

Huntley School District 158 blended learning enrollment explodes

Other McHenry County school districts shying away from online classes

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[HUNTLEY](#) – In his sophomore year at Huntley High School, Jason Zobott was one of only 600 students who had a red “B” on his school ID.

Two years later, he rarely sees a student without one. The mark represents participation in Huntley Community School District 158’s Blended Learning program, which allows a student to learn in part at a brick-and-mortar facility, as well as through online delivery, according to district literature.

For Zobott, because his first class of the day is blended, it means a few days out of the week he doesn’t physically have to be at school until second hour.

“Sometimes I get some extra sleep,” he said. “Sometimes I come in if I have a lot of homework and just sit in the library.”

Teachers and administrators have said the program has given the school a college campus-like feel, and gives students a head start into a life in which they’ll be responsible for their own time and goals.

Since the program’s 2011 start, more students have gotten that experience every year as enrollment in blended classes has exploded.

Between the 2011-12 school year and this school year, the number of students in the blended program has rocketed 1,513 percent, from 100 to 1,613. Huntley High School has a total enrollment of about 2,773, according to the Illinois Report Card.

For students such as Zobott, who went the traditional route freshmen year before “going blended” sophomore year, it has offered a sense of freedom – but it also has meant being more responsible with the time he has.

“Going from no blended to blended, it’s been so much better,” Zobott said, adding it was burdensome being in class during times he otherwise could’ve been spending time on a subject in which he needed more work. “I was going to bed super late because I didn’t have enough time to get everything done.

“If you manage your time well, blended is terrific.”

If students struggle with the newfound freedom, however, the district provides a “safety net,” Huntley High School Principal Scott Rowe said.

“If any student gets to a failing grade at any given point throughout the year, they have to come [to class] every day,” Rowe explained.

Having started teaching when blended learning first was introduced at the high school, Spanish teacher Jack Towne said he’s mostly seen success over the years.

“I tracked data the first two years because I was teaching the same class blended and traditional,” Towne said. “Blended performance was between 5 to 10 percent better on every assessment we took.”

Those who are part of the Virginia-based International Association for K-12 Online Learning have begun seeing benefits of personalizing education this way as teachers’ roles start to change, said Allison Powell, vice president for new learning models.

They can spend more time with students who want individualized attention while students who are able to excel have the freedom to do so, she said.

Although Powell couldn’t definitively say on a larger scale how prevalent blended learning has become, she said it seems it is a growing trend in education.

“I think there were a couple in the early 2000s, but it didn’t start taking off until 2006 or 2007,” Powell said.

But outside District 158, it does not seem to be widely used in McHenry County, at least in high schools.

McHenry Community High School District 156 Superintendent Mike Roberts said the focus in his district has been on Advanced Placement courses and exams, and the idea to transition from traditional to blended learning is not a topic that’s ever come up.

[Crystal Lake](#)-based Community High School District 155 has dipped into the blended pool, but at this point only offers one course over the summer.

Consumer education is offered in two sections that span about three weeks, said Matt Timmerman, District 155 director of staff development and instructional technology.

“Students meet three times over the course of the summer, but they do the rest online,” he said.

That particular course was chosen because it's mandated by the Illinois State Board of Education, but it's sometimes difficult to fit in between other required courses and preferred electives, added Scott Kubelka, director of curriculum and assessment.

"This provides students with the opportunity to participate in an online course, which is something we anticipate them doing post-high school," Timmerman said.

Each section has been full in the two years the blended course has been offered, but District 155 administrators said they still are reviewing the course before discussing possible expansion of blended learning.

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