



REIMAGINING SOCIAL CHANGE

Raising Blended Learners® Planning Year Summary and Reflections

August 2016

RAISE[®]
YOUR HAND TEXAS

This report was prepared by FSG and commissioned by the Raise Your Hand Texas® Foundation.

RAISING
BLENDED
A RAISE YOUR HAND TEXAS INITIATIVE LEARNERS®

Raise Your Hand Texas is pleased to share the first evaluation of the Raising Blended Learners initiative, chronicling and evaluating the 2015-16 planning process and program launch.

Early in the development of Raising Blended Learners, we commissioned FSG to conduct a four-year evaluation of not only the program's impact on students and schools, but also our work as a foundation managing the initiative. FSG's framework for evaluating both is developmental, because just as schools must consistently work to improve on their implementation of blended learning, so too must we iterate on our approach to supporting their work throughout the life of the project.

By evaluating our work we of course hope to improve upon it, but just as importantly, we hope others can learn from it. The blended learning space itself is formative. Raising Blended Learners has benefited from the expertise and input of several dozen state and national thought partners. We are excited to share our lessons learned over the last year to contribute to the collective knowledge of promising practice.

FSG's formative evaluation has been invaluable to the success of our planning year, as it undoubtedly will be to the implementation and scaling phases of the project. We hope you will continue to share with us your feedback, questions, and recommendations to improve education for Texas students through blended learning.

Sincerely,



Alison Badgett
Executive Director
Raise Your Hand Texas



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INTRODUCTION

On April 13, 2016, Raise Your Hand Texas announced the five winning sites of the Raising Blended Learners competition: Birdville ISD, Cisco ISD, KIPP Houston, Pasadena ISD, and Point Isabel ISD. Each demonstration site would receive up to \$500,000 over three years, plus technical assistance, to implement personalized blended learning. This announcement capped a yearlong, intensive selection process, but it also marked the start of something bigger – a carefully designed, statewide effort to not only seed blended learning, but eventually scale it successfully across Texas.

As part of Raising Blended Learners, Raise Your Hand® partnered with FSG to evaluate the overall initiative, beginning during the planning and selection year of 2015–2016. While it is somewhat unusual to commission an evaluation of a selection and planning year, this was an intentional decision given the amount of effort committed to the process. Furthermore, within the personalized

blended learning field there are a number of other initiatives at the local, state, and national levels focused on selecting promising sites and building capacity among school and district teams. While acknowledging this is only one approach, we hope the lessons learned through Raising Blended Learners' planning and selection year can inform and strengthen the work of others.

It is important to note that this focus on learning and continuous improvement has been reflected in the “[developmental](#)”¹ design of the 2015-2016 evaluation. FSG’s approach is not to pass judgment on what’s working or not, but rather to observe and offer ongoing feedback on what is emerging and taking shape. While quite flexible, this approach has also been structured and rigorous. FSG’s data collection methods have included:

- Attendance and observation at Round 1 and Round 2 Raising Blended Learners workshops, including multiple informal conversations with participants.
- Survey of all participants following Round 1 workshop, completed by 53 out of 74 school teams.
- Formal interviews with 10 finalist districts prior to announcement of winners.
- Observation of the selection process, including listening in on national judging calls and selection of winning sites.
- Informal conversations with staff from Raise Your Hand, CA Group, and other TA providers throughout the planning year.
- Year-end formal reflection interviews with leaders from Raise Your Hand and CA Group.

This document synthesizes these data to articulate how the Raising Blended Learners planning and selection process has been designed and executed, and how it was experienced by participants. Furthermore, we hope to shine a light on the lessons from Raising Blended Learners – both the most notable aspects of the initiative, as well as dynamic tensions that have emerged along the way.

¹ www.raiseyourhandtexas.org/programs/raising-blended-learners-developmental-evaluation/





RAISING BLENDED LEARNERS SELECTION PROCESS, 2015-2016

Phase 1: Founding Story

In 2014, Raise Your Hand leadership began exploring the potential for digital learning in the classroom to create a positive, systemic impact for all students in Texas. These conversations soon led them to the rising national trend of blended learning. While Raise Your Hand staff brought expertise in public school district leadership and demonstration program development, they did not have experience with blended learning. So they identified and partnered with fellow Texans and blended learning experts Heather Staker and Cat Alexander, who offered complementary skills. Staker had helped define the nascent blended learning field while working at the Christensen Institute, and had recently co-authored the book *Blended: Using Disruptive Innovation to Improve Schools*. Alexander and her team at CA Group had

been closely involved in implementing several national blended learning initiatives, and had valuable knowledge of where other efforts had succeeded or fallen short.

Together, this founding team decided a statewide blended learning initiative should start with an open invitation to any public school district in Texas. From there they would narrow the funnel down to a small subset of districts as proof points, and then provide the implementation supports needed to experiment and scale. The initiative would be flexible, with each winning team defining its own goals and approaches. The only requirement was a minimum of 40 percent of students qualified to receive free or reduced price lunch at piloting sites, and an interest in blended learning.

The founding vision for Raising Blended Learners was to “implement a demonstration initiative that showcases strategies for using blended learning to personalize instruction, thereby improving student achievement, particularly among schools and districts with persistent achievement gaps.” Within this overall vision lie three interconnected goals: improve student achievement through blended learning, demonstrate sustainability of learning models, and lead to scalability across school systems.

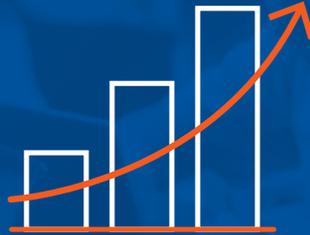
Over the summer of 2015, The Raise Your Hand team emailed every public school district leader in Texas, and followed up with direct mail, phone calls, outreach to over 1,000 school principals, invitations through Texas’ educational service centers, distribution through associations, and presentations at conferences. The intent was to encourage any district with sufficient interest to apply.

Raising Blended Learners

Key elements of a student-centered school system



Personalized



Competency-based



Blended

Phase 2: Workshop #1

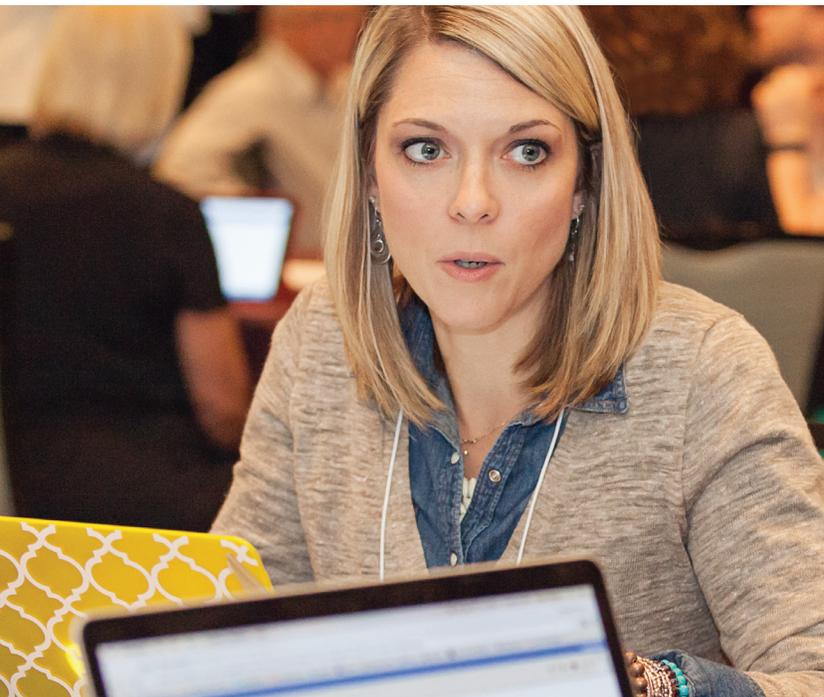
From the statewide outreach, [74²](#) district and charter public school teams submitted a brief written application, and were invited to attend one of four two-day workshops held in fall 2015. Staker designed and led these workshops, based on her *Blended* book and the theory of disruptive innovation. For each workshop, participating districts were asked to send teams of five, including the district superintendent or their designee, a principal from an applying campus, as well as individuals with collective skillsets in instruction, technology, and finance. Over a two-day period, these workshops gave a crash course in blended learning, with topics ranging from the student experience to the changing role of teachers to technology purchasing to school finance. Just as importantly, the workshops sought to model blended learning for their adult participants. Teams rotated among stations, and in

many modules participants could choose between accessing content via live lecture, video, written material, or some combination thereof (see a video from the workshops [here³](#)).

Feedback from these workshops suggested participants found them highly valuable, and appreciated both the information conveyed and the modeled blended learning format. In a follow-up survey, 94 percent of responding participants said they are likely or very likely to implement some version of the blended learning plan created during the workshop, even if they do not receive funding from Raise Your Hand. This enthusiasm was likewise reflected in interviews, with participants frequently citing the value of the blended format, the depth of content presented, and the importance of shared planning time with other school and district leaders.

² www.raiseyourhandtexas.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/RBL-Workshop-Attendance.pdf

³ youtu.be/oHXOC6HhD4Y



Phase 3: Business Planning and Feedback

Following the workshops, 67 teams submitted detailed business plans for implementing blended learning. These plans were organized around the *Blended* book as well as disruptive innovation theory to provide a common structure for such an array of applying teams. All applications were reviewed and ranked against consistent criteria. The top 35 plans were then distributed to a panel of national experts who brought significant prior experience with blended learning, albeit more weighted to the charter sector. While the judges found strengths and weaknesses within each plan, their overall feedback was more critical than expected. In particular, several judges felt the plans in aggregate lacked a sufficiently inspiring vision and a clear articulation of how students would experience school in new ways through blended learning.

Timing the Judging Process

It is worth noting the intentional decision to involve a panel of expert judges midway through the selection process rather than near the end. This choice invited critique of plans that were still in formation, but it also allowed Raise Your Hand to gather feedback on the forthcoming steps of the process. As a result, more time was spent coaching teams around areas such as the student experience, and site visits — while already planned — received even greater emphasis in the latter stages of selection.

“ I thought we needed to hear that feedback. When we went through the workshops and saw the passion and excitement we were on a euphoric high. And then the experts brought us back to reality ... [they] made us assess the difference between excitement and true substance.

— Raise Your Hand Texas Staff ”

These critiques, while difficult to hear, prompted reflection and course correction. The business plan template and corresponding scoring rubric was changed to emphasize the student experience and each district's unique vision, and teams were coached to make the adjustment. More significantly, the expert feedback gave a reality check for where

applying districts were at, and what degree of support they would need to not only complete their plans, but to ultimately implement blended learning successfully. In turn, this realization sped the development of one of the most significant aspects of Raising Blended Learners — the school support ecosystem.



Creating the Ecosystem

In parallel to selecting winning districts, the Raise Your Hand team spent much of 2015-2016 building an “ecosystem” of school support providers. The idea for an ecosystem started with listing the areas in which the finalist sites would need technical assistance to implement blended learning successfully – including professional development, teacher preparation, technology selection, school finance, implementation management, policy evaluation, and more. The team also realized that to achieve scale for blended learning in Texas, these supports would have to spread far beyond the finalist and winning districts.

To do this, the CA Group first conducted a national scan of best-in-class blended learning resources, and created a public [portal](#)⁴ for all schools to draw from. Next, they sought out whom they believed to be the best school support providers in the country, matched against the areas in which districts would need the most help with blended learning. In some areas a national leader was obvious; in others there was simply a lack of exemplary providers, in which case organizations with an interest in expanding into blended learning were chosen. The intent was to provide a comprehensive set of services free of charge for the winning sites and seed a market of high-quality organizations in Texas who could hopefully scale their blended learning supports to the rest of the state's districts in the future.

In addition to the providers giving direct support to the winning sites (listed below), the initiative has drawn on the expertise of organizations including The Christensen Institute, Competency Works, Educause, The Friday Institute, iNACOL, KnowledgeWorks, The Learning Accelerator, and Next Generation System Initiative for thought partnership, resource development and workshop support. As of June 2016, the evolving list of direct support providers within the ecosystem includes:

- Afton Partners (finance)
- CA Group (student experience design, pilot implementation, and project management)
- EdSurge (technology selection)
- FSG (evaluation and learning)
- Heather Staker, Ready to Blend (design)
- YouthTruth (student voice)
- Texas Tech University (teacher preparation)
- TNTP (professional development)

⁴ www.raiseyourhandtexas.org/programs/blended/blended-learning-resource-portal/

Phase 4: Selecting Finalists and Building a Network

Based on feedback from the panel of national experts as well as internal deliberations, Raise Your Hand selected [10 finalist districts](#)⁵ in January 2016. The finalists intentionally reflected the range of Texas schools – large and small, urban and rural, charter and district, serving diverse populations and geographies – to show how blended learning might work for Texas at large.

These 10 finalists were invited to attend a two-day, intensive workshop in Austin, which integrated the technical assistance expertise of the ecosystem providers. Whereas the first workshops in the fall introduced districts to blended learning, the finalists workshop stressed implementation. Compared to five participants at the first workshop, each finalist brought 10 participants to the second, with an emphasis on participation by classroom teachers in addition to school and district leaders. Over a two day span, each team rotated through 10

modules focused on different aspects of their business plan and application. The ecosystem providers led workshops associated with their expertise, and gave feedback for each team to improve their plans. Participants reported this second workshop to be exhausting but rewarding, and every team made significant changes to its business plan as a result.

By spending two days with each of the teams, Raise Your Hand and the ecosystem providers were not only able to provide feedback, but also began to sense the dynamics, strengths, and weaknesses of each of the 10 finalists. This understanding deepened when Raise Your Hand and the CA Group conducted follow-up site visits. In some cases what they observed on the ground matched what they'd seen in the plans, but in other districts the caliber of instruction and interpersonal relationships far surpassed what the teams had been able to express on paper.

⁵ www.raiseyourhandtexas.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/RBL-Top10.pdf



The Point Isabel ISD team at the finalists workshop.

Phase 5: Assessing Readiness and Choosing the Winners

Over the course of the workshops, business planning, and site visits, Raise Your Hand increasingly realized that momentum for blended learning would not be limited to the five winning sites. From the 74 teams that attended workshops to the 67 that completed business plans to the 10 that advanced to the finalists round — these teachers and school and district leaders had spent much of a year planning and imagining what blended learning could look like for their students. For Raise Your Hand, this degree of excitement engendered not only a sense of opportunity for scaling blended learning, but also a feeling of responsibility for supporting the many teams that had committed to the work.

While the number of grant-supported winning sites was fixed at five, feedback from multiple finalists suggested they could still move forward in some way with blended learning if they had more access to

expertise. Raise Your Hand decided to expand the scope of technical assistance provided to the runner-up sites. They called this the Pilot Network — a second circle of 15 sites beyond the five winners — that would receive a smaller amount of subsidized technical assistance in implementation, finance, and professional development. Finally, the remaining workshop attendees, while not receiving direct support, would have access to the continually updated portal of blended learning resources.

To select the five winning sites, each site was ranked against the revised rubric, and the CA Group and Raise Your Hand conducted additional site visits to understand close scores or ties. In addition to these scores and observations, deciding

67

OUT OF 74 TEAMS
COMPLETED
BUSINESS PLANS

15

IN THE PILOT
NETWORK

5

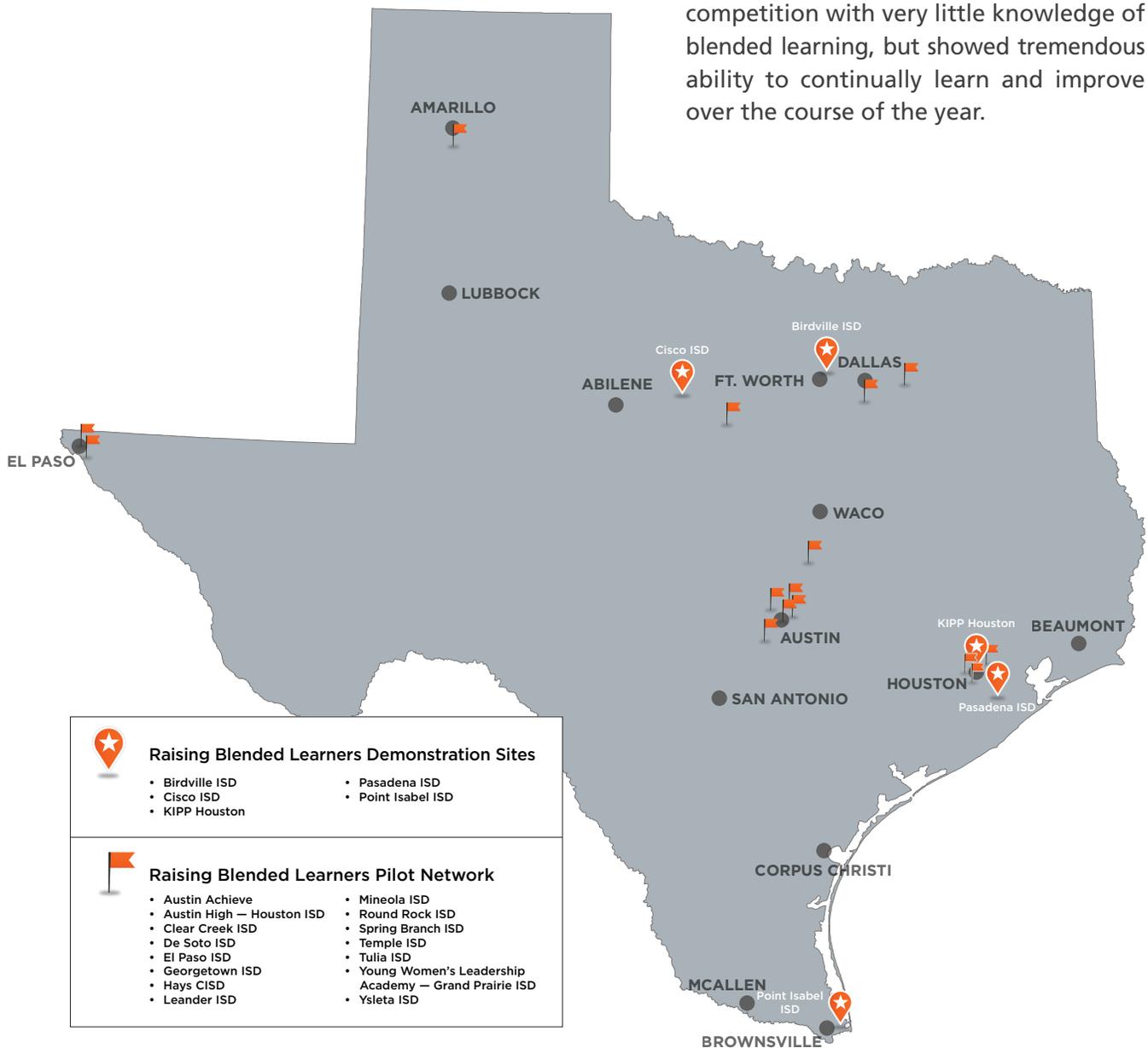
WINNERS



Afton Partners working with teams at the finalists workshop.

factors for the five winners included the degree of will and capacity present in each team. For *will*, Raise Your Hand wanted to know if team leaders felt the commitment and dedication to stick with blended learning, work through inevitable challenges, and sustain the work in the long run. In the few instances where this was in question, Raise Your Hand drew on its deep Texas networks and knowledge to have frank conversations with applicant superintendents about their commitment to the work and willingness to be

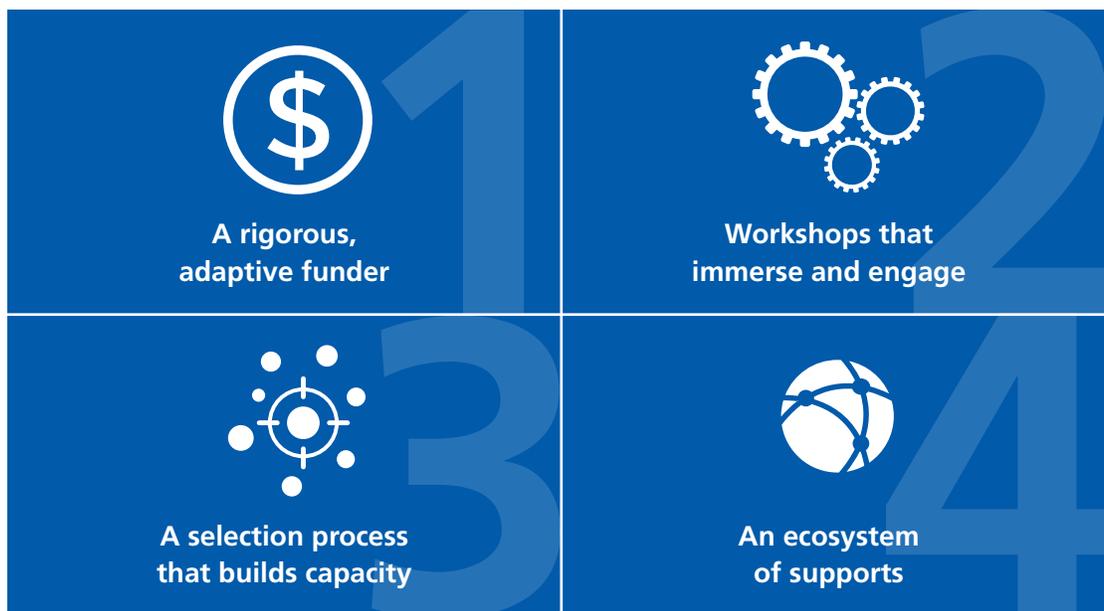
collaborative members of the Raising Blended Learners cohort. Yet to balance their commitment, winning teams also needed to have the *capacity* to continue to learn, grow, and implement blended learning successfully. This emphasis on capacity to grow was key for several winning districts that entered the grant competition with very little knowledge of blended learning, but showed tremendous ability to continually learn and improve over the course of the year.





FOUR KEYS TO SUCCESS FROM THE RAISING BLENDED LEARNERS PLANNING YEAR

It is no small feat to have moved from conception of the idea, to launching a statewide funnel for blended learning, to selecting winners, to beginning implementation — all within a year. Much of this success was the product of careful planning and design, coupled with a flexibility and willingness by Raise Your Hand and its partners to seize opportunities as they arose. The following four factors stand out as critical to the success of the work so far.





A rigorous, adaptive funder

Raise Your Hand entered this initiative relatively new to blended learning. While the organization had been active in Texas public education, the bulk of its work had been in state advocacy. This newness to running a blended learning initiative — particularly one as large as Raising Blended Learners — created at times a steep learning curve for staff, but also an openness to flexibility and continuous learning. Furthermore, in designing Raising Blended Learners, it quickly became apparent that, while the organization was new to blended learning, blended learning at a national level was in its early stages as well, with little established consensus for how to bring good work to scale.

At the same time, this openness to learning was reinforced with strong expertise, including a former Texas superintendent on the Raise Your Hand staff who brought decades of experience as an educator. Just as importantly, he had seen the success and failure of many large-scale education reform efforts in Texas. In addition, other senior staff brought experience with complex program management and with developing collaborative demonstration initiatives. Raise Your Hand admittedly had less direct knowledge of blended learning, and to fill this gap they partnered with nationally esteemed experts.

For Raise Your Hand, assembling a core team with this complementary expertise was an important aspect of initiative design. As the work unfolded, Raise Your Hand worked equally hard to create a low-ego, high-trust internal environment where new ideas and existing notions could be challenged and thoughtfully considered. Many of the mid-course evolutions to Raising Blended Learners — for instance, creating the Pilot Network or building the ecosystem — were allowed to flourish through this culture.

This mixture of trust and competence among the internal team had cascading effects throughout the initiative. In FSG's interviews, multiple applicant teams noted how straightforward it was to work with Raise Your Hand and CA Group staff, and how it felt more like a partnership to make blended learning work rather than a typical grantee relationship. Within the ecosystem, rather than having different providers work in isolation, one of the first steps was to convene the ecosystem of organizations, build trust, help each group figure out how their work might intersect or overlap with the work of others, and customize accordingly.

Considered in isolation, many of these actions by Raise Your Hand may seem obvious or even standard practice for good grant making. But taken as a whole they've helped set a pattern and a culture for how a system of actors in Texas public education has begun to work together differently. As one Raise Your Hand staff member reflected, "Ninety percent of this is risk and never been done before — how do you do that without trusting the team? You have to be as intentional about the trust as the program."



Workshops that immerse and engage

Seventy-four teams attended the fall 2015 workshops designed by Staker, and many teams reported that these two-day sessions were a transformative experience that went much deeper than typical professional development. Part of this was a workshop structure that modeled blended learning for participants. For districts that were new to blended learning in particular, being able to *experience* a blended environment was tremendously important for building enthusiasm and understanding.

In addition to modeling the blended structure, spending two full days with other district leaders was a rare opportunity to bring the teams closer together and create time for creative thinking. Furthermore, the requirement that each district bring five individuals with diverse roles broadened both the perspectives brought to the table as well as support for blended learning once participants went back home.



It was just a great time to watch teachers cut loose and dream. That has been the blessing of the experience, to see these teachers get re-energized, get excited, think about what this really could look like, and create the whole plan. Watching teachers fall in love with this again.



— Workshop participant



A selection process that builds capacity

The 74 teams attending the workshops started the Raising Blended Learners initiative with vastly different knowledge of and experience with blended learning. Some districts were already implementing different versions of blended learning models and were in close contact with leading national funders and thought leaders. For others, blended learning was entirely new. These staggered starting points reflect the reality of how blended learning is distributed within



Texas and across the country, but posed an understandable challenge for devising a selection process.

An ecosystem of supports

For Raise Your Hand a key question became how to provide appropriate but differentiated support that met each district where they were at, and took them where they needed to go. Within districts starting the initiative at an already high level, this meant challenging school leaders to take authentic risks and push themselves in new ways. Among districts that started with very little exposure to blended learning, the key differentiator became the

Providing technical assistance to grantees is not a new practice, but Raising Blended Learners stands out for the comprehensiveness and flexibility of the support ecosystem. At the broadest level, the online portal exists to compile leading resources and tools to benefit any school looking to implement blended learning. To support the winning sites and the Pilot Network, Raise Your Hand and the CA Group undertook the significant task of assembling leading



growth they showed through the process. At each interval in the initiative — from the fall workshop to business plans, from business plans to selecting finalists, from finalists to choosing winners — CA Group and other TA providers spent an increasing amount of time coaching applicants on how to improve. This close connection was key for understanding which districts were ready to implement blended learning, but it also created a cadre of sites (winners and not) that were significantly more advanced in their blended learning thinking at the end of the year compared to where they started.

organizations in the areas most important for implementation. Furthermore, the providers were asked to customize their offerings to a significant degree. Texas Tech University, for instance, will pilot a graduate certificate program focused on blended learning, and integrate training in blended and personalized learning more broadly throughout their teacher preparation. This will ideally strengthen the educator pipeline in Raising Blended Learners districts, as well as benefit Texas at large.

As implementation has begun to unfold, the CA Group has played a crucial role in monitoring the month-to-month needs of each site and calibrating supports accordingly. For the providers, this has meant learning to work in a flexible way to ramp up or ramp down their resources based on the progression of sites in specific topic areas. Many ecosystem providers have also begun to work collaboratively; the CA Group facilitates calls among ecosystem providers, and has begun to coordinate sharing of data and lessons learned to inform the work of the collective organizations.

For Raise Your Hand, thinking about the ecosystem as seeding a market for future blended learning support in the state has also led to very careful vetting over the

planning year. By having the ecosystem providers engage with applicants during 2015-2016, Raise Your Hand could better determine their fit with the initiative, and where any gaps might exist. This led to replacing providers in some areas, a difficult decision that is nonetheless easier to make before implementation begins. In other areas, working with applicants in the planning year illuminated gaps that remained to be filled — for instance, in competency-based progression, community engagement, and learning management system resources. These areas reflect needs in the overall sector, and as Raise Your Hand addresses these and other areas, the ecosystem will continue to evolve in 2016-2017 and beyond.

DYNAMIC TENSIONS TO RECOGNIZE AND LEARN FROM

Raising Blended Learners has many positive lessons to share from the planning year. But, as is often the case with large-scale efforts, some areas of strength simultaneously posed challenges. We have called out several of these areas as dynamic tensions — that is, areas that are not purely a success or a struggle, but that raised a tension within the work Raise Your Hand had to balance and learn from.



**Blended and Disruptive
Innovation Terminology**



**Structured vs.
Open Planning**



**Calibrating Quantity
of Information**



Blended and Disruptive Innovation Terminology

The Raising Blended Learners workshops, as well as the applicant business plans, were strongly anchored in disruptive innovation theory along with other practices from *Blended: Using Disruptive Innovation to Improve Schools*. In many instances, this gave district teams a common vocabulary and set of mental models for thinking about blended learning. For teams relatively new to blended learning, for instance, distinguishing between a [rotational versus flex](#)⁶ approach was quite important for planning. Disruptive theory likewise pushed some sites toward more ambitious models. Yet teams also struggled to apply terminology, often transposed from the business world, that either felt new or less applicable to education. For example, applicants were asked to create both heavyweight and lightweight teams to carry out larger and smaller aspects of the shift to blended learning. Yet in one winning district few educators wanted to be on a team called “lightweight” — after much discussion they shifted their names to the *project team* and the *content team*. In another instance, teams were initially tasked with developing a “rallying cry” for their business plans, but found this term confusing. Subsequent iterations defined this more concretely as identifying a problem and setting goals.

As shown by these examples, the *Blended* terminology provided a backbone and cohesion for the yearlong effort. The learning curve for some sites would have

been steeper without it. Yet as sites have moved into implementation they’ve learned where this language supports their work, and where they need to adjust their terms to meet their local needs and context.



Structured vs. Open Planning

Related to terminology, Raising Blended Learners has also sought to balance structured versus open-ended approaches to school design. With 74 teams attending the initial workshops, a highly structured business plan template was deemed necessary to operate at this scale (rather than, say, facilitating each of the teams through an individualized design and visioning process). In some respects this hypothesis was validated — 67 teams completed a detailed plan. Yet, as reflected in the feedback from national experts, some of these plans fell short of an inspiring vision or a sense of what made a team’s approach unique to their context and school. In response, the planning team added in more detailed questions about vision and the student experience in a revised business plan. Vision and student experience also became central themes in the finalists workshop — a task also made easier by having only 10 teams in attendance. The result was a set of problem statements, goals, and approaches that were much more personal and unique to each district, in turn leading to deeper buy-in and engagement among the teams.

⁶ www.christenseninstitute.org/blended-learning-definitions-and-models/



Calibrating Quantity of Information

An ongoing consideration of Raising Blended Learners has been delivering the right mix of breadth and depth of information, while not leading to information overload. In the first workshop for instance, the workshop creators knew that many teams would be new to blended learning and would need a broad overview, but also enough detail to begin writing a business plan. In the second workshop, participant feedback

suggested that, while the information conveyed was strong, there was simply too much for teams to process effectively. Many teams wanted additional time for reflection and planning, and even would have been willing to extend their participation an extra day if needed. Again, as the number of teams diminished it became easier to calibrate the specific learning needs and capacity of each individual team – a lesson for adult learning that mirrors the ethos of personalization for students.

WHAT'S NEXT FOR RAISING BLENDED LEARNERS?

Starting in the fall of 2016, the five winning sites will begin implementation. They will be joined by 15 districts in the Pilot Network, who will likewise begin work. An ecosystem of support organizations will provide tools and services for blended learning, while FSG will serve as an evaluation partner. Raise Your Hand Texas Foundation will be joined by several other statewide funders in support of this work, including the Michael & Susan Dell Foundation, Educate Texas, and Meadows Foundation. At the regional level, local foundations have also begun to support “hubs” of districts to pilot blended learning – the first such hub is emerging

in the Central Texas region surrounding Austin. Together, these foundations have committed over \$7M in funding to date, with additional co-funders expected to join the effort in 2016-2017. As the work unfolds, Raise Your Hand, FSG, and the other partners remain committed to sharing what is happening through the Raising Blended Learners [website](#)⁷ in an open way. We hope that what is learned by these sites at the vanguard of blended learning in Texas – both bright spots and challenges alike – can benefit the work of other schools and districts across the state and nation.

⁷ www.raiseyourhandtexas.org/programs/blended/

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All statements and conclusions, unless specifically attributed to another source, are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the other organizations or references noted in this report.

QUESTIONS

For questions about the Raising Blended Learners initiative, please contact Jennifer Jendrzey, Associate Director of Research, Blended Learning, Raise Your Hand Texas: jjendrzey@ryht.org



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