made by administrators and which are made by teachers.
Administrators at Hybrid High make overarching edtech decisions that affect the school as a whole, such as purchasing devices. Admins also manage school finances. “We switched from Macbooks to Chromebooks because of pricing. It was $300,000 [to lease] 120 Macbooks [in 2012],” Sicat says. “For twice as many Chromebooks, we paid a third of the price.”

And the admins at Hybrid High choose the schoolwide tools, such as the SIS (namely, Illuminate), a Google Apps teacher dashboard (Hapara), and provisioning and integration tools (Clever). Josh Kinoshita, Hybrid High’s IT Director, explains that when administrators make these decisions, it “unites a school in design” while also freeing up teachers to focus on application and curriculum software.

Sicat’s SY2013 Data and Communication Infrastructure Plan: green points to examples of tech chosen by teachers

![Diagram showing Class 2016 and Class 2017 with Key Topics, Daily Lessons, Resources, Links to extra practice, E.g. Canvas, E.g. Curriculet, E.g. TED-ED, E.g. APEX, E.g. Khan Academy]

Source: Hybrid High

When teachers choose their tools, they subsequently “own” the software used in the classroom.

Sicat delegated some responsibility for choosing software to the teachers. “At the beginning of the year, we give teachers $3,000 to spend on whatever they want,” Sicat explains.

This money, referred to as “flex funds,” allowed teachers to choose whether or not they used Apex. “Apex was left on the table, but it wasn’t the only option. Teachers could choose to use it this year,” Cohn explains. “If teachers wanted it, we subsidized it, as Apex would have far exceeded their classroom budget.”

Teachers are using these “flex funds” to purchase the edtech that they feel best suits their needs. Enthusiasm for the tools they’re using may spread, influencing the choices made by other teachers. While the administration purchases large-scale edtech products (i.e. Hapara and Illuminate) with the school budget, teachers can purchase other curriculum materials as they see fit—from pencils to curriculum user accounts.

Case in point: Curriculet and Canvas were both tools that teachers chose on their own—and eventually introduced to other teachers. Ninth grade teacher Dr. Christine Levinson was looking for a learning management system and came across Canvas while on Twitter one day. “It made everything easier, all housed in one place. I also knew it was something that we needed at my school site,” she shares.

As it turned out, other teachers were impressed when they saw her choice. As a result, Canvas became Hybrid High teachers’ LMS of choice organically, with no administrator influence. Given its popularity, next year’s school budget will include administrative funds for Canvas, restoring some of that $3,000 back to teachers.

“Canvas has emerged as the teacher-chosen learning management system,” Cohn reports. “Our teachers find good stuff. It leads to a good mix of tools.”

Teachers as creators

In addition to searching for tools and content, teachers are also creating it—whether blending the best elements from Khan Academy and YouTube, or drafting content themselves.

 “[Sicat]’s model for growth is very decentralized,” Cohn explains. “You can see that with the studio model.”

Currently, Hybrid High’s blended learning structure works like this: teachers can choose to lead instruction themselves (as long as it’s personalized for students) or create “studios,” essentially self-paced lessons for students to take on their own. “Studios are student-focused, but allow for teachers to curate different types of content,” Kinoshita explains.

What if teachers don’t feel comfortable creating studios? Hybrid High offers two alternatives: At the beginning of the 2013-2014 school year, Sicat
conducted a professional development session with sample studio lessons; teachers can use those as an exemplar. When material gets more complex or interdisciplinary, staff members also collaborate to create studios--both with colleagues who teach the same or different subjects. (“Teachers work on studios during their shared prep periods,” Cohn says).

Source: Hybrid High

**Accountability and high expectations**

You may be wondering: Is there such a thing as too much freedom for teachers?

Both Assistant Principal Cohn and Dean Gallagher agree that accountability and high expectations are key. “The teachers are free to make some choices, but we also hold them accountable with what’s going on with positive impact on student learning,” Gallagher says.

Starting in September 2013, Hybrid High administrators began meeting with teachers to do quarterly assessments of school-wide student results--with forthright conversations about what teachers are doing in class when those results are poor.

The leadership team and IT director Josh Kinoshita also conduct classroom observations. Cohn explains that there is also “incentive for teachers to make great curricular decisions,” as they are evaluated using a performance-based evaluation (including student achievement data from the ACT and CAHSEE).

Cohn explains that such quality controls are vital:

> “[The controls] reflect a desire to allow innovation to happen in the classroom balanced with a high degree of accountability for making good instructional choices. We want to empower the people who are best able to make the decisions about individual students’ learning to do that and give them the structures to help them be successful.”

Source: Hybrid High

**Results from year two**

Thus far, of the sophomores who attended Hybrid High last year (the “cohort”), 41% are meeting (or exceeding) national math averages, 52% are meeting (or exceeding) national reading standards and 55% are similarly succeeding in language arts. More than two-thirds of those sophomores are meeting their growth targets. Even so, that leaves plenty of room for growth--especially for students who aspire to go to college.

*Scores of Hybrid High Sophomores who joined the school in September 2012*
Sicat says he doesn’t spend much time thinking about the past -- just about how to help his students reach the goals that they and Hybrid High have for them. Parents trust him: the staff reports that 97% of parents feel that “we have high expectations and care for their son/daughter as a person.”

“I haven't thought much about last year as we are more focused on looking forward and solving the challenges of personalization,” Sicat says.

Principal Macaulay is also looking forward: “Before, everything was centered around edtech. Now, we allow teachers to find the necessary tools for themselves, and work with what they want to work with to help students reach their outcomes. The edtech helps us be more student-centered.”

About the Author

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