

## Sarina Marine

3rd grade  
Discovery Elementary School  
Ashburn, VA



Discovery Elementary School enrolls about 900 students in the suburbs northwest of Washington, DC. About one in five students is an English Language Learner, about 16% of students are economically disadvantaged, and the same proportion (16%) have Individual Education Plans. Discovery is one of 90 schools in Loudoun County Public Schools (LCPS), the third largest school division in Virginia.

LCPS has a focus on implementing personalized learning (PL), and Discovery is one of the 15 schools the division has chosen to lead the PL implementation. In the PL instructional model, online content, small group instruction, and independent student work all complement a reduced reliance on whole-group instruction to dynamically tailor learning experiences to students' strengths, needs and/or interests.

**“I’ve been teaching for 11 years,** and last year (SY 2016–17) was new for me because my co-teacher, Sara Conant, and I got a grant to purchase Chromebooks, in addition to the iPads provided by LCPS, so we are one-to-one. We are the only classroom in our school that doesn’t have to use computer carts. This has made planning and using technology far easier and more meaningful than when we had to check out the carts.

**LCPS has started a major personalized learning initiative.** Our school just finished its second year focusing on personalized learning. We shifted from just giving it a shot to more intentional planning and reflection using data from online programs as well as from standardized testing. To me, blended learning is a way to implement personalized learning. The key is that the technology allows my co-teacher and me to focus on each individual student. This is especially true in math, where we have the most online content, and some in reading and science too. We have been experimenting with different ways to engage our students in activities that are necessary for them, while also giving them some choice. In our classroom, we have presented activity choices as “Must Do” and “May Do”, we have provided several sets of choices

and required that at least one from each set be completed, we have tried some menus and playlists, and at times, we’ve given very little guidance, and let students plan their independent work for the day. For us, it seems like the format of the class needs to be flexible. Just as our students do not fit in a box, neither can our blended learning plans. Switching up the format also helps keep students engaged and motivated.

**Our district not only supports blended learning with technology, it is top priority** coupled with project based learning. In the fall, all third, fourth, and fifth-grade students will be provided a Chromebook for their personal use at school and at home! (Being that I work at the elementary level, I’m not sure of the model in middle and high schools.) This will open up so many more opportunities for teachers to be creative in their instructional delivery, and for students to be engaged in content in ways that are meaningful to them. Teachers will be much better equipped to meet the individual needs of students. I look forward to collaborating with colleagues more next year (SY 2018–19) when we all have the same resources available to our students. I think our school will embrace blended learning even more!

*In my classroom last year (SY 2016–17),* before we had as many devices available, we mostly worked with whole group lessons and tasks, with a little bit of small group or partner work. This year the personalized learning approach has allowed us to reduce our whole group time, which in turn allows us to focus on individual student's needs. Usually we provide a short whole-group introduction or review of the day's material, and then give students an explanation of their choices for paths to follow for the class, which usually include support at a "teacher table", working with a partner, independent practice through technology, doing basic review tasks, or taking on a more challenging option. They make their choices and get to work!

This year's students were needier than last year's group, and there was an issue with learned helplessness among many of them. Therefore, our technology integrations and personalized learning structures took longer to implement. But, during the second half of the year, students really started to get comfortable with expectations and procedures, and we were in a good groove.

*At first it was difficult to release some of the control to students,* and to trust that it would benefit them. To be honest, it was kind of messy initially. Students weren't used to this approach, so sometimes they were choosing the fun activity, or the partner activity, as a default, and we had to rethink how we were presenting the choice options. We created a planner for them so they have to think about what they intend to accomplish, and then can choose their activity based on their goal. In some units that are more difficult, we guide them more at first before giving them choices.

*Blended learning has increased student engagement dramatically.* It has enabled my co-teacher and me to spend much less time delivering whole group instruction because we know students will be engaged in meaningful activities, allowing us to provide targeted instruction in small groups or with individual students, based on their needs.

My teaching team (other third grade classroom teachers; plus special education and ELL teachers) is very supportive and collaborative in our lesson planning. I'm not sure that everyone is aware of all the wonderful things that happen in every classroom. We have had many visitors view our implementation of blended learning and personalized learning within our co-teaching structures. This has been a tremendous opportunity and as a result we are viewed as a leading BL and PL classroom at Discovery.

*I would tell teachers considering a shift to blended learning that it's not as scary or chaotic as it seems!* The benefits greatly outweigh the negatives or failures you may perceive as you make the shift. It was hard at first, and we are still learning, but I know improvement will come with time and experience. We are always seeking more opportunities to co-plan with other teachers, and having more opportunities to observe exemplar blended learning classrooms in action would be very helpful.

*The biggest challenge for me, and it is not a new one, is teaching students to take the reins.* My students are only in third grade, so they are still very young. There are at least a few each year who are resistant to taking risks, and ultimately to accepting some responsibility for their own learning. I think this is in part because they have not had the opportunity to do so much before. Some have not developed the persistence needed to see themselves through any kind of challenge. They want to know exactly what to do, when to do it, and what is right/wrong. It isn't as easy for these students to "fly below the radar" as they seem to stand out much more in a blended learning atmosphere. Many of them are shocked to be experiencing difficulty because school has always been easy for them. They have already been trained to view school work as something that just needs to get done so they can move on to something else. When it finally does click though, there is no stopping them! ■