EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Students have a diversity of learning needs, interests, and skills, and they are more accustomed to technology than generations before. As students and their communities have evolved, there is a greater need for the classroom to do so too.

District leaders everywhere struggle with better serving every student, helping them on different learning pathways to graduation. In this guide, you’ll read about a new strategic approach, complete with practical and easy-to-use tips that can guide your district into the future.

You’ll get an inside look at how the Columbus Municipal School District (CMSD), a failing district that is now a nationally recognized digital leader, used the following seven key strategies to implement open educational resources (OER) and transition to a new blended instruction model that engages and supports students holistically in their learning journey.

Highlights

• 7 future-ready principles for district and school leaders
• Expert tips and practical advice to help you get started
• Checklist: What to look for in a vendor
• Real-World Example: How one district saved $900,000
In the fall of 2016, 50.4 million students attended public primary and secondary schools.¹ The education landscape is shifting in many ways, and the “traditional student” is an idea of the past. For years, the U.S. Census Bureau forecasted a majority-minority population by 2043. However, the future has arrived much sooner. For instance, non-white Latinos have already surpassed African-Americans as the largest minority in the country. In August, the National Center for Education Statistics reported that, for the first time, the total percentage of minority students is larger than the percentage of whites in public grade-school classrooms. The problems start with the achievement gap, and more questions continue to arise about whether educators are doing enough to prepare for the demographic change.

It’s nothing new that students have different learning needs and skills to take into account. In today’s dynamic digital world, engaging students has gotten harder. Consider the growing everyday use of mobile technologies and apps that occur early in a child’s development – where 56 percent of children, ages eight to twelve, have a cellphone.² In a survey of Advanced Placement (AP) and National Writing Project (NWP) teachers, while the majority agree that the Internet and digital research tools has a mostly positive impact, 87 percent say these technologies are creating an easily distracted generation with short attention spans.³

For district leaders, it is no longer a question of why going digital is important, but how to integrate into every school and every classroom.

A NEW FRAMEWORK FOR SUCCESS

Transformation is not going to be easy and certainly won’t happen overnight. So how do you make a change? There are seven strategies that will help you create a manageable, multiple-stage approach to transition your district and schools.

Develop a Futuristic Culture

In a world where most families consider mobile devices and apps an essential part of daily life and learning for their children, students are digital natives before hitting high school. Now, a student’s first inclination isn’t to ask a teacher for help, but to find answers through YouTube, Reddit, or Google. One of the hardest parts of getting future ready will be to adjust your district’s use of this culture of a high stakes, industrial education model.
Engage all stakeholders
This means investing time in your education community right from the start – parents, businesses, other school systems, principals, teachers, and students. There is some disagreement among superintendents about whether individual schools and educators should have authority in technology decision-making. Remember, your teachers and students are the end users. Giving them a role in the process not only accelerates adoption but provides opportunity for testing and feedback. This goes a long way in helping your implementations work the first time, saving money and valuable hours.

STEP #1

Create a shared vision for transformation
A word of wisdom, lead with the problem your district is facing, not the solution. Doing so will educate your constituents on where your district is in relation to where it wants to be. This will foster community and create opportunity for all groups to take an active role in decision-making, including parents.

STEP #2

Develop shared goals for the transformation
You've heard the saying: failing to plan is planning to fail. Once your vision is complete, establish committees, organize town halls, and leverage local media outlets to instill a culture of collaboration and transparency. This will produce different insights you wouldn't otherwise receive in a siloed environment. It sets clear standards for success to ensure everyone is tuned into the why, what, and how your district will achieve what it's trying to achieve.

STEP #3

Plan for implementation
Planning ahead and setting the stage in advance will pay off in the long run. A good plan will give them time to adjust to change, establish benchmarks for success, develop a realistic timeline, empower students, gather feedback, and apply lessons learned.
EMBRACE A NEW INSTRUCTIONAL MODEL

Like other leaders in education, you realize the importance of moving away from the long lectures, “drill and kill,” and “sit and get” models of yesterday. These techniques aren’t personalized, and they deliver content in the most unengaging way. In turn, student outcomes are stagnant and students become less competitive on a global level. Too many students are falling through the cracks, because their learning experience isn’t personalized to them.

Before you jump into a new education model, perform an instructional needs assessment. This will help your district clearly identify challenges and ensure the model, and the technology that supports it, will be effective. Whether you choose to develop, adopt, or remix an existing model, choose one that fulfills these best practices.

**Full integration with technology**, including an explanation of the use of technology tools within the model.

**Sequence of entry points** which includes: introducing new learning (usually whole group instruction or I-Do), guided practice (We-Do, They-Do), independence practice (You-Do), and small-group rotations that involve the 4Cs and authentic project-based learning (real-world connections).

**Mastery assessments.** At each entry point, your model should check for each individual student’s level of understanding so you can use your findings to respond to learning gaps. Some examples include: technology checks, exit tickets, checkpoints, structured peer conversations and communicating data to students.

**Differentiation between instruction types or levels.** Ask yourself, “Does the model allow for a variety of instructional strategies like flexible grouping, tiered instruction and does it engage students in higher order activities?”

Most importantly, make sure your lesson plans can fit the sequence of the model and that it supports a positive and respectful environment.
Teachers are passionately committed to what they do. They happily work long hours and spend their nights, mornings, and weekends supporting their students. However, teacher churn is a massive problem in K-12. In fact, 17 percent of teachers leave the profession after five years. This may seem like a small number, but when teacher attrition costs $15,000 on average ($2 billion a year), the turnover can drastically impact your district’s success.4

Shifting to a new education model and integrating new technology in the classroom puts pressure on teachers, especially when they already work more than 60 hours a week. This makes addressing adoption all the more critical. The key to adoption starts with leadership providing support, encouragement, and empathy from the top down.

- **A staff-led approach** to keep all stakeholders engaged in shared goals, strategy, deployment, and results.

- **A personalized and differentiated system** should empower teachers to ascertain not only what they believe the district’s needs are but what their needs are.

- **A model that is embedded in teachers’ jobs**, so they can receive training materials and opportunities to get trained while on the job.

- **A tiered approach that embraces the train-the-trainer model**, including a 1:1 coaching by subject matter experts and the teachers themselves, practice by observation and application, and the creation of an action plan.

- **A sustainable and ongoing process**, where you incorporate monthly goals and host professional development sessions that are short and focused on key areas. Also, recognize the success of other teachers and schools through walk-throughs and micro-credentialing.
It’s not that educators are technophobic. The fear lies in implementation, where most superintendents are uncertain whether students are engaged in the classroom. As mentioned earlier, this is a different age of students. On top of that, there are thousands of education technology providers vying for their share of an $8-billion industry. With so many options, it’s easy for school leaders and educators to be skeptical.

Use this checklist to help your district select and work with the best technology vendor.

**Complete an Instructional Needs Assessment**

Gather, evaluate, and report on existing data: student demographics, student achievement, curriculum and instruction, professional development, parent/community involvement, early childhood assessment measures, and technology needs.

**Assess Your District’s Infrastructure**

- Do you have high-speed Wi-Fi connectivity?
- What content resources, both licensed and openly licensed, are available?
- What safeguards have been established to protect student data?
- Do you have a Responsible Use Policy (RUP) that is widely adopted and enforced?
- Do your students have Internet access outside of school?
- What devices do you currently have?

*The U.S. Office of Educational Technology has a great guide with several use cases that address infrastructure. You can access them here: [http://tech.ed.gov/netp/infrastructure/](http://tech.ed.gov/netp/infrastructure/).*
**STEP #3**

**Decide to Go 1:1 or 2:1**

Committing to a 1:1 program is a big decision. Without focusing on vision and strategy, device programs can lead to a waste of time and money. Bringing digital devices to your district without a pedagogical shift in culture will not translate to student achievement. A fresh instructional model and curriculum overhaul is needed. Deploying devices must be secondary to transforming a district into a digital ecosystem.

**STEP #4**

**Select Devices**

Consider what your budget can afford given devices vary significantly in cost. Know your community. Going digital is a great PR event, but make sure it’s not only for that. Enlist the help of your greater community to understand what is needed to close the opportunity gap. Some only need devices for students who don’t have access to technology outside of the classroom while others require a mix of BYOD and 2:1. One suggestion is to expose students to different devices throughout their educational journey, which will empower them to focus on device use rather than device preference.

**STEP #5**

**Partner with Vendors**

Vendors can be a great resource throughout your digital transformation. Ask vendors to provide coaching and train the trainer opportunities for staff. Ensure the focus is on implementation instead of an introduction to the product. Lastly, require vendors to invest in research and development. This will not only provide vendors valuable feedback for product development but will also improve use of the product in your district.
The significant impact personalized learning has on student achievement, engagement, and satisfaction has been proven in study after study for the past decade. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) strongly supports nonindustrial models of education, including personalized and blended learning.\(^5\) As a result, it is of no doubt that there is a greater urgency for school systems to adopt personalized and blended learning models from the federal and state levels. The “how” is what remains to be seen.

Transitioning to personalized learning requires a shift in attitude – it’s not about the device or technology, it’s about putting students first. The Education Reimagined Initiative does a terrific job of laying out five elements that can help drive student-centered education models at your district.\(^6\)

- **Competency-based learning.** This model guides students to competency and mastery in three defined domains of knowledge, skills, and dispositions.
- **Personalized, relevant, and contextualized.** Development of domains is achieved by focusing on the distinct learning needs of each student.
- **Learner agency.** Provide students the voice and choice in their learning experience.
- **Socially embedded.** Learning is fueled by meaningful relationships with a student’s learning community.
- **Open-walled learning.** Give opportunities for each learner to engage in a variety of communities, settings, times, and formats to guide the learner to competency.
FOSTER COMMUNITY

There are two things that can keep a district from being future ready: your learning community and school boards. Safeguard your future ready plan by regularly sharing your vision for success and engaging your learning community and school boards throughout development, implementation, and evaluation.

Promote an environment of collaboration, transparency, and inclusiveness. Don’t exclude or leave them behind. Try out these proven ways to keep both groups in the loop:

- Town hall meetings
- Information sessions at local community centers
- Training opportunities for parent
- Two-way symmetrical communication, inviting parents, teachers, and community members to serve on school boards
- Regularly scheduled board training
- Sponsored board retreats
- Emails or newsletters to share board readings, notes, and research on your initiative
- Subscriptions to popular education blogs, webinars, podcasts, and newsletters
Open education has proven to be valuable in K-12 and higher ed. Proponents of open education believe that everyone should have access to high-quality learning resources. Open educational resources (known as OER) are growing in use in U.S. schools, because of its potential to greatly reduce classroom costs. In fact, within the next year, 48 percent of superintendents are planning to launch their own OER initiatives.⁷

As many district leaders are finding out, it is no simple task to deploy OER districtwide. There are many barriers and challenges to consider in the beginning:

- **Ensure both speed and quality in obtaining open educational resources**
- **Make sure OER aligns with core learning standards and objectives**
- **Personalize OER to student learning needs**

So what is OER? Creative Commons defines OER as free and openly licensed educational materials that can be used for teaching, learning, research, and other purposes.⁸ There are billions of OER across a multitude of platforms, aggregators, digital libraries, paid subscriptions, news sources, and more. Most teachers are manually locating and vetting. This not only inhibits productivity but it also creates opportunity for error. It is impossible to have a formal review process, let alone discern if a particular resource is aligned to standards without the help of technology.

Ultimately, the goal of personalization should be linked to any OER initiative. To be successful, districts and teachers will need to evaluate student needs and competencies, develop curriculum that can integrate that model, and then offer each student a unique learning experience based on an analysis of the student’s profile and performance.
Columbus Municipal School District Saves $900,000 with #GoOpen

In October 2015, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan announced #GoOpen at the Open Education Symposium, hosted by the U.S. Department of Education and the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy. The #GoOpen campaign encouraged states, school districts, and educators to use openly licensed educational materials (or OER) to transform teaching and learning. The Columbus Municipal School District (CMSD) was one of the first six districts to transition to the use of openly licensed educational materials.9

One of the biggest drivers to their success was partnering with the right technology vendor. From the start, Dr. Philip Hickman, the district’s superintendent, knew it was imperative to find a technology that could achieve their goal of adopting high-quality, personalized OER districtwide, without increasing teacher workload.

District Successes

Over two years, CMSD has made major strides. Fishtree’s solution helped their teachers save 60 percent of the time they previously spent searching for open educational resources. The partnership with Fishtree was an important component of developing and establishing CMSD’s core curriculum and technology-integrated model for their classrooms.

For several years, CMSD relied on a traditional teaching models. By 2014, they were budgeting $800,000 for textbooks. Today, their shift to open education contributed to more than $900,000 in savings for the district. They’ve also achieved significant growth in student performance, including:

- Graduate rates increased by 20 percent
- Student engagement increased to 98 percent
- Their attendance rate is up to 90 percent
- For the first time in 10 years, the district raised its state rating from a D to a C

"Unlike any other platform I evaluated, Fishtree met all of our qualifications. With a click of a button, its platform was able to source from millions of OER in real time, automatically vet for quality, align to any learning standards and personalize OER for each student."

-Dr. Philip Hickman, CMSD Superintendent
List of Sources:


K-12 educators and leaders turn to Fishtree for their cutting-edge digital solution to help streamline, personalize, and measure student learning. Fishtree is a comprehensive platform that is designed to enable dynamic and results-driven teaching for the 21st century classroom. Discover how you can build courses with the click of a button, save more time and money with access to millions of open educational resources, and gain real-time analytics and insight to improve student outcomes for your district.

Education News, Trends, and Resources

Fishtree Blog
• The Week’s Top Headlines in Education
• The Next Big Thing in Ed Tech: Learning Relationship Management
• Teacher’s Toolkit: 5 Ways to Finish the School Year Like a Pro!

Guides & Reports
• Digital Pioneers: How a D-Rated School District Led the Nation in OER Adoption
• How to Create a Successful Blended Learning Program
• Getting Started with Blended Learning

Templates
• Education Technology Vendor Comparison Checklist

Webinars
• Can You Scale Personalized Learning While Saving Time and Costs?

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