


# BRIDGING THE GAP



STUDY REVEALS  
SUPPORTS  
TEACHERS NEED  
TO MOVE FROM  
UNDERSTANDING  
TO IMPLEMENTATION



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Inside Prodeo Academy's St. Paul, Minnesota, campus, students walk quietly across polished wooden floors in their navy-and-white uniforms. The majority of the school's 77 students are refugees, many of whom have emigrated from Thai refugee camps that shelter Karen and Kayah ethnic minorities from Myanmar.

Down the hall, a peek inside Kathleen Boland's mixed K-1 classroom reveals a learning environment that feels reassuringly recognizable, yet quietly revolutionary. As she animatedly taps out phonics exercises around a table with five students, at a nearby table a handful of children quietly work on phonics worksheets. On the bright carpet, another cluster of students complete self-paced activities.

Flexible seating in the form of colorful bucket chairs allow students choice and variety in their learning

environment. In an inviting reading nook called the Peace Corner, where students are allowed to take three short breaks per day, a child daydreams in a rocking chair.

While the scene in Boland's classroom appears almost magical, it's the fruition of careful research and hard work. Although individualized learning, also known as student-centered learning, isn't a blanket solution to every pedagogical problem, it means that teachers are equipped for the delicate balancing act of supporting some students as they forge ahead toward new challenges while helping others catch up on foundational concepts.

Boland collaborates with Principal Liz Ferguson and her fellow colleagues on the school's curriculum development and design. Each Prodeo teacher is equipped with a 105-minute daily period for prep, research, and grading.

There's also a weekly data analysis meeting with Ferguson and, every six weeks, a data day when educators assess, reflect, and rechart their classroom's course. This kind of explicit structural design is necessary, Ferguson says, to help educators make the leap from a more traditional instructional model.

When students talk about their experience at Prodeo, however, it's not data, technology, or structure that pop up in conversation — it's choice, the freedom of self-paced assignments, and joy. "Math is easier for me to understand because I can go at my own pace," one elementary student said. "In reading, I like that I get to pick my own books. It makes it so I really like reading" (Chandler, n.d.).

### **STUDENTS AT THE CENTER**

Individualized learning is about placing students at the center of their educational experience while meeting

them at their individual achievement levels and engaging them in the process of learning.

In 2016, the Bush Foundation launched its individualized learning strategy with the goal of supporting its region — Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota, and the 23 Native nations that share the same geography — to become the national leader in individualizing education to meet the needs and ambitions of all students.

At its core, the foundation believes individualized learning makes education more relevant for students in terms of who they are (cultural relevance), how they learn (instructional relevance), and what they aspire to do (career relevance).

These three dimensions of individualized learning represent a unique approach within the student-centered learning field — particularly cultural relevance. The three dimensions, which ideally should all be present in order to best engage and provide students meaningful learning experiences, comprise an approach that recognizes and meets the needs, interests, and agency of the whole learner. Together, they represent a transformative change from the traditional school model to one that makes the experience of education personal and relevant to every student.

To increase the number of schools engaging in individualized learning in the region, the Bush Foundation is pursuing a three-part strategy, called Inspire, Equip, and Connect.

The Inspire portion of the strategy is designed to encourage implementation of individualized learning by building awareness, understanding, and enthusiasm for the power and possibility of a more relevant education experience through cohort learning experiences and an annual regional convening.

Under the Equip part of the strategy, the foundation invests in building the capacity of those who want to implement more individualized learning practices in their schools

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through grants to intermediary organizations that work directly with schools.

Finally, with the Connect part of the strategy, the Bush Foundation brings together people who have already begun implementing individualized learning so that they can support and learn from one another.

While a good amount is known in education research about approaches to individualized learning (e.g. differentiated instruction, personalized learning plans), little is known about the scope and scale of efforts to individualize learning in the Bush Foundation's region of focus.

To support its learning and future investments, the Bush Foundation commissioned Social Policy Research Associates to conduct a regional scan in 2018 to learn about the current conditions, practices, and challenges to implementing individualized learning strategies within the region.

The scan involved telephone interviews with 41 school or district leaders, funders, and intermediary organizations; and a survey of 158 school leaders representing 303 schools across the region. This article draws considerably from that scan to highlight key practices and challenges facing educators as they seek to transform learning environments.

### **A FUNDAMENTAL SHIFT IS NECESSARY**

Overall, the baseline scan found

that most educators in the Bush Foundation's region shared the same belief about transforming their education systems: To individualize learning, there must be a fundamental shift in how educators conceptualize learning and the role of school in a child's life.

Central to this shift is the acknowledgement that the traditional, one-size-fits-all approach to teaching and learning is insufficient to prepare students for lifelong learning. This shift requires knowledge about what individualized learning looks like and how to implement practices.

The research from Social Policy Research Associates revealed that the level of understanding of individualized learning was very much on a continuum across the region. The majority of study participants were at least familiar with the more common terms used to describe student-centered approaches — such as personalized learning — and most were familiar with individualized learning.

However, deeper understanding of actual practices related to individualized learning was quite varied and often limited to specific districts, schools, or educators. Despite at least a basic familiarity with the concept of individualized learning, only about two-thirds of school leaders who responded to the survey reported implementing it in their schools, suggesting a widespread lack of knowledge about how individualized learning best occurs.

Moreover, while most of those participants pointed to specific practices in their contexts that enhance instructional relevance and career relevance, they were less likely to offer concrete ways in which their learning environments considered cultural relevance.

The Bush Foundation's region is quite diverse, with great variation across cultural communities and schools. Included in the portfolio of schools being served by Foundation partners are public school districts in urban and suburban areas, small rural schools,

tribal schools, independent schools, and charter schools.

Given this diversity, the majority of participants indicated a recognition of the need to connect learning to the communities from which their students come and have regular and equitable celebrations of their students' unique identities and cultural backgrounds. However, the way forward was not typically clear.

## BRIDGING THE GAP

In combination, the findings from the scan point to the fact that bridging the gap between understanding and implementation — particularly around cultural relevance — represents both a challenge and an opportunity to bring individualized learning to students from a wealth of cultural backgrounds and identities across the region.

Because individualized learning is a significant shift from the traditional way that educators engage with students and learning in the classroom, educators require in-depth support to make that change.

The schools and districts featured in the scan were using professional learning communities, districtwide professional development, outside organizations or consultants, conferences, and book studies to equip educators with the knowledge and tools they need to implement individualized learning.

Here are other needed supports for educators the scan revealed.

**More information about how to do individualized learning well.** Some ideas identified by respondents included enhanced professional development opportunities, such as through professional learning communities where teachers come together to share their experience and learn from each other.

**Opportunities to observe practice.** Educators reported that an effective strategy for enhancing teacher knowledge and understanding of individualized learning is through direct observation of individualized

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learning in action. These activities included teachers observing colleagues' classrooms, site visits to other schools or districts within the same state, and multiday trips to other states to learn from their schools.

**Community engagement and buy-in.** Participants emphasized the importance of involving the broader community in supporting educators' development. One field leader explained that designing culturally relevant lesson plans depends on "understanding the cultural community [of the school] and developing pedagogy based on that."

**Thoughtful assessments.** For educators to individualize instruction, they need access to real-time assessment data that provide a comprehensive picture of students' successes and challenges. Just as individualized learning represents a different conception of education, it also requires a different way of assessing student growth than what traditional school-based assessments currently offer.

**Reimagined roles for educators.** Through exposure to individualized learning in action and through trying on individualized learning practices in the classroom, educators are beginning to see a fundamental shift in their role. School leaders pointed out that educators are beginning to embody the role of the facilitator of learning, in which their primary role is acting as a guide for learners. As one school leader described, educators "are facilitators of learning, not the 'sage on the stage' anymore."

**Flexibility and autonomy.** Educators identified local autonomy

and flexibility as key ingredients for schools' ability to innovate and make individualized learning a reality. Schools that have successfully implemented individualized learning practices exercised their local autonomy to test out new ideas aligned with individualized learning principles. However, many school leaders still felt encumbered by state and federal requirements that are designed for a traditional education framework.

Looking ahead, the Bush Foundation is using the insights from the 2018 baseline scan to inform its individualized learning strategy and deepen the capacity of the region to deliver student-centered learning experiences.

In thinking about how to best equip the region in this way, the foundation sought partnerships with several school intermediary organizations that provide customized support to schools and educators. Sourced through an open competitive grant program, these intermediary organizations are working to build the capacity of about 75 schools in the region to implement individualized learning through activities such as school redesign and planning, school community engagement, leadership coaching, and staff professional development.

## REFERENCE

**Chandler, S. (n.d.).** One classroom, many paths. *bMagazine*. Available at [bmag.bushfoundation.org/one-classroom-many-paths](http://bmag.bushfoundation.org/one-classroom-many-paths).

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