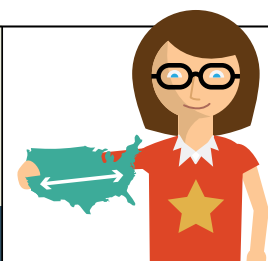


## PIONEERING BLENDED-LEARNING TEACHERS REACH MORE STUDENTS

AN OPPORTUNITY CULTURE VIGNETTE SERIES

SCOTT NOLT'S FOCUS: CRITICAL THINKING, STUDENT-LED PERSONALIZATION

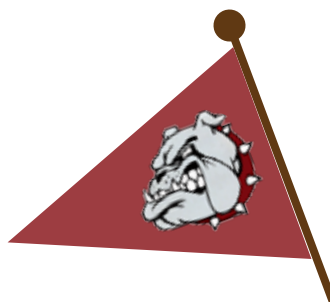


### FACT FILE FOR JAY M. ROBINSON HIGH SCHOOL

Jay M. Robinson High School in the Cabarrus County, N.C., school district, has about 1,300 students in grades 9 through 12.

- ★ 47 percent of its students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch.
- ★ 51 percent of its students are white; 24 percent are African-American; 21 percent are Hispanic.
- ★ Jay M. Robinson High first established blended-learning teacher positions in 2014–15, with one blended-learning teacher leading American History I.
- ★ In 2015–16, there were two blended-learning teachers, each teaching American History I and II.
- ★ Maximum annual pay supplement in Cabarrus County for blended-learning teachers (based on number of course sections taught): \$14,000

Sources: Data from 2014–15 and 2015–16 as available: student population numbers from <http://www.cabarrus.k12.nc.us/Page/25633>; FRL data from <http://www.cabarrus.k12.nc.us/Page/4864>; demographics from <http://www.cabarrus.k12.nc.us/cms/lib09/NC01910456/Centricity/Domain/497/GRS%20Month%201.pdf>



In 2014, after 13 years of teaching and 10 years as chair of Jay M. Robinson High School's history department in Concord, N.C., Scott Nolt began to wonder if he'd already hit his professional peak.

In the traditional classrooms he'd always taught, he could reach only about 30 students per period without experiencing diminishing returns in student achievement. In those classes, some students would be bored, while others would struggle as lessons progressed at the same pace for all of them. Nolt's students were getting above-average results. But, he said, he needed every minute of the semester to get those results, and found the available technology of limited use to his focus on developing students' critical thinking. Within that traditional classroom, how could he do more to meet his varied students' needs?

"I wanted to keep growing professionally," Nolt said, "and I'd just resigned from a long-time college cross-country coach position." He began seeking new opportunities that might help him break through the ceiling he felt his teaching hit—and was cautiously optimistic when he heard about his district's new blended-learning role.

At Robinson and several other schools in 2014–15, Cabarrus County Schools began using the **In-Person Rotation** version of a Time-Technology Swap. This is one of several Opportunity Culture models that extend the reach of excellent teachers to more students, for higher pay, within each school's regular budget. In the rotation model of blended learning in secondary schools, students typically alternate between classroom instruction days with their blended-learning teacher (BLT) and digital or offline skills practice and project days, allowing the teacher to reach more students on the "off" days.

Nolt's students worked largely from home on the off days, leaving campus during the final class period. They also had the option to stay and work in a computer lab monitored by a paraprofessional.

Nolt took the leap, becoming a BLT for American History I and II practically overnight, he said. "I received a stipend over the summer [of 2014] to design my blended curriculum, but I only made it through about 25 percent of my course by the time school had started. I wasn't ready and didn't know what I was doing."



Scott Nolt's American history blended-learning students showed better student growth results than students in traditional classes, despite receiving less in-class time with Nolt.

Despite that, and despite his school not meeting state growth targets overall, 61 percent of Nolt's students in his blended classes exceeded the growth targets the state set for them. Overall, students in his blended classes met or exceeded growth targets at a higher rate than students in traditional classes—75 percent versus 58 percent—despite receiving less in-class time with Nolt.

"The blended students also demonstrated growth in other areas that I don't see happening in my traditional classes—growth in self-discipline, independence, and an ability to succeed in future online classes, which are becoming more the norm in post-secondary settings," Nolt said.

Depending on the number of blended classes taught, Cabarrus County BLTs can make an annual supplement of \$14,000; Nolt earns \$7,000. Opportunity Culture districts generally require schools to rework their schedules to allow teachers who extend their reach to gain extra planning time to do planning and grading for more students, though Nolt does not get that.

After two years of refining his strategies, materials, and techniques, Nolt feels confident about extending his reach to even more students. "I think there's no reason for me not to work with students in a 50-to-1 ratio [at one time per class period] in years to come. Or even 75-to-1. Give me the opportunity, and I can make it happen!"

### LEAPING INTO BLENDED LEARNING

Combining blended learning with the Opportunity Culture goal of extending great teachers' reach appealed to Nolt. By making the last period of the day a blended class, he can teach 33 percent more students each semester overall. "So, basically, I'm making up another third of a teacher," Nolt said. "And I'm increasing my impact. The additional students I teach might have otherwise had to take a class with a less-experienced instructor"—or one who gets less than Nolt's strong student outcomes.

### SCOTT NOLT'S KEYS TO HIS BLENDED CLASSES

- ★ Use in-class time for analytical, critical thinking and student collaboration
- ★ Don't try to cram a standard full week of in-person instruction into the new in-class schedule; do less lecturing, more activities allowing students to collaborate and the instructor to see where the needs are
- ★ Use out-of-class time for assessments, skills and concepts practice or early reading and research on a new concept, and written assignments
- ★ Put all class materials—including lecture notes—online, then tailor each class based on students' current needs
- ★ Take advantage of out-of-class time to allow students to practice, fail, and try again, with extensive feedback
- ★ Share the big concepts with all students, then differentiate by encouraging and helping students to go as deeply as they want on assignments
- ★ Use online messaging/email to build bonds with students: With face-to-face time limited, work to build relationships in person, but provide more feedback and interaction online
- ★ Use the power of being online to draw out quiet students through small-group collaboration and online discussions

Nolt used to attend professional development sessions about innovation and leave feeling frustrated. "We'd learn concepts like '21<sup>st</sup>-century skills,' 'differentiation,' and 'personalized learning,' and I'd want to integrate those into my classes, but would have no idea how. Realistically, how does one teacher, with an enormous curriculum to teach, have time for add-ons like that?"

With a blended class, he found the answer.

"How do you differentiate between the English language learner, the exceptional child, or the child who simply learns in a different way? The answer is that you create conceptual lessons where you start with a big idea that all students can understand. Each student can add to that idea as deeply as they want to, follow that line of thinking, and delve deeply into it. If they don't want to, they can just go with the basic assignment."

“How do you differentiate? ... You create conceptual lessons where you start with a big idea that all students can understand. Each student can add to that idea as deeply as they want to... if they don't want to, they can just go with the basic assignment.”

And he found that lessons in collaboration, self-paced learning, time management, self-management, and problem solving “all naturally fell in line. Now, my lessons aren't *just* on history. Students who are taught to take responsibility for their learning inside and outside of the classroom pick up skills without even realizing it. We're winning all over the place!”

### STRUCTURING THE CLASS

Nolt taught two blended courses—American History I for juniors, and American History II for seniors. “It's an every-other-day schedule—I see juniors on Day 1, while seniors are working from home on short- and long-term assignments they can access from the school's online learning management system.<sup>1</sup> Juniors complete assignments on their own on Day 2 while seniors are in class. They continue to alternate, one day in class, one day out,” Nolt said.

Most students were expected to leave campus on the off days, meaning the blended class must be held during the last period. That may change as the blended option grows; in 2016–17, more juniors—who often don't yet have driver's licenses or a car to leave campus—will take blended classes. The school's digital lab is staffed by a former teacher to oversee the students on their off days.

Nolt sees multiple benefits to the combination of this schedule and the online resources available to students.

“We need to teach students, especially in social studies, that there isn't just one authority that has all the right answers and all the history that they need to know, that there are many different narratives of what happened. Online resources are the perfect answer to that.”

### In-class time

When Nolt plans lessons, he focuses on what work students really needed to do in front of him: analytical, critical thinking.

So he might ask students to begin tasks requiring critical thinking and analysis on their own, or in small groups, but then finish those tasks during class, when Nolt could ask questions and

1. Cabarrus began with Schoology but now uses the Canvas learning management system.

challenge assumptions. Skills practice and assessments, though, could be done outside of class.

He keeps his in-class time moving.

“I explain the general concept and the way we're going to analyze and look at things for about 10 to 15 percent of class time. Forty percent of time tends to be students collaborating on a key activity I design for them. Other shorter activities take up the rest of the time. They don't just sit and passively listen,” he said.

“For example, the first thing we did today was review a mini-lesson students completed on their own. Then we worked together on a quick comparing and contrasting activity. After that, I introduced the new concept for the day: Imperialism—does it help or hurt people? I explained how we were going to analyze that.”

The bulk of that class was then spent in groups, with students researching and working together before posting their findings on an online board. “Meanwhile, I'm walking around, listening to their conversations, helping with things,” Nolt said. “At the end of class, I gave them a quiz asking them to apply the content to answer questions about several cartoons. And that was it.”

Nolt keeps any actual lecture time brief.

“This isn't their parents' history course—we're not just memorizing dates,” he said. “So I don't spend 50 minutes just talking. But what I have to say is carefully selected and important, and I want them paying close attention.”

To keep students focused on what he's saying, Nolt uploads the written lecture onto the students' online course page so they can review it later. “That way, they're not scrambling to take notes when they really need to be listening. And if they missed class that day, or were distracted or tired, students know where to find what they missed.” (For details, see “Early Lessons,” page 4.)

### Out-of-class time

Outside of class, students must keep tabs on their online message system, where Nolt posts lecture notes, resources, and all assignments and due dates for short-term and long-term assignments.

“Students have to stay on top of their work. If they don't, there are regular check-ins to provide a little bit of a safety net. We can get them back on track and allow them to be ultimately successful...then they'll be ready for college, where more and more courses are going online every year.”

Students may practice concepts at home using Nolt's online worksheets, take quizzes that give him an idea of where he should focus his brief lecture during the following class, or other written assignments. “It's pretty fluid, though,” Nolt said. “Sometimes I might introduce a new topic outside of class because it's pretty easy to grasp without my help. It's not like, in class, students always do this, and outside of class, they always do that.”



Nolt keeps any actual lecture time brief. Students generally spend most class time researching or working together on key activities.

Nolt permits his students to submit their written assignments in a variety of forms, such as essays, PowerPoint presentations, or posters. He focuses on content over form, and whether students have supplemented what they've learned in class with their own research.

"The nature of the class is, you learn the content, but your learning is self-directed. I'll give you everything I can [during class], but I want you to bring what you find too," Nolt said. "I'm not the all-powerful, all-knowing. We're partners in this! The source of our learning is not just the textbook; it's also primary sources. Websites. Videos. Podcasts. And so on."

After assignments are graded, students whose efforts fell short receive an explanation of how to improve and the option to resubmit. "One student recently went through four revisions," Nolt said. "But it's important that he finally got what I wanted him to get. When students don't have to come to class every single day, that gives them more time to practice, fail, and try again; it's not a one-and-done approach. And they can always email me when they have questions."

Students appreciate all the flexibility that the time out of the classroom gives them.

"I work slower sometimes so...instead of being limited to an hour and a half of class, I could do the work and take three hours if I needed," said one of Nolt's students. Another student noted that "sometimes I'm tired during fourth period, so the days that I get to go home, I can rest and maybe do it later on in the night. I like being able to do it when I choose."

"I'm not the all-powerful, all-knowing. We're partners in this! The source of our learning is not just the textbook; it's also primary sources. Websites. Videos. Podcasts. And so on."

Nolt notes, though, that having students in class for only half the time—just 45 days a semester—does make it harder to form bonds.

"I have to be a little bit more diligent about building those relationships with the students in person," he said, but in many ways, he can build relationships that are as strong as traditional classes.

"We communicate *academically*, through the constant feedback they're getting, way more than I ever did with students before. Students used to do maybe 20 different assignments, with only 75 percent coming back to them and only half with any feedback. They have about 100 assignments over the semester in a blended class."

Online messaging means Nolt frequently communicates with students outside of class time, and the messaging and collaboration encourages students who might not speak up during class. "You can draw kids out a little bit more," he said. "Shy isn't really an excuse there, and I think they forget about that, so they forget that they're giving their analytical thoughts...and they're okay sharing that in that setting a little bit more."

In student-teacher messages, "sometimes, we have some issues with how they speak to a teacher and we've addressed that, but those are life lessons of how it's different communicating with your teacher over an integrated message system versus your best friend who you just shot a text off to in the middle of the night. Those are simple understandings to some people, but I don't think they're nearly as simple as we think, and we're teaching students to be able to make those differentiations."

### EARLY LESSONS AND CHALLENGES

Nolt's class plans and structure changed considerably after the first blended year. During the summer before the first year, when the district paid him to plan the class and create online materials, he tried to preserve what he viewed as the most important aspects of his in-person teaching. That, he discovered, left him scrambling to squeeze as much as possible into half the class time.

"As a traditional social studies teacher, you have a teacher-centered element to your lesson, you have [students] looking at different text sources, and then collaborating on them a little bit and coming up with some kind of a product," he said. "When I first started doing blended learning, I thought, okay, I still want to do all those things, I still want it to be conceptual, I can't stick kids on a computer for 90 minutes, just reading, answering multiple-choice questions and going through little modules that aren't really all that engaging or conceptual or effective. So I thought, I'll pack everything into that day I need to, and then release them to have 90 minutes of work to do on their own. And that worked fairly well, and I needed to have that perspective starting off."

But he had an “ah-ha” moment before his second year as a BLT, leading him to put his entire course online—all his class notes and materials.

“When students took notes while I lectured, it didn’t serve much purpose except to offer the students that wonderful joy of taking notes on a computer, and to distract them from what I was actually saying. So I realized there was no reason for me to have my students take notes. Instead, I thought, I’ll introduce a topic, I’ll talk about it, but instead of my students typing in a little bit of what I’m writing up on the board, I’ll put those notes in their online course materials so they can simply listen.”

With all materials online, he can choose content and strategies on the spot to meet students’ needs as they arise.

“It frees me up so that when I need to introduce a topic or a concept, or apply historical events to a concept like descent or oppression or the power of government, I can do so. It’s an online class, and if kids don’t get it, if kids need to go slower, if kids need to go faster, it’s all right there for them.”

Making these changes also helped relax his pace and reframe his role.

“What I realized is that my role in the classroom, when they were in class with me, was too regimented, too structured, too locked in. I would have two hours’ worth of stuff to do in 90 minutes, so I would fly through it, and then realize I didn’t have time to do some of the more flexible things I needed to do. I’d realize, I forgot to go back over the homework assignment I graded, but because I already had 90 minutes’ worth of stuff to do, I couldn’t. So I realized, if I put the entire class online, I could just tailor what I wanted to do based on what students had been doing well, or what I thought they needed to be doing well. Then I’m not just a guy who can read lecture notes or who can supervise students for 90 minutes. I’m bringing in things that they can’t get on their own, and that they can’t get through the online class or other text sources.”

That inspired him to reconsider all his teaching, eliminating anything done just out of habit.

“When you realize, I need to make sure learning happens when I’m not there with my students, and I’m going to change my complete role, and adjust how I look at my content and what my students need to know about it, there’s nothing sacred anymore. It creates an innovative spirit in you that touches everything. There’s nothing you don’t look at.”

**Nolt reconsidered all his teaching, eliminating anything done just out of habit: “It creates an innovative spirit.”**

## TIME CHALLENGE

Nolt still struggles to keep the extra grading from taking over evenings and weekends.

Most Opportunity Culture schools add extra planning time for teachers during school hours, or, at the elementary level, consolidate time into larger blocks for planning.

To free planning time for a reach-extending teacher, secondary teachers who use Time Swaps in at least two class periods can extend their reach in one but not the other (or roughly half the class periods in which they use swaps). This frees a class period every other day for extra planning and grading, while reaching 50 percent more students overall in each pair of class periods.

But under the rules dictated by Nolt’s district, even if he implements a time swap in two class periods, he would not be allowed to save one class period every other day for additional planning and grading.

Despite that challenge, Nolt has remained resolute. “My goal is that students never walk into class without me returning a graded assignment to them. Students appreciate and come to expect instant feedback. A week ago, one girl complained that I didn’t have their analytical arguments graded 10 minutes after they’d finished them! It’s a lot of work, but because it allows me to teach the way I always imagined I wanted to teach, I’m happy to do it. And at the end of the semester, students’ grades are an honest reflection of their efforts. That wasn’t always the case before.”

Students reacted well to Nolt’s new approach.

“He makes you think outside the box,” one student said. “If he gives you a picture, you’d obviously see what’s on the picture, but he gets you to think deeper. I like how he does that.”

Another student, a senior, said the class helped prepare her for online work in college. “We won’t be like, ‘Oh, I don’t know what I’m supposed to do because I’m not with my teacher.’”

Greater autonomy allows students to personalize the learning experience for themselves, Nolt said. “A student who doesn’t really like history [can] shoot through the class, finish her assignments early, and achieve proficiency, but decide to spend more time and effort in another course where her true academic passions lie. And it allows another student who loves history to really, really sink into it, and take it in a ton of different directions.”

Nolt found that students who aren’t history buffs still get engaged in a well-designed blended course.

“No, they’re not all becoming historians! But they’re becoming analytical thinkers. The other day, I put a 19<sup>th</sup>-century political cartoon about Chinese imperialism on the projector, and five minutes before class started, a handful of 18-year-old boys were standing in a huddle, breaking it down. These weren’t the honors kids. It’s exciting to see students becoming intellectually curious and inquisitive, even those you wouldn’t expect.”

### **PUSHING THE BOUNDARIES OF BLENDED LEARNING IN AN OPPORTUNITY CULTURE**

Nolt can imagine future experimentation with different schedule designs to explore even more flexibility, such as a two-day-on, two-day-off schedule, with the fifth day for optional small-group work and tutoring.

“I like the idea of opening up more availability for me to be a tutor. Students who don’t need tutoring can keep trucking along. We could potentially set up the class so that students have the option of finishing in 60 percent of the time. After those students take the exam, that could take my 50-to-1 student ratio down to 30-to-1 for the end of the semester, so I could focus on the ones that need extra help.”

As he speaks, Nolt’s voice rises with enthusiasm. “Once you break out of the traditional way of doing things, you start to get greedy,” he said. “You don’t want to see the innovation stop! Things that seemed impossible from the other side now seem ridiculous *not* to do.”

“Once you break out of the traditional way of doing things, you start to get greedy. You don’t want to see the innovation stop! Things that seemed impossible from the other side now seem ridiculous *not* to do.”

Nolt also envisions districts in which there are hundreds of opportunities for blended-learning teachers so they can learn from and inspire one another.

“I’d like to see what other excellent teachers are doing with the blended system and tools. It’s almost like teaching for the first time again. If there were more of us in Cabarrus County, it would be easy for us to collaborate and fine-tune and share lessons, approaches, systems, schedules.”

Nolt sees another benefit in districts and schools growing the number of BLT positions that focus on extending the reach of excellent teachers, for more pay, within regular budgets: increased retention of their best teachers.

“The thing with this role is, you’re keeping excellent teachers vested. Not only does the BLT role offer monetary gain, but it allows you to demonstrate leadership, and expands your possibilities,” he said. “But with only two BLT positions at our school, I feel a lot of insecurity about where this position is going to go. I don’t

### **THOUGHTS FOR SCHOOLS AND TEACHERS PLANNING TO BLEND LEARNING TO EXTEND TEACHERS’ REACH**

After two years, Nolt said he would warn new BLTs that they will feel like a beginning teacher again, and know that they have to “dip their toe in the water and go from there. Let it evolve. I couldn’t have done what I’m doing now two years ago. You develop your understanding of what the power is and what the tools are from day to day. I can’t tell a teacher who’s just starting, do this, this, and this.”

School leaders should be inflexible when it comes to teacher quality, he said.

“A BLT teacher has to be an excellent one who’s comfortable taking an experimental approach. You could easily design a *bad* blended-learning course. Think about online programs for credit recovery—they’re *terrible*. Students don’t learn anything. That’s why teacher selection from the school or district level is so very important. It has to be your strongest, most dynamic, most creative teachers in charge, with the content and pedagogy at their fingertips. They have to redesign the class so that it’s dynamic and innovative, utilizing all kinds of learning environments. They have to be strategic. It’s a lot of work.”

Unlike other BLTs he has spoken with, Nolt encounters very little pushback from parents, and he would tell new BLTs that after redesigning their classes, they must be advocates for blended learning.

“You have to assure parents that this new form of teaching is not a compromise,” Nolt said. “I know of another BLT who continues to get negative feedback from them. I don’t get any of that. I think it’s because I’m so vocal in saying that this is the right way to teach. Blended classes don’t handcuff us. It’s exactly the opposite.”



“The nature of the class is, you learn the content, but your learning is self-directed. I’ll give you everything I can [during class], but I want you to bring what you find too,” Nolt says.

feel secure that it’s going to exist forever. But once you’ve broken the paradigm of 30 students, one classroom, it’s hard to go back. If you offer BLT roles to begin with and then take them away, you’re forcing the best teachers out of the profession. They’ll look for other opportunities, because this opens their eyes to what they could do in another field.”

Nolt notes that for the school to be able to pay a generous stipend for the BLT’s extra work and expertise, the school must trade in half of a regular teacher position. “But these trade-ins don’t have to be a burden. This year we blended three sections, so we needed one fewer teacher. By extending the reach of our best, most experienced teachers, we didn’t have to hire someone else who would likely have been less effective. And every single

student was assigned to a top-notch teacher, which is what all of our students need.”

In the end, it comes down to knowing that his new class structure is making a difference.

“The best part is that I know my kids don’t go home wondering if what they’re learning is relevant. If you tell kids, ‘read these 20 pages and take this quiz,’ they’ll memorize it, then forget it. But if you design a blended-learning class around questions that are just as applicable now as they were 150 years ago—Should we be invading countries? Who should be in control?—and help kids learn how to answer those questions for themselves, they’ll share and collaborate and think and develop as learners so much more than they would have otherwise. They’ll go deep.”

### Acknowledgements

This vignette was written by Sharon Kebschull Barrett of Public Impact. Angie Spong conducted research and contributed to early drafting. Thank you to Emily Ayscue Hassel for editing, Beverley Tyndall for shepherding this work through production, and April Leidig for the design.

The work for this publication was performed under a subcontract to the [American Institutes for Research](#) and funded by an anonymous funder.

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Please cite this publication as: Public Impact: Barrett, S.K. (2016). *Pioneering blended-learning teachers reach more students: Scott Nolt’s focus: Critical thinking, student-led personalization*. Chapel Hill, NC: Public Impact. Retrieved from [http://opportunityculture.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/BLT\\_Vignette\\_Scott\\_Nolt-Public\\_Impact.pdf](http://opportunityculture.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/BLT_Vignette_Scott_Nolt-Public_Impact.pdf)

**Watch:** A [short video](#) accompanies this [vignette series](#) on Opportunity Culture blended-learning teachers, featuring Scott Nolt and Caitlyn Gironda.

And read about Caitlyn Gironda in the vignette profiling her—[Pioneering Blended-Learning Teachers Reach More Students: Caitlyn Gironda’s Focus: In-Class Collaboration, Feedback to Improve](#).

**Read:** Columns in Real Clear Education by other Cabarrus County blended-learning teachers: Lori Treiber, in [For Truly Personalized Learning, I Had to Try, Try Again](#), and Scott Nolt in [Blending the Best: Better Learning for More Kids](#)

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