The BC Education Plan's emphases on personalized education plans and 21st Century learning has set the bar high. However, the parents, teachers, administrators, and community members associated with Comox Valley's Navigate Program are convinced that they have a strategy that fits and that the work they're doing in blended and online learning is the way of the future.

Jeff Stewart, District Principal for Distributed Learning, is a keen promoter of the program. “The traditional approach works for academic kids and their families, but I've seen far too many disengaged. It is difficult to break out of the mold and do things differently, but we're so lucky. However, we're actually being asked to do that [by the Ministry of Education].

“And it’s not about richer resources. We don't need more money to do these things.” However, he did point out the value of having senior staff and a school board that is forward thinking and supportive of this approach.

Teacher Roger Vernon added, “They had the courage, during very trying times in education. But they heard the call.”

Government funding for directed learning (formerly called distance education) follows the students, so the pressure is great to keep the students and their parents engaged and supportive.

The school recently received an award from the International Association for K-12 Online Learning for providing an effective model that can be replicated in other schools. The program, along with three other programs in Canada, was nominated by the Canada eLearning Network. While still relatively new in Canada, the blended approach is well known in the US.

Navigate has a school budget of $5-million and enrolls 5,000 students, many part time, but with a full-time equivalent of 950 students in Kindergarten to Grade 12 as well as adult learners.

Distributed Learning doesn’t follow the traditional funding formula. However, Navigate’s model which included creation of a new school in the district (Aspen View) and blending class time and online learning...
Students, in cohorts of 24, meet in classrooms with their teachers on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays. On Mondays and Fridays, they do online work from home, participate in field trips, or do their work and learning in the community with adult mentors, agencies, and businesses.

effectively blurs the line between the two approaches and allows regular school funding.

Several unique programs have been launched, including the K-9 Fine Arts eCademy and two levels of a grades 6 to 9 eCademy of New Technologies, Engineering and Robotics (ENTER).

Students, in cohorts of 24, meet in classrooms with their teachers on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays. On Mondays and Fridays, they do online work from home, participate in field trips, or do their work and learning in the community with adult mentors, agencies, and businesses.

The Mondays and Fridays “free the kids to take on the sparks, passions, and interests that they deem important for their growth as a person,” said Vernon. “They can really work on their skiing or hockey without falling behind in school.

“There’s a lot of wasted time in educational institutions,” he added. “Everyone knows that.”

However, Vernon said, it’s been an adjustment moving from the traditional approach to this model of education. “Before, it was 30 students, ring the bell. The next 30 students, ring the bell. But how do we develop personal education plans when we run them through a batch system? I had to change my identity as a block-by-block teacher. Now I coach them.”

There is a different role for parents as well. They are not co-teachers, but rather co-facilitators of learning and their input is required to help teachers know how to spark students’ interests and personalize their education.

Parents are expected to take on added responsibility, which Stewart estimates takes about twice the time parents usually devote to their children’s elementary school education. “Not all parents are bound to the regular nine-to-five workday,” he explained. “The parents are very involved and some struggle with it, but their kids love it so they deal with it. They’re spending quality time with their kids and that changes the whole dynamic of the family.” Vernon noted that the whole socio-economic spectrum is represented among students in the Navigate programs.

Marilyn Nettleton, mother of a 13-year-old in the program, has been involved for three years. Her 11-year-old son is doing well in his regular school.

“It’s empowering for parents to know that they do have a choice and they can move their children around,” she said. Her oldest son was immediately hooked when he entered the lab during a Navigate open house. “They’ve taken all this theoretical talk around 21st Century learning and are making it work.”

Nettleton said she hears parents talking about the power struggles they’re having with their children to get them to do their schoolwork and then they ask her about her son’s experience. “Once parents get to understand what it is, there will be more demand for it,” she said.

“There’s a lot of buzz around independent learning, but here they’re being taught the skills systematically,” she added. “Kids can be functioning at the level appropriate for them because of the design of the curriculum, the instructional skills of the teachers, and the relationships they have with their students.”

Nettleton said that in her son’s case, much of the credit goes to Vernon. “Roger is highly skilled and has an amazing impact on these students and an innate ability to motivate them … He finds some strength in every student to build on.”
Key requirements for success is that students have to learn quickly how to be organized, stay motivated, communicate effectively with adults, and advocate for themselves. Having that maturity before entering the program helps, said Vernon.

Teachers are available through Skype and email on the Mondays and Fridays, in the evenings, and on weekends.

A learning cycles calendar breaks the school year into four eight-week blocks with the weeks in between being used to celebrate the work that's been done and to allow staff to have rich pedagogical conversations with parents and other important adults in the children’s lives (community champions) about what’s been accomplished and the plan for the next cycle, said Stewart.

At the core of Navigate’s approaches are Martin Brokenleg’s Circle of Courage model focusing on belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity. Also informing teachers’ work is the human development theories of Peter Benson which focus on knowing each student’s spark and building on his or her assets. “Kids don’t always know what their passions are and you have to mine those,” Stewart said.

Also at work are the theories of Ken Robinson who has harshly criticized outdated education models and urges schools to adopt strategies that encourage divergent thinking.

All this theory needs structure and Stewart said that much of the conversation leading up to the launch of Navigate in 2012, and as the programs go forward, centres on the question, “How do we get to the most important things in learning?”

“There’s no model to take from,” said Vernon. “It’s ground-level work. Distributed learning requires an entirely different skill set for supporting learners and parents and providing peer and social learning.” The parents come to the program because the regular approaches weren’t working for their children. “They were willing to be early adopters and go through the bumps,” Vernon said.

Not that it hasn’t been difficult for some. Nettleton said, “I struggled with it. I couldn’t comprehend what it would look like.”

Netleton had worked in adult education program development. “I was a resistor initially. It looked great in theory but I hadn’t seen it work. I strongly believe in public education and I thought I was taking on two days of teaching. Where’s the equity? Why am I stepping in as teacher? I had to unlearn everything I knew and understood. My level of frustration was higher because it was hard to be the coach and guide.”

Netleton was used to the pressure that many parents feel of trying to help their children get assignments done and ready for the next day of school. “Even if you didn’t agree or understand, the goal was to get the math sheet done. So I thought I had to teach him the math but I would end up having him do things unnecessarily.”

She recounted how concerned she was when he decided to study the Odyssey to determine how Odysseus helped win the Trojan War. “Oh my God, I thought, he’s going to get himself in trouble. It’s way too big. It’s going to take all weekend. But he was so excited.”

However, all the students were given the formula to stay on track and in one afternoon, her son had completed a three-page essay. “It was about the process,” said Nettleton. “That was the turning point for me … You’re trying to help them become independent and then you get out of the way. Learning is about taking risks. Not about getting right answers.”

On another assignment, she saw her son’s research leading him “down the garden path.” Time
was wasted and he was not happy with the model that he built. “He was quite disgusted with it,” she said. But he was able to explain the steps he’d taken, where he spent too much time, and the science behind the concepts.

From Tuesday to Thursday, students in the Kindergarten to Grade 8 fine arts program (music, and visual and performing arts) meet in their pods in the mornings before spending time with their specialist teachers. “We’re shifting to a focus that’s more globally minded,” Stewart said. It also ties in with UNESCO’s holistic and integrated vision of education and the four pillars of learning: to be, to know, to do, and to live together.

In the case of ENTER, students work in industrial arts classrooms located in each of the three secondary schools in the district. The teachers are generalists who act as guides or coaches.

Students are also partners in the design of their learning. So rather than assigning arbitrary activities to fit prescribed provincial learning outcomes, a backwards design approach is used where project work is linked back to the outcomes.

“We drive learning from the inside out,” Stewart said. “It’s dynamic, project-based learning. We’re taking the core curriculum and turning it on its head.

“Reading Don’t Fix No Chevys,” he said, a reference to a book on literacy and young men by educators Michael Smith and Jeff Wilhelm.

“We’re using Lego robotics. They eat it up. They love science.”

More than one-third of the students in ENTER have Ministry of Education special needs designations. “But if you went into the classroom, you wouldn’t notice it,” Stewart said. “All the kids are speaking the same language.”

But they also come with a sense that they don’t fit in the regular school system.

Vernon said staff soon realized that ENTER appeals to particular students. “They are very much the gaming, tinkering kids who tend to live in their own spheres. They’re in a creative mind space a lot. They’re used to having success on their own.”

Teacher Meiko Matsumoto said she’s heard many students talk about why they like the program. “We’re like a little family,” they’ve told her. “We’re not geeks. We’re just people.”

The district covers a large sparsely populated geographic area so there were not many opportunities for students of like mind to connect with each other, Vernon said. These students also did not have much experience working in groups, so the staff restructured the original program to include opportunities that help them develop the social skills that are required when working in teams.

Stewart said he’s seen where “the social agenda is treated as a sink or swim situation,” but at Navigate, the staff see themselves as “raising the whole child.” So while they may be in the arts or technology program, there is an equal emphasis on social and emotional learning (SEL). Referencing Lynn Miller and Kimberly Schonert-Reichl’s work, he said, “We know that any amount of SEL raises their achievement levels.”

The teachers “work with the kids on the mat, learning to learn,” Stewart said. “We have strict rules for engagement. Teachers are mindful of the social dynamics and give the kids tools to negotiate them. We have to get to executive functioning. It’s not officially part of the curriculum in BC yet, but there’s been a shift to EQ as much as IQ.”

Another driving force, Stewart said, is helping students get into the “flow,” the mental state in which people are fully focused, involved, enjoying their work, and the sense of time disappears. “That’s the optimal mental place to be in,” he said.

So teachers are highly responsive to the needs and interests of the students. “There’s no gentle immersion” into complex processes. Recently, students were using AutoCAD to work on a project. They...
needed an advanced mathematical formula to solve a problem. “It was Day 1 and by 2 p.m. they were all 100 percent engaged,” Stewart said.

The program does appeal more to boys than girls, Vernon acknowledged, but he said that will change as more women enter non-traditional fields and powerful women advocates are more well known. “We’re seeing changes with [groups like] Women in Trades and Women Who Code.”

Vernon said the bigger concern is that inaccessible group of students who “just don’t care about learning.”

Matsumoto is in her first year teaching at ENTER. She was the shop teacher at Cumberland Junior Secondary. “I spent a day looking at the program and I just loved it. It’s way more individualized and there’s way more freedom. It’s just so different from the brick and mortar model where everyone’s at the same place at the same time. It’s more cross curricular too.”

Matsumoto described a typical Tuesday. She and the students began by sitting on couches talking about their days away, what they learned that was interesting, and the things that made them happy or frustrated. “It’s sharing and community building,” she said.

Shortly after, timed paper and pencil exercises got their brains working.

Then the students did an hour of coding. Some wanted to learn Java Script, while others wanted to know how to make an app, a video game, or a website.

Matsumoto uses Lego robotics and said that the free Khan Academy videos, used to teach math concepts, are fun because the program uses avatars in its incentive program.

SketchUp, a 3D computer-modeling program, helps students come up with designs and ensure that they are feasible before putting them to the test with band saws, drill presses, and 3D printers. MakerSpace (an online community of inventors) also helps them with their design and development work.

Students stay organized and aware of assignments using Desire to Learn. “It’s an online version of your school,” Matsumoto said. Different pages link to different courses and classrooms have links to a calendar, class log, and assignments.

Google docs and Blackboard Collaborate are also effective online tools for working one on one, in small groups, or as a class.

On Mondays and Fridays, students check in with their teachers between 10 and 11 a.m. to explain their plan for the day and again between 2 and 3 p.m. to talk about what they accomplished. “If they get nothing done, I ask, ‘So what’s the plan to get it done?’ They take responsibility for their learning.”

PE is also offered on the face-to-face days. Students use the school gym and the surrounding fields and forests. But they take the activities one step further and talk about how it correlates to video game design.

“I think this is the way education is moving,” Matsumoto said.

It will take a decade or so of tracking students to show the effectiveness of Navigate’s initiatives. “We’re not perfect,” Stewart said, “but there is anecdotal evidence and we’re seeing world-class work being done.”

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