Blended Learning: Levelling the Playing Field for Students with Learning Disabilities

[Music]

[Narrator:] Some of these students have learning disabilities. Some don't, but anyone looking in wouldn't know the difference. That's because educational technology is available to all students.

[Sean McDade]: I'm seeing how technology is able to get work out of students that we never realized was in there. It's showing a complexity that is just wowing us.

[Rhonda Reiger:] They are able to access the information that they have and really share what they know with us, using technology.

[Gary O'Donnell:] They don't have to go to the lab, they don't have to go to the back corner. They can be sitting at their desks, they can be sitting in a group, and have access to those digital technologies that support their learning as a student.

[Narrator:] Laptops, tablets and applications like Google Read and Write are some of the digital tools that students at St. Ambrose use to support their learning.

[Teacher 1:] So if you press this button, you can speak it in.

[Student 1:] Spear and shield.

[Teacher 1:] There you go. You got it!

[Narrator:] But these tools aren't only for students with learning disabilities. Each student gets the same tools; they just use them a little differently.

[Ethan:] The words can be paused and un-paused on Google Read and Write, and it helps me think of what the answer is. Google Read and Write really helps other kids like me.

[Britney:] It's a headphone and when you go onto an account, or if you want to listen to your work, you can just click it, and you could just highlight all of the stuff that you want to listen to, and it will read all that for you.

[Hunter:] I use the Chromebook for if I needed to write, because if there's tricky words, it can help me autocorrect them and stuff.

[Ty:] If you make a spelling mistake, you go to Tools and you press Spelling. There's an option if you can change it to the right word, or just ignore it.

[Jade:] Well, you take a picture of what you're going to do and you write it. And if you can type it if you're a messy writer.

[Narrator:] Making digital tools available to all students is part of a model called "blended learning," an approach that combines face-to-face teaching and technology.

[Teacher 1:] Check it out, look, I think it's ready.

[Student 2:] Okay.

[Nikki Gibson:] It's a totally different environment when you walk into my math classroom and they're doing things that involve technology, because they're so engaged, and they're so excited about it. And I just find that their performance and their knowledge of the topics are just increased so much, because it kind of creates an experience for them, rather than sitting there just answering questions out of a textbook.

[Narrator:] Technology in the classroom is increasing student engagement, and it's also helping students with learning disabilities demonstrate what they know and what they've learned.

[Gary O'Donnell:] The teachers are finding richer, more deeper thoughts from students that they weren't hearing from, because they didn't want to raise their hand. They didn't want to submit a handwritten piece of work. But when it's in a digital form, they have been able to participate actively and engage in the conversation.

[Sean McDade:] We are now able to provide students so many ways to show their thinking. And that's what's game-changing. When there was typically one or two ways for a student to show their thinking, you know, they could write a paragraph, they could write an essay, they could do a traditional presentation in front of the class -- there are so many barriers in those two or three ways that would be really hard for students with learning disabilities. Now students can pre-record their presentation. They can use multimedia where animation tells the narrative. There are all these ways where the technology can overcome the barrier, without compromising the thinking of the student.

[Narrator:] Students with learning disabilities often face the social stigma of being different. But blended learning helps minimize their differences by levelling the playing field.

[Britney:] The Chromebook helps me because it reads to me, and it's like my personal reading assistant.

[Narrator:] Technology is also giving students with learning disabilities confidence in themselves and their learning.

[Nikki Gibson:] They're taking more risks. They're getting more involved, and not taking the back seat as often as maybe they once would have. In turn, they're opening up. And other people are seeing them in a different light. And they're seeing that they have more common ground, and ultimately allowing friendships to flourish.

[Mary Kathryn Simmons:] They're independent learners, and they're confident learners because they know how to use their devices. And the classroom is set up that you need to use the devices.

[Sean McDade:] I think it's important for students with learning disabilities, because they can be stars in the classroom. They can absolutely shine. They can be the one with the answer. They can be the one with the big idea. They're the one that can create the presentation. So by creating tools that all kids have access to, it just really opens up new learning opportunities for all students, especially students with a learning disability.

[Narrator:] Blended learning helps every student excel, and allows educators to better-support students on their paths toward success.

[Judy Merkel:] We now have real-time data around what students know and what they don't know. We know about how students learn, because we've now given them a very even playing field. And we've been able now to say to students, okay, we can see clearly, this is something you are really, really great at. This is something that we need to help you move along with. Technology has just been the vehicle, and it's opened up a whole new world for our students.

[Britney:] Most people in the classroom, they actually know how to do a lot of things that I don't know how to do. And when I don't have that kind of stuff, I don't feel smart, and I don't feel like I'm good at things. And everybody else is good at things, but I just feel down.

When I use the Google Read and Write like everybody else does, I feel smart, and I feel like I'm not, like, not smart.

[Teacher 2:] You can use --

[Britney:] That thing?

[Teacher 2:] Yeah. Your Speech to Text.

[Britney:] Not much schools...

[Narrator:] The success of blended learning is seen every day at St. Ambrose. For students with learning disabilities, using technology isn't a weakness, but a strength.

[Music]