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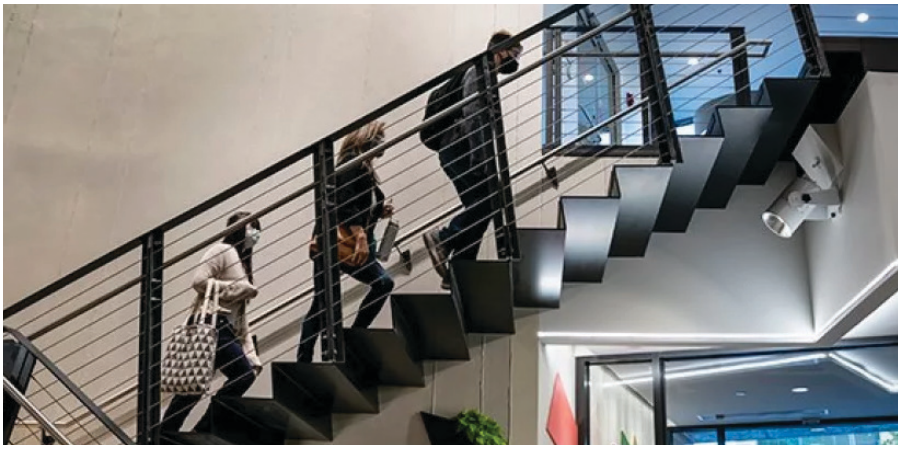
Personalized Learning

EDITOR'S NOTE

Personalized learning continues to be important but still presents as a challenge. This Spotlight will help you evaluate the mastery verses seat-time debate; consider how to tailor instruction to the needs of individual students; discover how educators are innovating and learning on the fly; assess what should be considered in personalized learning; and learn how the arts could be included in your schools' personalized learning efforts.

OPINION



—Whitney Curtis for Education Week

Saras Chung, center, her daughter Karis, 14, left, and her son Jaron, 12, walk up to Saras's workplace office in St. Louis. Karis and Jaron, who are attending school remotely full-time, are participating in personalized learning programs.

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How the Pandemic Is Testing Personalized Learning

By Kevin Bushweller

The mix of instructional models that schools are using during the pandemic is dizzying: Full-time remote, hybrid, in person but socially distanced.

Tack on to that the wide range of teaching approaches within those models and you have a very complex picture of what is happening in schools. In full-time remote instruction, for instance, schools are all over the map with how much live, instructional time they are providing. With in-person instruction, group work is emphasized in some places, but not in others.

What schools have found under these circumstances is that personalized learning—which focuses on addressing students' individual academic strengths and weaknesses as well as their personal interests—is very difficult to pull off.

More than half of educators in an EdWeek Research Center survey said teachers aren't doing as well with personalizing instruction as they were before the pandemic. And most say student group work and individual one-on-one time with teachers—hallmarks of personalized learning—are suffering.

That, in turn, makes it much harder to engage in "deep learning," a teaching approach that encourages students to dig deeply into a specific issue, problem, or question that is related to what they are studying and piques their interest. The idea is that digging deeply, rather than just skimming the surface of a topic, will make them better problem solvers.

Still, teachers are trying.

"A lot of things that are good practice can be done in a virtual space," Boston middle school teacher Neema Avashia told Education Week. "If we believe kids learn best when they are doing things deeply instead of broadly, it's about building those kinds of [activities] in an online space."

Making policy adjustments is important too. For example, measuring learning by how much time students spend in a classroom (also known as seat-time requirements) is getting a hard look during COVID-19 because some see it as a relic of the past.

That focus on continuous improvement is now as important as it ever was, said Stacy Stewart, the principal of Chicago's Belmont-Cragin Elementary School, which emphasizes personalized learning.

"We have to continue to listen to kids more and be flexible with what they tell us," she said. "It's hard. I don't want to keep having to iterate, but you do. That's the one takeaway I can always recommend: not to be afraid to iterate and learn."

And that's good advice for all of us during these uncertain times. ■

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The Mastery vs. Seat-Time Debate Takes Center Stage During the Pandemic

By Mark Lieberman

COVID-19 has forced educators to reexamine some of their core practices, and in some cases, circumvent them altogether. Measuring learning by how much time students spend in a classroom could be next for an overhaul. But making that transition won't be easy.

Numerous U.S. school districts have experimented in recent years with a teaching approach that emphasizes student mastery of discrete skills or "competencies" over assessment-based, one-size-fits-all measures of learning progress. Most states have policies that permit this experimentation, and a handful have explicitly codified efforts to expand this type of education. The approach consists of a wide variety of practices, from directly communicating learning objectives to assigning projects that demonstrate learning in a variety of qualitative ways.

Proponents of the model believe the pandemic has reinforced its value: When students don't have the luxury of being in the same room as their teachers all day, they need to draw from intrinsic motivation, and teachers can't expect all students to progress at the same pace, given the wide variation in access to and comfort with technology tools.

Some schools that had already begun making these changes have advanced their efforts more quickly since March 2020, when COVID-19 forced most school buildings nationwide to shut down for the remainder of the school year. Others have adopted competency-based or personalized learning practices, like allowing individual students in a class to progress through learning material at different paces, out of necessity, as remote learning makes traditional instruction more onerous.

Most states have relaxed policies that require students to complete a certain number of in-person school days in a given year for last school year, this school year, or both, giving schools

Stride Learning Hub

5 Ways Personalized Learning Will Look Different Post–Pandemic

This school year, many districts have welcomed students back for face-to-face learning and others have found ways to improve and enhance their virtual programs. Across the board, personalized learning has become more critical than ever. Districts need ways to help students move forward stronger amidst excessive learning loss and social-emotional impacts experienced in the past several years. As educators and students have become more experienced with technology and online learning in pandemic times, they are better poised and more willing to embrace educational technology that delivers the benefits of personalized learning.

Get ready for a simplified and enhanced approach to personalized learning

We expect to see an expanded approach to personalized learning post-pandemic. First, we must move beyond technology platforms that automatically serve up targeted lessons for the student and put the tools in teachers' hands to differentiate learning based on students' needs, interests, and how they learn best. Next, to be successful, we need to provide the resources for teachers to easily create personalized learning that goes beyond addressing skills gaps to enrich learning with themed collections, timely topics, project-based learning, and support for social-emotional learning.

Simplify and enhance personalized learning to be more effective post–pandemic:

01
Empower teachers with the tools to expand how they personalize learning

In the past, technology-driven personalized learning was often presented as a hands-off approach where teachers allowed the platform to select targeted content to differentiate asynchronous instruction. Now, personalized learning can become a teacher-driven, dynamic learning experience, but with a streamlined and simplified approach to save them time.

With the new Stride Learning Hub by Stride Learning Solutions, teachers have access to a robust library of digital learning assets that they can easily search and assign to individuals or groups of students, or incorporate into their classroom instruction to address students' learning loss more effectively. Stride Learning Hub also allows teachers to expand and enrich learning experiences with resources and activities that look beyond filling skill gaps to enhanced personalized learning.

02
Customize to students' interests

Recent district profiles in EdWeek's *Personalized Learning's Big Test Is Coming This School Year*[1] showcase student successes coming from schools who connect students to projects they care about and that align to their interests. In one featured article. *Why Personalized Learning Works in Some Schools, But Not in Others*, one common factor in high-performing schools is that students are more motivated to learn when their personalized learning environments align to their interests. Stride Learning Hub gives teachers the tools and assets they need to create personalized lessons matched to their students' interests and for older students, their future career or workplace goals.

Stride Learning Hub gives teachers access to a rich library of digital, multisensory learning assets that they can use to address students' learning loss. From there, teachers can expand and enrich students' learning experiences digitally, efficiently, and effectively.

03
Match learning modalities to how the student learns best

Because many students have an ideal way of learning, it is imperative that teachers have access to tools to deliver lessons and activities in a variety of modalities, including those aligned to the four types of learning: visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and reading/writing.[2] When personalized learning delivered online can provide multisensory learning activities in the format that works best for a student, they have their best opportunity for learning success. Students who have access to multisensory engagement can be more proactive in their learning, take ownership, and feel empowered. Stride Learning Hub's robust library of more than 200,000 learning resources features 30-plus different interactivity types to drive student engagement. Among them are videos, eBooks, games, project-based learning experiences, simulations, and open exploratory spaces.

Stride Learning Solutions

04
Make learning experiential by connecting to real–world experiences

Personalized learning that is student-centered and built with a project-based curriculum that encourages hands-on, real-world, relevant learning is proving to be a strong driver of success. A recent case study conducted by Getting Smart shares how Kansas City schools, along with business, civic, and community leaders, have come together around a real-world learning initiative designed to provide students with the skills and credentials they need for success after high school. By focusing learning around real-world workforce needs, students are getting prepared for their future.[3]

To help support teachers in making relevant, real-world connections, Stride Learning Hub features themed collections, like the Newsworthy collection, that provide resources on current events and timely topics that teachers can use to help students relate what they are learning to what is happening in the world around them. For example, when students explore the California wildfires or space exploration as tied to their themes in science or social studies, they can apply what they are learning using real-life examples that help engage them and provide context for their learning.

As teachers look to implement project-based learning, they can lean on the Stride Learning Hub to access projects that include real-world case studies and activities that allow students to work independently or as a team for a collaborative work experience.

05
Focus on the whole child

To be effective today, a personalized learning environment needs to customize learning by taking the whole child into account. With the rising mental health crisis resulting from the pandemic, school districts are implementing system-wide social-emotional learning programs that help address the mental health and well-being of students.

In the study, *Differences in Personalized Learning Practice and Technology Use in High- and Low-Performing Learner-Centered Schools in the United States*, schools with the most successful personalized learning environments saw better academic success, as measured on state tests, as a result of several factors, including a focus on the social-emotional well-being of students in all facets of their personalized learning plans.[4] To support teachers in adapting their lessons to support the whole child, Stride Learning Hub provides lesson plan resources and activities that they can use to focus on the emotional well-being of their students.

There is no disputing the critical role technology can play in personalized learning. However, over the past two years, high-performing schools have redefined the role of technology in personalized learning to support teachers in improving the unique learning experiences for each student.

Online learning environments like Stride Learning Solutions and the personalization tools available in the new Stride Learning Hub open up greater flexibility and streamlined personalized learning. They improve access to real-world learning and make project-based, experiential learning more expansive and engaging.

Ready to take personalized learning to the next level? Explore how the Stride Learning Hub can help.

stridelearninghub.com
844.638.3533

1 Personalized Learning's Big Test is Coming This School Year https://www.edweek.org/technology/personalized-learnings-big-test-is-coming-this-school-year/2021/07

2 4 Types of Learning Styles: How to Accommodate a Diverse Group of Students https://www.rasmussen.edu/degrees/education/blog/types-of-learning-styles

3 How bringing real change to Kansas City students has national implications. A new case study reveals the keys to the progress of a regional Real World Learning initiative. https://www.kauffman.org/currents/rwl-case-study-summary/?utm_source=edweek_sponsored_content&utm_medium=cpc&utm_campaign=edweek2021

4 Why Personalized Learning Works in Some Schools, But Not in Others. What Test Scores Say / Differences in Personalized Learning Practice and Technology Use in High- and Low-Performing Learner-Centered Schools in the United States https://www.edweek.org/technology/why-personalized-learning-works-in-some-schools-but-not-in-others-what-test-scores-say/2021/10

more flexibility to provide instruction for students using the methods that worked best under COVID-19 constraints. Most of those policy changes were not designed to stick long-term, according to an analysis from the Education Commission of the States. But some competency-based learning advocates think they should.

"History may prove the situation with COVID-19 as a watershed moment of true transformation for K-12 systems," said Susan Patrick, president and CEO of the Aurora Institute, which helps schools develop and refine online and personalized learning programs. "The structures that traditional systems rely on are just not built to support all students' needs at a personalized level."

A broader shift in education toward competency-based learning may be a long way off, though. Even schools that implemented competency-based practices years ago still struggle to get teachers to support and adopt them. Teachers have been so beleaguered during COVID-19 that they may resist additional pushes for change. The pushback can also come from parents, who feel skeptical about a school model that's different from the one they experienced as a child, or that departs too much from their notions of how school should work.

"When we made the shift in March, for teachers who already understood competency-based learning, they said, 'I can make this shift pretty easily,'" said Ann Hadwen, curriculum administrator for the Exeter school district in New Hampshire. For others, she said, "it was really a struggle, and it continues to be a struggle."

Accelerating the shift

Some schools have been planting these seeds for years.

The Harrisburg school district in South Dakota a decade ago began transitioning to a competency-based model after teachers consistently found some students who finished Algebra 1 quickly were getting bored and frustrated while waiting for other students to catch up. The district's high schoolers have had the option to engage in competency-based learning for seven years, and more recently the district began offering competency-based pathways to middle and elementary schoolers as well.

Even before COVID, making these changes wasn't easy.

"Kids are trained to be told [what to do during] every single part of their day and never have to think for themselves," said Travis Lape, the district's innovative programs director. The competency-based approach "puts the pressure and the ownership on the learner" to determine their needs and preferences—an important skill that many college counselors have told Lape they need to see in the students who apply to their institutions.

—Getty

In the Harrisburg district's competency-based program, curriculum and digital instructional modules serve as the foundation for learning, and direct instruction and interaction with students deepen engagement. Students involved in that program were more prepared for full-time remote learning, Lape said, because their teachers aren't devising lesson plans based primarily on how much material the teacher had covered the previous day.

From a social-emotional perspective, competency-based teaching also prepared educators in Harrisburg to acknowledge students' diverse needs and be flexible with due dates, Lape said. Those considerations proved essential as COVID-19 upended families' lives and schedules.

In some cases, simply knowing that it's possible to depart from the traditional teaching model has been enough to spur interest in competency-based approaches. A cohort of 10 teachers in New Hampshire's Exeter district last year completed an 18-month master's program in competency-based education at Southern New Hampshire University, and they've been spreading the gospel to their colleagues ever since. They credit their relative success with remote learning to their master's program experience, which involved rethinking their teaching and testing out new approaches in their classrooms.

When the pandemic hit and teachers had no choice but to abandon some of their traditional approaches, the district's competency-based education converts had an easier time getting their message across to their skeptical colleagues. The notion of having regular meetings with students or explicitly communicating to students how assignments serve the learning objectives seemed more suited to the pandemic situation, said Catherine Thorn, a science teacher at Exeter High School who participated in the SNHU cohort.

Trying to suggest intriguing new practices for teachers without tying them to an intimidating concept like competency-based education is "like putting vitamins in the chocolate milk," she said.

Struggling to make it work

Competency-based learning isn't inherently better suited to the remote environment than to in-person teaching, though. Lape said some teachers have struggled to maintain predictability and routine for students and families while also tailoring instruction to students' individual progress.

In a typical school setting, teachers might have a quick, impromptu conversation with each student in a class about progress on a set of reading objectives. But during remote instruction, teachers have struggled to maintain that kind of spontaneity.

"Things have to be somewhat predictable for families so they can get on their Zoom call and not be stressed out in terms of, 'Why's my sched-

ule changing every day?' " Lape said.

Rita Boyd, a biochemistry teacher at Del Lago Academy, a public science high school in Escondido, Calif., has been teaching students with competencies in mind for years, and has emphasized project-based learning even longer. But in the virtual context, some of the vital pieces of her competency-based approach—namely, the student-to-student interactions that can enrich learning during group work—have proved impossible to replicate on videoconferences.

She's also "pared down" her standards for certain projects, such as asking students to present a slideshow rather than a full lab report. "In online learning, kids get bored more easily" and attention spans are shorter during videoconferences, she said. Even using videoconferencing breakout rooms and other digital tools, teachers in Exeter have struggled to build relationships with and among students. In a normal school year, by early October, Thorn and her science colleague Annie Gonsalves would be expecting students to share detailed feedback on each other's work. During remote learning, though, they are proceeding "very gingerly" as students have seemed reluctant to offer feedback as openly as they would in a regular classroom setting.

Room for improvement

Could more-flexible policies accelerate the move toward competency-based learning, even past the pandemic? The jury's still out.

"New Hampshire has had a good set of rules and laws for more than a decade, and we've made some progress, but not near the amount of progress that we would have wanted to," said Frank Edelblut, the state's education commissioner. He said he hasn't heard recently from fellow state education leaders who might be curious about emulating the state's competency-based education approaches.

He has heard, however, from district leaders in his state who believe they'll have an easier time moving their schools toward competency-based learning because more people have now seen the value of offering flexible options and rethinking antiquated traditions.

Without state policy changes, Patrick from the Aurora Institute worries schools will struggle to "move to have deeper or personalized learning with rich performance assessments that are authentic while the state is still planning to impose accountability" using traditional assessment-based metrics. Schools in the Exeter district, for instance, expect students to be self-directed and creative in their work, but the students still receive traditional letter grades on report cards and transcripts.

Still, there's already plenty of evidence that competency-based practices are taking hold. Thorn said all of Exeter's teachers are collaborating more this year out of necessity and conducting more meetings with students one on one, because the workload during virtual learning is heftier than usual. Teachers have no choice but to develop workarounds on the spot when individual students' technical glitches get in the way of their learning. And the education field as a whole has been confronted with glaring technology access gaps that reinforce the need for differentiated teaching approaches.

All of these efforts represent a more personalized alternative to the more traditional model based around lectures, standardized tests, and all students in a class moving through content at the same pace.

Hadwen has no illusions that her school, or education at large, will fully embrace competency-based education overnight, even during the pandemic. But she has seen teachers unknowingly putting competency-based practices into action, as when they spent the first days of the school year explaining expectations and objectives to students, rather than diving right into content.

The concept of "competency-based learning can be really complex," Hadwen said. "I think being remote has made [understanding of the concept] a little bit more clear." ■

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Personalized Learning: Same Subject. Same Teacher. 3 Different Student Experiences

By Mark Lieberman

Personalizing instruction to the needs of individual students is hard. It takes a lot of planning, a commitment to understanding each student's academic and social needs, and smart use of ed-tech tools. That is probably why most K-12 students still learn the same material, at relatively the same pace, for the same subjects.

To understand why it is difficult (but possible) to tailor instruction to each student's individual needs, Education Week asked teacher Tricia Proffitt to outline what her teaching looks like for three students with very different learning needs in her dual-language English classes at Belvidere Central Middle School in Illinois. Proffitt has been developing personalized teaching approaches for years and has continued to do so during the pandemic.

The bottom line: Three students learning the same subject are having completely different experiences with the same teacher.

Here's a look at the experiences of three of her students:

#1: English-language skills

This middle school student arrived in the United States from South America. She can't read English and has "very little" English-speaking skill, Proffitt said.

The Plan: Each week, Proffitt creates a separate work plan for Student 1. Proffitt mimics the standards she's setting for her class that

week for an assignment that's manageable and worthwhile for Student 1. For instance, if the class is reading a short story that week, Proffitt assigns her a separate short story on her level, in her language. The online vocabulary platform Learn That Word allows Proffitt to select specific English skills for her to work on while other students are doing different exercises in the same program. The weekly work plan includes direct hyperlinks to online assignments so the student doesn't have to dig through files on her Chromebook to find the right links.

The Result: Proffitt had to do a lot of "trial and error" before she landed on methods for communicating clear expectations to the student and ensuring that she understood those expectations. The student was quickly getting overwhelmed when Proffitt sent her daily instructions in the early weeks of the school year.

Now, Proffitt is taking a more personalized approach: "I send her the work plan on Monday. Via Google Translate and emails and chats, we get the kinks worked out to what the expectations are [for the week]," Proffitt said. "She's working on the skills that she can handle, and she's doing great."

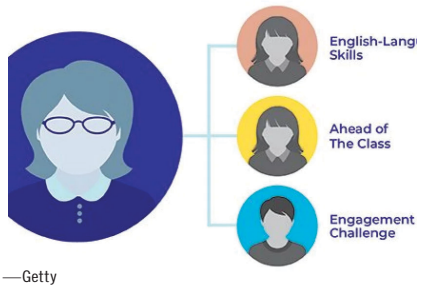
#2: Ahead of the class

One of Proffitt's students demonstrated early in the school year that she was operating well above grade level. Her vocabulary and grammar usage stood out, as did her enthusiasm for the class and eagerness to help her classmates.

The Plan: Several of the online programs Proffitt uses in her class allow her to tailor assignments to each student's progress, and for students to move through the material at their own pace. Upon seeing this student produce high-quality work, Proffitt quickly organized advanced modules and additional assignments for the student to work through while other students were a bit further behind.

Sometimes during a class session, Proffitt tells the class, "If you know what you're doing and you want to move ahead, you can." Student 2 "knows that means her," Proffitt said. She also pulls high-achieving students into separate videoconference sessions for more in-depth discussions.

The Result: Instead of having to wait weeks or months for other students to catch up to her level, the student can engage in meaningful



—Getty

work that challenges her and prepares her for future classes as well. In addition to the more advanced modules, Proffitt set up a website where the student can privately publish her written work, add graphics, and supplement the text with a read-aloud. By mid-October, the student was working on tasks that most of the rest of the class will catch up with in the next quarter of the school year.

#3: Engagement challenge

One male student was "very disengaged" during the early weeks of the school year. He participated to an extent, but once Proffitt began assigning work, the student dropped off.

The Plan: Proffitt asked another one of this student's teachers whether his lack of engagement was consistent across all of his classes. Proffitt's colleague confirmed that it was. She arranged a meeting with the student's parents, and quickly discovered that he and his family were overwhelmed by school responsibilities. "He felt that he had already dug such a big hole, so what was the point?" Proffitt said.

She reassured him that the most important thing for him to do was make progress, even at a slower pace than other students in the class. Proffitt picked out a couple of important assignments from the material he had missed, emphasized those as essential for the student to learn before he could move on, and told him to ignore the rest of the practice exercises on the list. Then she sat with him on a video call while they worked through some of the material together.

The Result: About a month and a half into the school year, the student had started to request meetings with Proffitt, participate during live sessions, and even email Proffitt during nonschool days to ask about work he still needed to make up. Proffitt no longer has to send him messages to remind him to stay on task. "He knows how to check for missing work, understands it's okay to ask for help, and to speak up if he is confused," Proffitt said. ■

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How Personalized Learning Is Weathering Tough Times: 'Iterate and Learn'

By Kevin Bushweller

Making personalized learning work is hard under normal circumstances. Teachers must pay close attention to each student's academic strengths and weaknesses and their personal interests. Students must have regular access to digital devices and WiFi, but not overuse technology. And schools must balance maintaining academic rigor with encouraging students to pursue projects fueled by their interests.

Trying to do all that during a pandemic makes those challenges even more daunting. That is especially the case for schools serving students in high-poverty communities of color where the threat and impact of the coronavirus is much higher, and they are likely engaged in remote or hybrid learning.

Even so, many schools in those circumstances are muddling through the challenges—and some principals and their teachers are innovating and learning important lessons on the fly that they believe will make their schools better for the long haul.


Stacy Stewart


Phyllis Lockett

One of those educators is Stacy Stewart, the principal of Belmont-Cragin Elementary School on the northwest side of Chicago. The community surrounding the 430-student school has one of highest positivity rates for COVID-19 in the city, 94 percent of its students are Latinx, 4 percent are Black, and 84 percent are from families living in poverty. Instruction is currently all-remote for the K-8 school's students.

Phyllis Lockett, the CEO of Chicago-based nonprofit LEAP Innovations, has been working with schools like Belmont-Cragin on develop-

ing personalized learning programs before and during the pandemic, evaluating their effectiveness, and helping them make instructional adjustments now and for the future.

In separate Zoom interviews with Assistant Managing Editor Kevin Bushweller, Lockett and Stewart recently reflected on the lessons they have learned trying to make personalized learning work under difficult circumstances.

What do you see as the biggest challenge during the pandemic?

Lockett: There are many struggles. First and foremost is technology access. We still have not cracked the nut on how we ensure broadband and device access for all students. I think one of the silver linings that will come out of the COVID crisis is a movement to make technology access a student right for all learners across America. It is as basic as water and air if we are serious about preparing our students to be competitive in a digital economy.

What will it take to solve that problem?

Lockett: It's going to have to be a reinvention of the E-rate [federal program that helps schools expand access to technology] on steroids. "E-rate plus" or "E-rate squared" approach. That's the only way it's going to happen.

We all know kids are spending way too much time on Zoom calls for school. How are you balancing that time spent using Zoom or other videoconferencing tools with project-based learning?

Stewart: We don't want kids having a lot of screen time. [But] we have to follow the district or the state's mandates in terms of synchronous and asynchronous instructional minutes. What we are trying to do now more intentionally based on the feedback of the students is give them more asynchronous time to work on projects. We thought, if this is something they are passionate about and it is still aligned to standards, then why do we have to have them in front of the camera to do a project when they could just do the project and use the camera for the presentation or to ask questions or to collaborate with a group of other peers who may be doing something similar?

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How long have you been using personalized learning approaches in your school?

Stewart: Five to six years. But I feel like this year we are all brand new to doing it this way, and it's another level of vulnerability. We were doing very well with it, but now the environment has changed, the control and flow of the day has changed.

Did you see student gains prior to the pandemic?

Stewart: We went from being one of the lower-ranked schools in the district to one of the top-tier schools in the district within three to five years. As we delved into personalized learning, we saw huge increases in student growth where you have 95 percent or more of our students meeting or exceeding growth standards in reading and math.

How do you create a balance between personalized learning approaches and performance on standardized tests?

Lockett: Personalization, in our opinion, does not trade off [academic rigor]. You have to set a high bar of expectations and academic outcomes for students. How do you do that in a way that honors every student's context? We feel very strongly that state testing needs to absolutely continue to be a criteria for success. But it can't be the only criteria on which we measure our students and assess their skills and needs.

Why do you think some self-directed learning efforts lack academic rigor while others are very effective?

Lockett: [For a long time], there was no connection between learning science and how kids learn. You'll see this manifested in how kids are using or engaging in ed tech [during the pandemic]. What's really fascinating to me is when I hear a lot of folks talking about how remote learning doesn't work because of the tech and the kids don't want to be on the tech all day and all these things. Yeah, it's like, guess what, kids don't want to be on Zoom all day listening to a teacher tell them what to do. It's even worse in a virtual environment, let alone a school [building].

What level of professional development does it take to get teachers ready to use personalized learning strategies?

Stewart: Let's talk about the "why" [first], because universities are not training pre-service teachers for this type of work. And so what happens as a building leader is you are having to undo a lot of the traditional practices that were emphasized by the universities. So that's one big challenge.

And the opportunities?

Stewart: We use our school as a lab site for personalized learning. You can take a small subset of teachers who you call your "first followers" of this type of learning and those are the ones who get the largest amount of professional development to pilot the work and use the lab model to be studied by the rest of the school.

What do you think is the next big step for personalized learning?

Lockett: We really need to upskill and reskill our educator workforce. Educators not [using] an LMS [Learning Management System]—that's nonnegotiable, especially in the context that we are preparing students for a digital economy.

Cultural competency. Another big, big deal. That connects not only to relational skills, but understanding the context of our students, particularly our Black and brown students. If a teacher does not understand how to connect and value the culture and context of the students they are serving, there is no way they are going to be able to build the relationship and trust.

Stewart: We have to continue to listen to kids more and be flexible with what they tell us. It's hard. I don't want to keep having to iterate, but you do. And that's the one takeaway I can always recommend: not to be afraid to iterate and learn.

Also we need to look at this issue of equity. How can we eliminate some of those barriers across the country? How do we provide more equitable access and resources and experiences regardless of where students live or their socioeconomic status? ■

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Why Personalized Learning Works in Some Schools, But Not in Others. What Test Scores Say

By Alyson Klein

Personalizing learning to students individual academic strengths and weaknesses and personal interests was hard to do during the pandemic, especially in remote or hybrid learning environments. Social distancing in physical classrooms added to the difficulties.

But now that most students are back in classrooms, schools running personalized learning programs that struggled during the pandemic are trying to get them back on track, and other schools are in the beginning stages of putting personalized learning strategies in place.

No matter what stage they are at in putting such programs in place, one big worry is how such efforts will affect test scores. The reality is that changing up instruction and integrating more digital tools into learning could jeopardize everything from teachers' relationships with their students to the school's state standardized test scores.

So what does personalized learning look like in schools that perform well on standardized tests versus those that perform poorly? What factors are at play that educators should know about?

To answer those and other questions about personalized learning, Education Week spoke to Dabae Lee, an assistant professor at Kennesaw State University in Georgia, who studies project-based learning, personalized learning, and online learning. Lee is an author of a recent study, "Differences in Personalized Learning Practice and Technology Use in High- and Low-Performing Learner-Centered Schools in the United States."

Here's what she had to say:

> "Our number one takeaway was that personalized learning, when implemented thoroughly, was effective for increasing academic achievement measured by standardized tests."
>
> **DABAE LEE**
> Assistant professor, Kennesaw State University in Georgia

You were the lead author on a recent study showing that teachers in high-performing schools tend to implement personalized learning strategies more effectively than those who work in lower-performing schools. Can you tell us briefly how you conducted that study and what your number one takeaway was?

We wanted to see how personalized learning was practiced in K-12 schools that had already transformed their practice from teacher-centered to learner-centered. So, we identified those "learner-centered" schools in the U.S. and asked the teachers various questions about what they did to create personalized learning experiences for students and how they used technology to support them. Then, we wondered if there were differences between high- and low- performing schools in terms of practice and technology use. So, we gathered the students' data from state standardized tests and compared the teachers' practices and technology use between high- and low-performing schools.

Our number one takeaway was that personalized learning, when implemented thoroughly, was effective for increasing academic achievement measured by standardized tests. One of the greatest fears of teachers and administrators is seeing a drop in their test scores. This makes them reluctant to transform their traditional practice to personalized learning. We hope this finding will assure them that personalized learning is effective if implemented well.

You found that teachers in high-performing schools were more likely to include students' own career goals and interests in developing personalized learning plans. Why do you see that strategy as effective, and why might higher-performing schools be in a better position to implement it?

Motivation is powerful in learning. Every student has unique interests. Tailoring learning to individual students' career goals and interests makes learning personally relevant and keeps students engaged in their learning processes. We found evidence that tailoring learning to their unique interests helped motivate the students to learn more in those schools. So, I would not say higher-performing schools were in a better position to use students' interests.

Teachers in higher performing schools were more likely to say they formed close relationships with their

students. Why do you think that is and how might it have contributed to student success?

Yes, we found that teachers in high-performing schools formed close relationships with more students than those in low-performing schools. Other findings of the study help answer why that was the case. Teachers in high-performing schools considered more characteristics of students in developing personalized learning plans, stayed more years with the same students, and assessed more non-academic competencies such as social skills and work ethic, than those in low-performing schools. In other words, they had more opportunities to interact with each student and get to know each. These opportunities allowed them to form closer relationships with their students.

There are several ways that close relationships between teachers and students improve student success. When teachers know more about each student, they know what works for the student. So, they can create more effective learning experiences for the student. Also, students tend to feel safe and cared for when they think that their teachers know them well. They can more easily share their difficulties, struggles, and failures. A safe and caring environment encourages them to be adventurous and proactive when it comes to learning instead of being afraid of failure.

Teachers in high-performing schools were more likely to use technology collaboratively than those in lower-performing schools. Was that a key factor in the success of personalized learning?

Yes, high-performing schools had more powerful technology systems that integrated more functions that support learning than did low-performing schools. Technology alone is not a key factor in the success of personalized learning, but it is an essential enabler, especially for personalized learning in a classroom with a large number of students. Using powerful technology systems will not guarantee the success of personalized learning. However, it is a must-have tool that helps teachers implement personalized learning.

Your study touches on the role that standardized testing may play in keeping low-performing schools from going as deeply into personalized learning as they would like. Can you talk about the reasons for that?

Implementing personalized learning takes a paradigm shift in beliefs about teaching and learning and a dramatic change in instructional practice. The punitive nature of the [federal education law] No Child Left Behind left educators fearful about trying new teaching methods. While the law has been replaced by the less punitive Every Student Succeeds Act, some still feel pressure to get good test scores. This prevents many educators from taking risks to innovate their practice.

As the study findings suggest, personalized learning should be implemented faithfully to be effective. But it takes a great deal of time and effort to reach that level of implementation fidelity. Therefore, pushing educators to adopt personalized learning while maintaining the negative consequences of a temporary drop in test scores may lead them to adopt it at the very surface level, which will not result in an increase in academic outcomes.

What lessons from your study can we apply to the COVID-era of schooling in which learning virtually is more common than before the pandemic?

Learning virtually without physical interactions can be challenging, especially for younger learners. On the other hand, online learning can be designed in a way to bring multiple benefits that are difficult to realize in face-to-face learning. Actually, online learning environments can be more flexible environments for implementing personalized learning than traditional brick-and-mortar schools. Students can take as much time as they need to master content without being restricted by class time. Learning can take place anywhere, allowing students to engage in real-world projects. Student data can be recorded and processed instantly to inform teachers. Our study findings shed light on how we can tap into the distinctive benefits of online learning environments.

Also, during COVID some students, especially those who are disadvantaged, have learned a lot less than they otherwise would have. Therefore, when COVID is over, different students are going to have different gaps in their learning, and the only way to effectively fill those gaps is to personalize student learning. Our study sheds some light on how to do that. ■

—Getty

OPINION

Published November 20, 2019

Does 'Personalized' Learning Exacerbate Inequity?

By Paul Emerich France

***Today's guest post is written by Paul Emerich France, a national-board-certified teacher and the author of* Reclaiming Personalized Learning.**

There's been a resurgence in the personalized learning conversation, with reports of teachers' perspectives on personalized learning. The results are mixed, to say the least, providing even more evidence that the mainstream assumptions surrounding personalized learning are weak.

Among these mainstream assumptions are the notion that adaptive technology is necessary to personalize learning and the misconception that curriculum must be individualized in order to provide a personalized experience. Alyson Klein reported that 72 percent of teachers interviewed feel concerns about increased screen time, 48 percent of them think students are working alone too often, and 47 percent of educators are worried that big tech has too much influence over education.

I share these concerns, too, and more—all of which come from my time working for an education technology startup company and network of microschools in Silicon Valley.

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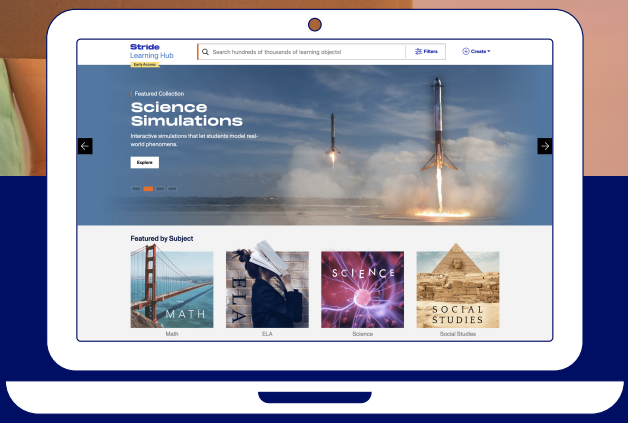

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Why I left Silicon Valley, EdTech, and personalized learning

The truth is, I didn't always have these concerns. I used to welcome technology's influence over my pedagogy, the increased screen time, and the time where my students were working on their own.

I worked for the aforementioned company for about three years, helping to open three microschools, serving as a public advocate for the company's mission and vision in prominent outlets like the New Yorker, and otherwise attempting to personalize learning for groups of students preschool through 5th grade using digital technology.

It didn't take me long to see the challenges associated with this brand of personalized learning. I tried to persist through the immense workload; I chomped at the bit to come up with "passion projects" for my students so that they felt their curriculum catered to their interests; I assessed rigorously and regularly to populate the platform's data reservoirs, in hopes that the data visualizations would eventually match what I knew to be true about my students.

I don't need to belabor this story to tell you that this vision never became a reality. With time, I not only began to realize that the tools we were building were no more effective than the outdated practices of the one-size-fits-all education characteristic of the NCLB era. But I learned far more important lessons than that. Most importantly, I learned about the role these misguided personalized learning efforts play in preserving and promulgating privilege in our education system, causing me to leave education technology and personalized learning altogether.

Systemic privilege in education

It's no secret that our education system is littered with privilege. Schools are naturally segregated based on socioeconomic status, with certain ZIP codes receiving more funding simply because of home values and the wealth that residents bring into neighborhoods. This inevitably correlates with race, as we know the average white family to have 10 times more wealth than the average black family, grounded in systemic racism that dates back to colonial times and black enslavement. Because the starting lines are so vastly different and because black families and families of color have fewer opportunities to grow wealth, it comes as no surprise that schools that serve students of color and working-class folks are disproportionately underfunded.

Over the past 20 years, we've only added insult to injury. The rigid standards of the NCLB era have only victimized schools that come to the table with less privilege. According to the tests used to measure the "effectiveness" of schools, schools that predominantly serve students of color and working-class students are not up to snuff. Put simply, the assets that these students bring into classrooms around the country are simply not valued in the same way that cold, hard academic knowledge is. This heightened value and prioritization of academic and content knowledge over the many funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzalez, 1992) that students of color and working-class students bring into our classrooms only widens opportunity gaps, because students experience a disproportionate number of perceived failures in schools, creating a cycle of increased opportunity gaps over time.

What does this have to do with personalized learning?

The brand of personalized learning that has been promoted by technology providers is just the latest initiative intended to address the challenges created by an inequitable school system that punishes students for opportunity gaps beyond their control. And when we examine the problems lying at the foundation of our school system, we unearth a few reasons why mainstream definitions of personalized learning, grounded in the aforementioned flawed assumptions about personalization, are not going to make the changes we need to create a more equitable system.

First and foremost, the sheer expense of these tools either limit access to schools or, in the event that they choose to appropriate funds toward digital tools, hemorrhage funds from the schools that could be directed toward facilities improvements, retaining quality teachers, or even programming that could help offset the opportunity gaps that students in underfunded schools are subject to.

Second, technology-driven personalized learning is only treating a symptom of the problems plaguing our education system. It is attempting to fill "knowledge gaps," when in reality, solutions to healing our education system need to address opportunity gaps and appreciate the diverse funds of knowledge all students bring into the classrooms. Simple pedagogical shifts including complex instruction (Cohen and Lotan, 1997), culturally responsive assessment practices, and increased representation in literature are a few practical places to begin in meeting all students where they are in the classroom.

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Put simply, the assets that these students bring into classrooms around the country are simply not valued in the same way that cold, hard academic knowledge is.

Finally, mainstream personalized learning tools foster dependence in learners who actually need to be liberated by their own independence. Zaretta Hammond's Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain differentiates between dependent and independent learners. Dependent learners, she says, are over-reliant on adults in their learning environments, while independent learners are able to problem-solve, think critically, and otherwise connect with their agency and autonomy. Digitally-driven automated personalized learning tools foster dependence in students and dehumanize the learning process, asking them to rely on a computer to individualize learning on their behalf.

It's startling, but when we examine personalized learning in the context of the true challenges that are plaguing our schools, we begin to see that mainstream personalized learning is yet another racist and classist means for treating the symptoms of education's core challenges because it is only exacerbating the racist and classist tendencies of the American school system.

Personalizing learning through systemic change

To reach all students, we need not individualize curriculum through digital means to make up for presupposed knowledge gaps. We need to, instead, attack the problem at its foundation. So infrequently do we discuss identity when talking about personalization. We get so caught up in learning-style myths and learning preferences that we forget the

color of one's skin, a child's gender identity, a student's sexual orientation, or a child's access to wealth and resources can most dramatically impact their ability to access an education that is inherently meaningful, relevant, and personal to them.

Sure, degrees of individualization are helpful within the classroom. As a national-board-certified teacher of 10 years, I make sure to differentiate my instruction, pull small groups, conference with students individually, and create interventions for students with skill deficits. I'm not saying that we can't create opportunities for individualization within our curriculum. But what I am saying is that individualizing learning through digital means will not resolve the storied inequities that have been ubiquitous in our education system for decades.

All students deserve an education that is within their reach—one that is meaningful and personal. And this begins with building an equitable system where all students have the same opportunity to succeed. If systemic racism, classism, and discrimination sit at the foundation of our education system, then only anti-racist, anti-classist, and inclusive education will begin to heal these deep intergenerational wounds.

And I hate to break it to you, but investing in computers won't get us there. ■

Paul Emerich France is a national-board-certified teacher, keynote speaker, and the author of Reclaiming Personalized Learning: A Pedagogy for Restoring Equity *and* Humanity in Our Classrooms.

OPINION

Published July 23, 2019

There's Value in Infusing the Arts Into Personalized Learning

By Jin-Soo Huh

"Arts are a part of who our students are, who people are," said Kara May, the director of Art in Motion (AIM), a school opening on Chicago's South Side. The arts encourage creative expression and cognitive complexity, they communicate ideas that impact both hearts and minds, they connect people within and across cultures and history, they give our lives meaning. Given the strong benefits of arts integration, my colleagues and I at Distinctive Schools asked ourselves this question: What would it look like to make the arts a core part of personalized learning? Through our work, we were able to discover a natural, strong connection between personalized learning and arts integration.

"It's important that arts aren't just desserts," May emphasized. "So many schools offer the arts as a supplemental piece. Having a dually focused approach at Art in Motion, where there are both arts classes and content classes infused with the arts, makes the students' learning so much more sound, pedagogically."

An interdisciplinary approach to infuse the arts across the curriculum would help students develop a broad range of competencies in a more authentic way. When we separate "core" subjects from other subjects in schools, we are often faced with false choices. Traditionally, math and English/language arts are most valued—their content is the base of state assessment systems, and schools often create double-blocks in the master schedule to give more instructional time to them. Science and history/social studies round out the core. And then there's the rest: art, music, health and physical education, social sciences, engineering and technology, etc. These supplemental courses are given less time in the schedule and are often the first to go when budgets get tight. It's hard to create a learning environment that develops the whole child in this kind of environment; so why do we separate "core" subjects from other subjects in schools?

Infusing arts into the education model

We started to explore this question and how we could create a learning environment that infuses the arts into our personalized-learning-driven academic model while designing AIM. The learning model for the creative arts school is student-centered and arts-infused. Growing to serve students in 7th through 12th grades, the school will offer middle school students exposure to various art forms including voice, dance, and visual arts. As students progress onward through high school at AIM, they will have the opportunity to choose a focus area within the arts. The arts will be infused into the personalized learning academic model used throughout the Distinctive Schools network, providing opportunities for both academic and artistic learning and development.

Since AIM is the first school in the network to infuse the arts into a personalized learning model, we assembled a team of arts educators and academic-content teachers from across our network to help authentically integrate the arts into the academic program.

"Having both arts and humanities specialists collaborating was invaluable—helping one another to understand the way we think about learning and how we interpret work was a really powerful experience," arts educator Molly Quinn explained. "There was some struggle initially between creative and analytical ways of thinking, but we grew together and developed a strong path forward."

This team became familiar with arts integration and how it benefits students. They pored over the National Core Arts Standards and crosswalked them with the Common Core State Standards to see where natural overlap exists. From there, the team collectively examined one 7th grade English unit to see what arts standards were already covered by the project and ways to further integrate the arts. The discussion and collaboration led to the development of a unit in which students will learn the technical and creative skills in writing and performing for a podcast. The initial project required students to conclude with a debate; the arts-infused project concludes with students sharing their debate via podcast, followed by a critique and discussion with their peers. The core objectives of the project are reached with the additional engagement and creative elements the arts provide.

The value of authentic arts-making

A major goal for the group of educators was to ensure that the integration of the arts standards was not a forced "add on." The projects

need to be authentic to truly engage students and be successful.

"The arts are actually tailor-made for personalized learning, they just inherently fit that model and allow the learner so many different pathways to success," music teacher Frank Cademartori said. "The hardest part, though, is making sure the art-making is authentic; true arts integration has the student learning through the process. I'm so in love with the potential of arts integration and its power in the classroom. It can appeal to so many different types of learners and can seamlessly link content to skills."

English educator Rachael Beucher said it was critical to have both arts and academic perspectives around the table. "The level of collaboration was higher and more valuable because we had experts from both sides of the curriculum working together to take existing projects and make them even more amazing by incorporating the arts standards. It also allowed for us as educators to think about the needs of our students and allow more ways for them to show us their learning through a different lens."

This experience helped to provide a framework for arts integration in year one of an arts-infused middle school model. This process is the foundation AIM hopes to use as a springboard to further intertwine the arts with academic content. This team of educators was challenged by the task of integrating arts into a personalized learning model but clearly sees the benefits for student learning.

"In order to incorporate the arts into a project, it is more difficult than one would think," Beucher reflected. "The art standards are equally challenging and rigorous, and it takes careful consideration as to how they can align to Common Core Standards and not just add to a task but enhance it. The benefits of infusing arts into a personalized environment are endless." ■

Jin-Soo Huh is the executive director of personalized learning at Distinctive Schools.

Downloadable Guide
Personalized Learning & Pandemic Recovery: 6 Big Considerations

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