

To: Members of the Smoky Valley USD 400 Board of Education

An independent Parent Task Force was convened on January 8, 2014, to comprehensively and objectively evaluate two key issues of concern to patrons of Smoky Valley USD 400:

- The first issue was the adoption of a new method of instruction known as 'Blended Learning'.
- The second issue was the adoption of a new digital-based curriculum known as 'EdGenuity'.

Background of the Parent Task Force

In November, 2013, Smoky Valley Middle School and Smoky Valley High School students and teachers were presented with information about a new method of instruction known as "blended learning" and were informed that it would be the future of education in the district. Students were led to believe that 'blended learning' would be universally adopted at SVHS and SVMS in the spring of 2014. An uproar ensued from area parents expressing concern that district administration had overstepped its authority and that the quality of education enjoyed by our children—along with the jobs of excellent USD 400 teachers—were in jeopardy.

At the school board's December 2nd special work session, a large contingent of concerned parents voiced their concerns about this proposed change based on a video and information that district officials had presented to staff and students.

As a result of these concerns, at the December 16, 2013 school board meeting, the board recommended that an independent Parent Task Force be formed to evaluate the proposed changes and report their findings with a recommendation about how USD 400 should proceed with this matter. Parents who were actively engaged in this conversation with the district, including many who voiced opposition or concern at the November BOE meeting, were asked to participate in the Parent Task Force. It became immediate reality, and the only vested interest the participants of this Parent Task Force have had since its inception and regarding this issue is that they are concerned parents of students of USD 400. This letter summarizes the results of participant research and is the basis for forthcoming recommendations to the USD 400 Board of Education.

January 8, 2014 - The first meeting of the Parent Task Force at Vision_Tek. All administrators and participants were present.

January 20, 2014 - Parent Task Force with EdGenuity representative presentation. Mr. Denk, Mr. Williams, and Mr. Van Ranken were the administrators present, as were several SVHS and SVMS teachers.

January 29, 2014 - Trip to Lawrence USD 497 to observe Blended Learning classrooms, followed by Parent Task Force meeting at SVHS. Mr. Denk, and Mr. Williams were the administrators present, as were several SVHS and SVMS teachers, all of whom participated in the field trip.

February 12, 2014 - Parent Task Force meeting at SVHS. Mr. Denk, Mr. Williams, and Mr. VanRanken present. Decision was made to create an ad hoc group of four Parent Task Force members and one administrator to further evaluate the blended learning concept and report to large group.

February 19, 2014 - Ad hoc group of Blaine Heble, Danelle Johnson, Dana Byers, Mark Galloway and Mr. Williams all met at SVHS.

March 3, 2014 - Ad hoc group met with four teachers from SVHS and SVMS who expressed their opinions about blended learning and EdGenuity as they have been selected as department representatives by their fellow teachers.

March 5, 2014 - Parent Task Force meeting. Mr. Denk, Mr. Williams, and Mr. Van Ranken were the administrators present.

March 24, 2014 - Ad hoc group meeting at SVHS. Blaine Heble, Danelle Johnson, Dana Byers, Mark Galloway, and Mr. Williams all met at SVHS.

March 26, 2014 - Parent Task Force meeting. Mr. Denk, Mr. Williams, and Mr. Van Ranken were the administrators present.

What Is Blended Learning?

The biggest challenge we have faced is creating an exact definition of blended learning. We have found that the district administration has also struggled to provide a clear and cogent definition which we believe is the true source of the confusion and concerns expressed by teachers and parents. After many hours and meeting sessions to disseminate exactly what constitutes the pros and cons of 'Blended Learning', the Parent Task Force has defined Blended Learning to mean:

“A method of instruction wherein a variety of instructional methods and resources are leveraged to allow students to work more at their own pace, engage in personalized learning, and work on independent, small group and whole group projects — with the ultimate goal of improving learning by engaging students more effectively to optimize their college and/or career readiness.”

One of the benefits of a blended learning approach is that the technology portion of the curriculum provides the classroom teacher with more freedom to meet the individual needs of each student. This ability to leverage time means students can learn at their own pace so they can optimize their individual learning experience. Students exceeding proficiency can dig deeper into content without feeling held back by students at or below proficiency, and conversely, students striving to meet proficiency are not left feeling like their teacher has lost focus on helping them succeed. This ability to combine electronic learning with traditional classroom instruction, while providing flexibility for teachers to individualize, provide whole group instruction, or create small group learning opportunities, results in an optimal learning environment for ALL students.

The following video presents 'Blended Learning' that implements technology in a way that we feel would benefit USD 400 students: <http://bit.ly/blendedsv>

A trip to a blended learning school district in Lawrence - USD 497, helped us witness first-hand how Blended Learning actually gives teachers more time to spend with individual students. Each classroom had a different look and feel to it. What we observed was a blend of traditional teacher whole group instruction, online instruction, and small groups of children working together. Blended learning did not look the same in every classroom. In some classrooms we saw small groups of children working together, while other students in the same class were working individually or with the teacher. In all observed classrooms, the teacher was the integral directing force in the customized blended instruction their students received. **None** of them had cubicles with students isolated from other classmates or teachers. Aside from teachers expressing favorable opinions in regards to increased student engagement, we also consistently heard that disciplinary issues have decreased in the district since blended learning was adopted.

What Blended Learning is Not

Despite the initial videos that students saw, Blended Learning in USD 400 will **NOT** find students sitting in cubicles with a computer instructing them with little teacher involvement.

This image of our children sitting in a cubicle, staring at a computer all day created fear and panic for students, parents, and teachers. This fear also led to the thought that teachers would no longer be useful or even needed and that students would not have interaction with teachers or other students.

How Blended Learning Could Look in USD 400

Though we all agree that there appear to be many exciting learning opportunities for USD 400 students if 'Blended Learning' is adopted, the Parent Task Force also believes it could be a dangerous and potentially catastrophic mistake for USD 400 to universally adopt 'Blended Learning' if not properly implemented or if the 'best-case-scenario' claims do not mesh with reality. Smoky Valley's implementation of Blended Learning will be distinctive as each district customizes their own approach to meet the specific needs of their patrons. Consequently, it is difficult to unilaterally translate the 'blended learning' experiences of other blending districts to USD 400. We have heard *from* districts, *about* districts, and even visited districts who all praise the 'blended learning' model for increasing student engagement and individualization. Every USD 400 parent with whom we have talked agrees that all of this could, theoretically, vastly improve academic performance. Logic dictates that increased engagement should produce tangible results.

The differences between the Lawrence USD 497 blending model and what blended learning in USD 400 will look like

Some patrons have asked members of the Parent Task Force about other Kansas school districts that are offering a blended learning environment. Each member has invested between 15 to 40 hours in evaluating the pilot and launch approach Lawrence USD 497 has taken. USD 497's model is encouraging to us as parents because we witnessed successful blended learning in action in the classroom. Lawrence launched blended learning in their district utilizing a pilot program similar to what we are proposing for USD 400. In year one, they had eight teachers who expressed a strong desire to pilot blended learning. In year two, they opened it up to any teacher who wanted to try it, and more than 40 teachers opted in after observing the enthusiasm of students and teachers who participated in the year-one pilot program. They intend to launch blended learning district-wide in year three.

There are, however, two major differences between Lawrence USD 497's version of blended learning and what Smoky Valley USD 400's version will look like:

1. Lawrence USD 497 **does not** provide a one-to-one laptop initiative for their secondary students. Consequently, they have had to create a customized curriculum that will allow them to provide a blended learning environment in a way that allows their students to use the computers that are available to them. The fact that USD 400 **does** have a one-to-one laptop initiative means we have more options than Lawrence regarding the possibilities of blended learning. We agree that currently USD 400 students are under-utilizing laptops in their educational pursuits, although many of us believe they are over-utilized for social media. In the context that the Parent Task Force envisions it, blended learning would mean our kids will receive a more enriching educational experience using their laptops than they are currently receiving, while better fulfilling the purpose and promise of USD 400's one-to-one laptop initiative.
2. Lawrence does not use EdGenuity as its electronic curriculum because they have/are creating their own curriculum as they advance their pilot. Lawrence is a large district with more available resources to create their own curriculum. USD 400 does not have this pool of resources available. Even if we did, the Parent Task Force does not believe creating a customized curriculum is the best use of financial or labor resources. After reviewing EdGenuity, we believe each teacher/section has the ability and freedom to custom the EdGenuity platform while having the foundational elements already in place. This ought to make it the best of both worlds. Furthermore, Lawrence is still determining how to individualize students because pieces of their curriculum have not yet been created. We like that EdGenuity is already complete, yet offers the flexible customization options to provide an even better curriculum for our students.

Parent Task Force Recommendation: We take the position that, clearly, computers have fundamentally changed the way our culture engages with entertainment, business, news, relationships, and education. We all use technology, but none of us would define ourselves as 'lovers of technology'. As a result, we believe it will be critical for our children to be provided a rich and technologically engaging education, but not be solely dependent on technology for all forms of instruction. In other words, we believe there are wonderful opportunities available to USD 400 students to better engage with instructional content, teachers, and peers in a 'Blended Learning' environment than without.

Since we do not have data that proves that increased engagement produces higher academic achievement, we believe it to be essential that a few enthusiastic teachers have the opportunity to pilot a 'Blended Learning' environment in their classroom(s) for at least a year so that the BOE has the opportunity to determine if 'Blended Learning' truly is the right approach for our district.

The Parent Task Force agrees that if 'blended learning' is a fit for Smoky Valley USD 400, we will realize some of those benefits in year one, recognizing that there will be a 'ramp-up period' as pilot teachers transition into this new method. If the results experienced look promising, we would like to see the pilot program expanded in year two with additional pilot classrooms and a reevaluation by the BOE at the end of year two. Benchmarks must be set prior to the end of the 2013-2014 school year in the classes that will be piloting blended learning in 2014-2015 by some form of assessment to provide an apples-to-apples method of evaluating the results of the pilot.

More about EdGenuity - the electronic curriculum we recommend to be used within USD 400's blended learning classroom environment

EdGenuity is an out-of-the-box electronic curriculum that claims to provide the most rigorous and versatile instruction in the market. We understand it to be an electronic, interactive textbook, with videos, images, and text to aid the classroom teacher in presenting content, information, and test retention. One advantage EdGenuity offers over a traditional textbook is that content is regularly added, updated, and improved so that users will have access to the most accurate data available. With regards to changes in Federal and State standards, this ensures that students in an EdGenuity equipped school district will be provided with the comprehensive education they are required to receive.

Though it is Internet based, USD 400 will store all content on district servers which will eliminate any bandwidth concerns. These concerns were addressed by the Parent Task Force and all agreed that if any electronic curriculum is adopted, technology problems would sabotage the learning environment. Though EdGenuity can be used as the exclusive source of content in a classroom, the proactive teacher will use it as one tool, along with other resources, to provide a true multi-media classroom in a similar fashion to the current use of a variety of resources that already supplement their traditional textbook-based curriculum.

Additionally, EdGenuity allows the teacher to efficiently test, grade, and analyze student academic performance on an individualized basis. Used properly, this capability for deep analysis should dramatically increase the quality of the individualized instruction each student receives, without significantly increasing the workload on the classroom teacher.

More information can be found at: <http://edgenuity.com>

Why EdGenuity?

We've learned that it is unfeasible for a district the size of USD 400 to create its own electronic curriculum from scratch. In order for 'Blended Learning' to be effectively launched in a school district the way we define it, three ingredients are essential:

1-One to one laptops - DONE

2-Curriculum must be rigorous and meet Common Core curriculum requirements as defined by the Kansas State Board of Education - EdGenuity does both.

3- Staff that is given the training to successfully use the curriculum and the freedom to customize it according to their own classroom needs and goals - EdGenuity trainers will provide comprehensive training to ALL USD 400 teachers in May, 2014 to allow piloting teachers adequate preparation time for the first day of school in August, 2014. Non-piloting teachers will have open access to the curriculum to begin comparing/contrasting with their existing textbook curriculum. Again, we feel one of the best features is that our district's teachers can add their own content to EdGenuity to create a customized curriculum for their own classroom.

There are other electronic curriculums available in the marketplace, but based on the information we have seen, EdGenuity appears to be the most comprehensive *and* the most flexible in how teachers are able to utilize its features.

EdGenuity Limitations

Based on information we have been provided from EdGenuity representatives, USD 400 officials, and USD 400 teachers who have researched EdGenuity, we have concluded that for core subject areas, EdGenuity appears to be comparable to newest textbook-based curriculums available in the marketplace. However, we recognize there are a few areas where EdGenuity could be limited, including:

- In certain specialized content areas, (eg. Kansas History), EdGenuity does not provide any content at all. In classes where this may be the case, content will need to be taught in a traditional, textbook-based classroom.
- Though most students are technology-savvy—seemingly ‘plugged in’ to some device all the time—we recognize that some students may struggle with the Human-Computer Interaction that is an essential piece of using EdGenuity. We believe it would be ideal if each classroom had a physical, hard-copy version of the curriculum available for students who need to learn this way.

Parent Task Force Recommendation: We agree teachers who are not piloting Blended Learning in 2014/2015 **must** be given access to EdGenuity to evaluate and utilize, *at their own will*, throughout the school year. We feel this is important to confirm the curriculum meets or exceeds existing curriculum. Some teachers have expressed concern that they do not believe that EdGenuity is rigorous enough, while others have stated that, after review, they believe it is more rigorous than existing curriculum. However, not all teachers have fully evaluated EdGenuity to make any determination yet. By allowing all SVMS and SVHS teachers full access to EdGenuity, a concrete comparison can be made in line with forthcoming academic standards from the KSBOE.

Further Considerations

As the School Board evaluates this proposal, further items for your review are provided, including some questions that we have been asked—or expect to be asked—by patrons of USD 400. We have some opinions on these questions, but you may want to be prepared to receive them as well. Also, we have provided opinions from various patrons, parents, and teachers of USD 400 for your consideration.

Q&A

What if a student/patron doesn't have internet access?

Will teachers have complete freedom to utilize their own materials or resources in their classroom?

Will the district mandate that staff must use blended learning in each of their classrooms?

What other area school districts offer blended learning?

What other area school districts offer EdGenuity?

Why the rush to become a ‘blended learning’ school district?

What happens if the power goes out, Internet is down, or infrastructure fails?

Community Opinions

“When I first heard Smoky Valley was considering “Blended Learning”, I was skeptical—I didn’t really know what it meant, but I knew I didn’t want MY kids sitting in a cubicle, in front of a computer all day. After the first task force meeting, I understood that’s not what Blended Learning is. And after learning more about it, and seeing “Edgenuity” first hand, I believe both Blended Learning and a digital curriculum could be really good things for ALL our kids.”

Milton Larson, Lindsborg

“ My first impression of Blended Learning was negative. The thought of kids being taught by computers sounded like technology overload. After visiting with students & teachers that have piloted Blended Learning, my opinions have changed. I believe Blending Learning will provide opportunities that otherwise would not be available for our students at Smoky Valley. Piloting this new way of teaching & learning will give all of us some insight into whether this is the direction that is most beneficial for our children & future students of USD 400.”

Blaine Heble, Lindsborg

“Blended learning provides educators the opportunity to personalize and customize learning for each individual learner while still holding the learner accountable to rigorous standards.”

James Henderson, Teacher, SVHS

Sincerely,

Parent Task Force Members - Denise Peterson, Milt Larson, Cheryl Larson, Larry VanDerWege, Dana Byers, Mark Galloway, Steve Sjogren, Blaine Heble, Connie Rawson, Danelle Johnson, Janna Weldy, Blakely Bunning