Private Schools Exploring Blended Models

By Benjamin Herold

San Francisco

Since becoming one of the first Roman Catholic elementary schools in the country to adopt a blended learning program, Mission Dolores Academy has boosted enrollment by 16 percent, cut per-pupil operating costs by one-third, and generated encouraging academic results.

Now, the 250-student school here wants to take the next step.

"Figuring out how to get data that people find reliable and actionable so that we can adapt our curriculum," said Principal Dan Storz, "has become kind of the Holy Grail."

Most observers agree that Catholic and other private or independent schools are several years behind public schools when it comes to embracing blended learning. If they adopt blended programs at all, the focus tends to be on cutting costs and expanding course offerings rather than rethinking how education is delivered.

But some advance-guard private and independent schools, like Mission Dolores, are beginning to leverage blended learning data to make strategic schoolwide decisions or overhaul their school's culture.

Others are looking to technology to provide students and teachers with more collaborative, engaging experiences. Private schools are forming consortia to share resources and ideas and encourage the creation of new blended learning materials.

They're all signs that nonpublic schools want to be leaders in the nascent blended learning movement, said John E. Chubb, president of the National Association of Independent Schools, or NAIS, in Washington.

"Our schools want to be producers, not just consumers, of online content," Mr. Chubb said. "They deserve credit for that
level of entrepreneurship, and I think we'll see more."

According to the National Catholic Education Association, based in Arlington, Va., K-12 Catholic school enrollment has declined from a peak of 5.2 million students in 1965 to 2 million today. More than 2,000 Catholic schools have either closed or been consolidated in the past 13 years. NAIS member schools, which serve 569,000 students, according to the organization, have also struggled in recent years, in large part due to the shaky national economy.

**Power Through Data**

Hit by those trends, Mission Dolores merged with a nearby school, Megan Furth Academy, in 2011. The school then received a $500,000 grant from various sources to work with a New York City-based nonprofit, **Seton Education Partners**, to go blended. The goals were to reduce costs by pushing class sizes higher and to bolster academic performance and relevance.

"The two go hand in hand," said Mr. Storz, the principal. "No matter how much money blended learning saves, your cost structure is going to be bad if you don't have families willing to pay tuition."

Located adjacent to a historic church in the heart of the gritty Mission District here, the academy uses a "classroom rotation" model in which groups of about 15 students cycle throughout the day between classroom computers and time with their teacher. The program has generated signs of positive growth in students' reading levels and math achievement.

One key has been granting teachers access to the "back end" of the software programs Mission Dolores uses.

"I understand the data now. Before, I had no clue what [students] were doing on computers," said Michelle Escobar, who teaches 7th and 8th grade reading.

The difference, she said, is that now she's able to more frequently regroup her students based on skill level and more regularly reteach the content or skills that students struggle to grasp.

Assistant Principal Paul F. Recktenwald said Mission Dolores Academy administrators are trying to extend that approach by attempting to analyze school-level data from different software programs, two sets of standardized assessments, and more. Among other things, they hope to identify gaps in the school's
curriculum and uncover inconsistencies in teachers’ grading. Such sophisticated data use would put the academy at the cutting edge of blended learning programs, regardless of sector.

"We need to synthesize information to be more strategic," Mr. Recktenwald said.

Another Seton Education Partners elementary school, the DePaul Catholic School in Philadelphia, is using blended learning data to gauge students' noncognitive skills, part of an effort to emulate the "no excuses" culture favored by charter school networks such as KIPP—the Knowledge Is Power Program. At DePaul, students of all skill levels are rewarded for completing 85 percent of the online content that is difficult but doable for them—a sign of persistence.

Such networks and consortia are also supporting efforts by some nonpublic schools to use blended approaches to rethink the classroom experience.

The nonprofit Jesuit Virtual Learning Academy, based in Omaha, Neb., has for the past six years provided online coursework to students in some of the country's 60 Jesuit secondary schools. Now, the group is piloting an effort to create new blended approaches in subjects like history and theology and to connect students and teachers around the country.

"It's about digging deeper and finding ways of delivering collaborative experiences for students," said Jeffrey L. Hausman, the Jesuit academy's founder and executive director.

Another group, the Affordable Jewish Education Project, based in New York City, provides similar support to Jewish day schools.

And five independent high schools in Northern California recently formed the Bay Area Blend-Ed Consortium. That undertaking will focus on helping "students prepare for the changing methods of instruction and communication they will see in college and the workforce" while preserving the culture that lies "at the core" of their educational missions, the group said in a statement.

"It's a particularly valuable approach for these schools because they tend to be so small," said John Watson, the founder of the Evergreen Education Group, a Colorado-based online-learning consulting group involved in the consortium.

A Leadership Role

Elite private schools, meanwhile, are "infusing their programs with technology," said Mr. Chubb of the independent schools association, but the extent to which they are changing instruction is less
Partly, that's because such schools are widely perceived to be working well. Families also expect those schools to provide intense student-teacher interaction in small classes.

But the dynamics of higher education are instructive, said Mr. Chubb. Elite institutions were slow to enter the online and blended arena but later quickly assumed a prominent role.

"We have an opportunity to [provide] some leadership in the field," he said. "The next step in all this, and where these schools are beginning to experiment, is rethinking how students should learn."