

Tapping the Power of

PERSONALIZED LEARNING

A Roadmap for School Leaders

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Preface.....	v
Introduction: Imagine Schools Where . . .	1
Chapter 1: Assumptions, Logic, and Levers: Changing Practices	16
Chapter 2: The Honeycomb Model.....	32
Chapter 3: Personalized Learning from the Students’ Perspective.....	62
Chapter 4: The Five Key Instructional Shifts of Personalized Learning	79
Chapter 5: Building Educator Capacity: Personalized Professional Development	97
Chapter 6: Secrets to Scaling and Sustaining Transformation.....	109
Appendix A: An Action Plan for Implementation	127
Appendix B: Sample Design Principles	135
Appendix C: Personalized Learning Skill Sets for Educators	138
Bibliography	140
Index	145
About the Author.....	148

A Definition of Personalized Learning

The philosophical shift that occurs when personalized learning transforms practices in a building affects everyone, including me as a school leader. Our roles become less focused on reactive ways to address concerns, whether academic or social-emotional. Instead, our efforts become more global and systemic—we are able to proactively support all students as they grow by investing our time and energies into systems that ensure they have the mindsets and behaviors to be successful in their current and future endeavors.

—Randy Daul, principal, Asa Clark Middle School,
Pewaukee, Wisconsin

You’ve probably heard the term “personalized learning” many times and discovered it to mean many different things. Currently, the best-known and most widely publicized definition is the one included in the U.S. Department of Education’s (USDOE) National Education Technology Plan (2010):

Personalization refers to instruction that is paced to learning needs, tailored to learning preferences, and tailored to the specific interests of different learners. In an environment that is fully personalized, the learning objectives and content as well as the method and pace may all vary (so personalization encompasses differentiation and individualization).

Though helpful, this definition misses a key element of truly personalized learning environments: repositioning of the student within the learning and teaching process. The USDOE definition stops short of recognizing the powerful role students must be allowed to play in setting learning goals, planning their learning paths, tracking their progress, and demonstrating their learning as partners and codesigners alongside educators. It misses the shift in instruction from something we do *to* learners to something we do *with* them, which accounts for the real power of personalization. In a truly personalized environment, learners play

a key role in planning, developing, demonstrating, and applying their learning, and in so doing develop greater self-efficacy, ownership, and learning independence—key preparation skills for the lives they will lead and careers they will build.

According to the USDOE definition of personalized learning, each learner pursues unique learning objectives and engages with individually tailored content at a pace that is personally comfortable. One might conclude that such learners may not develop a common body of knowledge or skills and, as a result, that educators are left without a comprehensive view of what learners need to know and be able to do before graduating. An absence of standards debated and adopted by the community risks depriving schools both of a common focus and of accountability to the community and could leave students ultimately unprepared for future success. Without question, learners need to move at their own pace and engage in classroom activities suited to their individual interests and levels of readiness, but alignment of instruction to appropriate standards remains enormously important.

We define truly effective personalized learning as follows:

An approach to learning and instruction that is designed around individual learner readiness, strengths, needs, and interests. Learners are active participants in setting goals, planning learning paths, tracking progress, and determining how learning will be demonstrated. At any given time, learning objectives, content, methods, and pacing are likely to vary from learner to learner as they pursue proficiency aligned to established standards. A fully personalized environment moves beyond both differentiation and individualization.

Our definition diverges from the traditional approach to instruction in the following ways:

It shifts the roles of learners and educators. Students and teachers move from a model in which teachers make all significant decisions and students are expected to comply, to one

where both parties work together to make decisions about learning aligned to standards and intended learning outcomes.

It ensures purposeful learning. Educators and learners actively consider the “why” of learning, and in doing so give meaning and focus to instruction.

It supports individual learning goals and action plans. Personalized learning goes beyond placing learners at the center to actively involving them in designing the learning path, identifying learning options and resources, monitoring progress, and demonstrating what they have learned.

It varies the pace of learning while remaining focused on established standards. Variations in how and how quickly students learn are respected and accommodated to ensure that learning, rather than instruction or curriculum, is the focus.

It focuses on broader concepts and deeper learning. Instruction that prepares students for their futures goes beyond asking students to memorize, organize, and sequence content to engaging students deeply in content and enlisting them to frame problems, design solutions, create models, and build lifelong interests and skills.

It develops collaboration skills and strategies. Personalization does not mean that students are isolated as they learn. To the contrary, working in pairs, in small groups, and as a whole class helps students to develop important social and work skills as they draw from other learners to design, solve problems, and build new knowledge together.

It uses technology as a support. Technology plays a key role in personalized learning, particularly as we work to scale the approach across groups and learning contexts. However, it is limited to a supporting role as a tool to explore, create, collect, analyze, and track data.

It affords learners greater ownership of and influence over learning. When students become more active partners in their learning, their level of commitment and persistence grows as

they increasingly feel a vested interest in learning outcomes. They develop the skills necessary to make decisions about and engage independently in their learning long after leaving the classroom.

It supports a variety of learning approaches. By placing learning rather than instruction at its center, the IPL model encourages collaboration between students and teachers in designing a learning path and thus rejects the “one-size-fits-all” approach that most of us experienced as students and too often continue to encounter as educators.

It builds learners’ skills and capacity with the support of important content. As noted earlier, personalized learning goes beyond the accumulation of academic content. Although content is very important, its role is to support the skill development and capacity building necessary for continued learning.

It fosters learning independence. Our ultimate goal is for students to no longer have to depend on us for their learning. Our purpose as educators is to support them as they become increasingly independent, accrue skills, and make choices in pursuit of meeting established standards.

Technology and Personalized Learning

Advertisements presenting the benefits of technology in education might lead you to conclude that the more technology students have at their disposal, the more personalized their learning is. If this were true, you’d expect personalized learning to be well under way throughout the United States, given the amount of money we spend on technology in schools. Unfortunately, there is little evidence that investing more in technology has “moved the needle” at all in terms of academic achievement (Tamim, Bernard, Barokhovski, Abrami, & Schmid, 2011). Certainly, data on the effect of technology on academic achievement do not suggest that more technology alone will lead to better outcomes

for students. One of the problems is that educators too often employ technology to support conventional learning activities that have been around for generations—think worksheets and print reading. What’s more, educators often fear that technology strips them of control over instruction and leaves them unable to adequately assess student progress—a justifiable concern at a time when educators are confronted with demands to keep up with technology while simultaneously relying on assessment measures from bygone eras.

Nevertheless, technology plays an important role in personalized learning. One of the best descriptions of its role that we have encountered is from Mary Ann Wolf:

Personalized learning requires not only a shift in the design of schooling, but also a leveraging of modern technologies. Personalization cannot take place at scale without technology. Personalized learning is enabled by smart e-learning systems, which help dynamically track and manage the learning needs of all students, and provide a platform to access myriad engaging learning content, resources, and learning opportunities needed to meet each student’s needs everywhere at any time, but which are not all available within the four walls of the traditional classroom. (Wolf, 2010, p. 6)

Our experience implementing the IPL model over the past five years is consistent with Wolf’s description. We have found that technology typically plays the following roles in personalized learning:

- Providing immediate, specific, objective feedback on learning that can also serve as a dialogue trail about learning efforts and activities.
- Sustaining motivation by providing choices of relevant content, customized learning pathways, and varying levels of difficulty.
- Capturing real-time data that support analysis and tracking of student learning. For many activities, technology can

be used to record and share results immediately, helping teachers to analyze areas of struggle and intervene quickly before confusion and misconceptions set in.

- Supporting student reflection on learning strategies, challenges, ideas, and experiences and facilitating the sharing of reflections with others.
- Seeking out, identifying, and contributing additional learning content and tools to support individual and group learning. When students bring additional information and their own discoveries to bear on their learning, their sense of commitment to and ownership of the learning grows.
- Tracking progress on learning goals, action plans, student achievement, and assessments. Technology can place these activities in the hands of learners as well as educators and parents, thus supporting shared responsibility and ongoing student-teacher collaboration.
- Providing multiple means for learners to acquire, express, and engage with information and participate in a variety of assessment activities, leveraging principles such as Universal Design for Learning (Hall, Meyer, & Rose, 2012).
- Supporting skills practice and knowledge acquisition. Well-constructed applications can support learners to engage in independent practice with real-time feedback and track progress related to consistency and automaticity.
- Communicating and collaborating with others. Technology can facilitate ongoing dialogue, questioning, information sharing, and problem solving among learners or with adults without necessitating face-to-face contact.
- Introducing and supporting learning challenges and simulations. Students can be given the freedom and flexibility to engage in a variety of interesting activities that also generate a wide range of learning outcomes.
- Exploring and learning from perspectives beyond geographic boundaries. No longer must learners depend solely

on textbooks, field trips, or the knowledge of educators to explore and understand other perspectives. Technology allows them to see the marvels of the world, speak in real time with experts from around the corner or around the globe, and explore history from the perspective of others who have vastly different views and experiences.

- Supporting embedded assessments in the form of simulations, virtual worlds, augmented realities, and game-based performances. Technology can support assessment activities that range far beyond traditional paper-and-pencil tests. Well-constructed assessments can help learners to build clarity and coherence regarding what they are learning, thus adding value beyond simply measuring progress.

ACTIVITY

The Readiness for Change Rubric

Time: 30 minutes

Type: Reflective

Who: Administrative team

Difficulty: 2 out of 5

This gets you: A sense of how ready your school is to start designing for and implementing personalized learning. Don't worry if you find that most of your responses fall in the "not in place" category. The key is to understand where you and your school are now and where you may need to start.

Keep in mind: Just because you're ready as a leader to implement personalized learning doesn't mean that