

# MAKE THE MOST OF THE MOMENTUM



LET'S PREPARE EDUCATORS TO HARNESS PERSONALIZED LEARNING'S POTENTIAL

BY REBECCA E. WOLFE AND LILLIAN PACE

**O**n any given school day, the majority of students in the United States and many other countries experience the same kind of schooling as their parents — and even their parents' parents. And yet, today's students live in a world that looks vastly different. The voices demanding that we move our education system far beyond its 20th-century roots grow louder every year.

Educators, parents, employers, and advocates in all corners of the education world are calling out the ways in which our prevailing systems devalue educators' professionalism, sort and batch children according to their skin color and ZIP code, and turn the joy of learning into marching lockstep through tests and worksheets.

A promising antidote to this grim outlook has risen in the past 10 years in the form of personalized

learning approaches. At its most basic, personalized learning is “driven by good teaching and strong student supports centered on the needs of each student” (Ambrose, 2019). What's behind that statement is a vision of teaching and learning that goes far beyond traditional instruction and calls into question how we prepare educators to lead those changes.

The movement for personalized learning is grounded in three driving forces:

1. Changes in technology, our economy, and other social trends are altering what it means for learners to be ready for life beyond high school.
2. Insights from the learning sciences have busted the myth of the “average learner” and underscored the unique strengths, challenges, contexts, and needs of each learner.

3. We need to make far greater gains in closing opportunity gaps and ensuring that we meet the needs of all youth, especially our most vulnerable youth, and help them develop to their full potential.

The potential of personalized learning to meet learners' needs, close opportunity gaps, and prepare them to craft their own futures was a focus in KnowledgeWorks' *2006-16 Map of Future Forces Affecting Education* (KnowledgeWorks, 2006) and all of its subsequent forecasts on the future of learning (e.g. Prince, Swanson, King, & Saveri, 2018).

After more than 10 years of reflecting on the current state and emerging trends in teaching and learning, the team at KnowledgeWorks recognizes that personalized learning is gathering momentum, and that educators and those who support them



**What is new in today's personalized learning approaches is putting equity in the foreground of the system.**

need the knowledge and capacity to realize its benefits.

### **THE EDUCATOR'S ROLE**

There is no shortage of hype around personalized learning, including lack of clear definition and disparate ideas about what it should look like. At KnowledgeWorks, we use the term personalized learning to refer to educational systems and approaches that are rooted in the equitable belief that all children can learn, are student-centered, and involve whole-child supports.

In this definition, personalized learning is a systemic approach and not interchangeable with technology. Technology is additive and supportive of great teaching and learning. In this vision, as a result of having engaged in high-quality, relationship-based personalized learning experiences, every child will emerge from his or her education experience with self-confidence, independence, and solid preparation for whatever unique path awaits.

Many of the principles of personalized learning simply reflect

good teaching and learning practices. However, for a setting to be personalized, some of these practices — such as connections to meaningful work — take on greater import.

There have been several attempts in the past decade to better describe, codify, and support how the role of the educator shifts in a modern personalized learning approach. One of the earliest of these was the Teachers at Work research released as part of JFF's (formerly Jobs for the Future) Students at the Center initiative (Cervone & Cushman, 2012). Cervone and Cushman spent time in six early adopter schools pursuing student-centered approaches and captured eight core elements of personalized teaching:

1. Strong relationships with students;
2. Anytime, anywhere, and real-world learning;
3. Personalization and choice in curricular tasks;
4. Technology that is integral to teaching and learning;

5. Appropriate challenge levels for each learner;
6. Clear, timely assessment and support;
7. Supporting social and emotional growth; and
8. Fostering autonomy and lifelong learning.

Since then, many studies and reports have reinforced this list (e.g. Levitzky, Merin, Murphy, & Klemm, 2017; Jobs for the Future & CCSSO, 2015; Jenkins, Williams, Moyer, George, & Foster, 2016). Across this work, a key emerging insight is that teaching in personalized learning settings is distinguished by profound changes in relationships.

Relationships between student and teacher shift from teacher as holder of knowledge and student as vessel to be filled to students as active seekers of mastery facilitated by teachers as learning partners. Relationships among teaching peers move from isolated planning days complemented by lunchroom venting to frequent

# PERSONALIZED LEARNING IN ACTION: A view from 2 districts

BY VIRGEL HAMMONDS AND ROBIN KANAAN



**T**ransforming a learning community from a traditional system to a personalized environment that serves every learner isn't easy. It requires a strong vision for teaching and learning driving every decision, from how a district budgets to how teachers co-create classroom rules with their students. Aligning resources and activities to that vision is a necessity, as is gathering data to inform the work and gauge impact.

But most challenging is rethinking what teaching and learning can be. That happens through supporting teachers in taking risks, using learner-centered practices and building them up so that once they've seen the changes in their classrooms and their schools, no one can imagine going back.

If we approach the work with the belief that students should own their learning, it helps guide the work. To create systems that put students at the center of their learning, we must partner with education leaders in school districts across the country to transform traditional, time-based systems to personalized, competency-based systems.

One learning environment that demonstrates what learning can look like when students are kept at the focus of all work is in Batesburg-Leesville, South Carolina.

**LEXINGTON COUNTY  
SCHOOL DISTRICT 3**  
BATESBURG-LEESVILLE,  
SOUTH CAROLINA



Lexington County School District 3, near Columbia, South Carolina, began its district transformation toward personalized learning with a strong sense of community and a focus on student needs. The district's vision, "Preparing students for the future ... now," illustrates its commitment to serve students and families while pursuing personalized learning. Personalized learning is seen as the district's overarching strategy, and its vision is consistently articulated at each of the district's four buildings, driving the strategic planning process.

With an established vision and an aligned strategic plan in place, the learning community partnered with KnowledgeWorks to measure progress. In Batesburg-Leesville, this meant completing the KnowledgeWorks District Conditions Navigation Tool and site assessment, which combines an online survey of community stakeholders, classroom visits, and teacher, administrator, student, and community member focus groups to act as a formative assessment of the district's implementation of the *District*

*Conditions for Scale: A Practical Guide to Scaling Personalized Learning* — a set of conditions KnowledgeWorks believes must be present to scale personalized learning districtwide (Williams, Moyer, & Jenkins, 2014).

KnowledgeWorks used the data collected to create an opportunity analysis for the district, outlining areas of strength and opportunities for growth across 13 systemic areas related to implementing personalized learning. The analysis also detailed suggested priority action steps and provided baseline data to measure growth and communicate impact over time. Data also informed the professional development and support plan for the district.

"The opportunity analysis process was a great experience for our schools. Our staff thrives on feedback, so being able to have a different lens shared with us for our work on personalized learning was extremely valuable," said Angie Rye, the district's chief academic officer. "It has allowed our administrators to affirm practices, refocus on areas that are still in progress, but most importantly plan for our next steps with professional learning for both teachers and administrators."

Collecting data and developing data-driven priorities is only the first step. The next step is capacity building, which includes developing student-centered

collaboration characterized by deep attention to improving student learning and engagement.

Administrators spend less time evaluating and remediating staff and more time on building a culture of trusting relationships, setting conditions for risk-taking, and supporting teachers

to lead and learn. Educators' and students' relationships with curriculum and assessments focus on interest, passion, inquiry, connection, and authentic demonstrations of learning to meet high standards instead of rote regurgitation of facts and formulas.

At a more granular level, there

have been several attempts to define, codify, and provide indicators of standards and competencies of teaching in a personalized manner. *Educator Competencies for Personalized, Learner-Centered Teaching*, produced by the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and JFF's Students at the

classroom practices, creating strategies to increase social and emotional skills, building a competency-based learning continuum, and extending learning opportunities through community engagement and partnerships.

Educators need to know and understand how to do these things, but a top-down approach is not sustainable — districts must build the capacity of educators from within. Coaches and other instructional leaders need to develop not only the content knowledge to achieve the desired change but grow their ability to manage change and coach others in the necessary skills to personalize learning.

Lexington 3 educators and instructional leaders are getting this kind of personalized support by participating in professional learning hosted several times a year across the state by South Carolina Department of Education's Office of Personalized Learning.

District teams deepen their understanding of personalized learning: the why, the what, and the how, and develop strategies for scaling and spreading content in a systemic K-12 approach.

These sessions are part of the state department's larger strategy to scale personalized learning across the state, one of the cornerstones of Superintendent Molly Spearman's educational priorities to "create a system of instruction that will prepare every graduate for successful life after high school. The foundation for that instruction is effective classroom

teachers and principals who facilitate personalized learning for every student every day."

### MARYSVILLE EXEMPTED VILLAGE SCHOOL DISTRICT

MARYSVILLE, OHIO



Many of the tools and processes KnowledgeWorks employs in learning communities such as Batesburg-Leesville were prototyped and refined in Marysville Exempted Village School District in Marysville, Ohio.

Superintendent Diane Mankins started her district's path toward personalized learning so they could better serve all students well. "There was no vision set for the district," Mankins said. "There was this sense that we had good teachers, good kids, that everybody was working really hard, but our arrows were all pointing in different directions."

For Mankins, and for us, the first step was recognizing the importance of establishing a vision for teaching and learning and aligning behind that vision.

With Marysville as a collective thought partner, KnowledgeWorks created a professional development framework aligned to the *District Conditions for Scale: A Practical Guide to Scaling Personalized Learning*, as well as a refined version of the District Conditions Navigation Tool. Marysville coaches and administrators constructed a professional development curriculum for instructional leaders.

Building internal capacity in Marysville has enabled sustainability within the district in addition to building an evidence base from which other districts implementing personalized, competency-based learning can benefit. And, ultimately, the winners are the students benefitting from the work. According to Marysville Early College High School graduate Elijah Mejia, the experience within the district was "a foundation for a fantastic future."

We know that transforming traditional, time-based systems to personalized, competency-based systems can't be done without developing the capacity of communities and educators to imagine, build, and sustain the kinds of innovative learning environments that allow each student to thrive. That gives all students the foundation they need for their own fantastic futures.

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**Virgel Hammonds ([hammondsv@knowledgeworks.org](mailto:hammondsv@knowledgeworks.org)) is chief learning officer and Robin Kanaan ([kanaanr@knowledgeworks.org](mailto:kanaanr@knowledgeworks.org)) is director of teaching and learning at KnowledgeWorks.**

Center, is a comprehensive document that compiled research on high-quality teaching and learning sciences and cross-walked competencies from 12 existing educator frameworks spanning a continuum from traditional to fully personalized instruction.

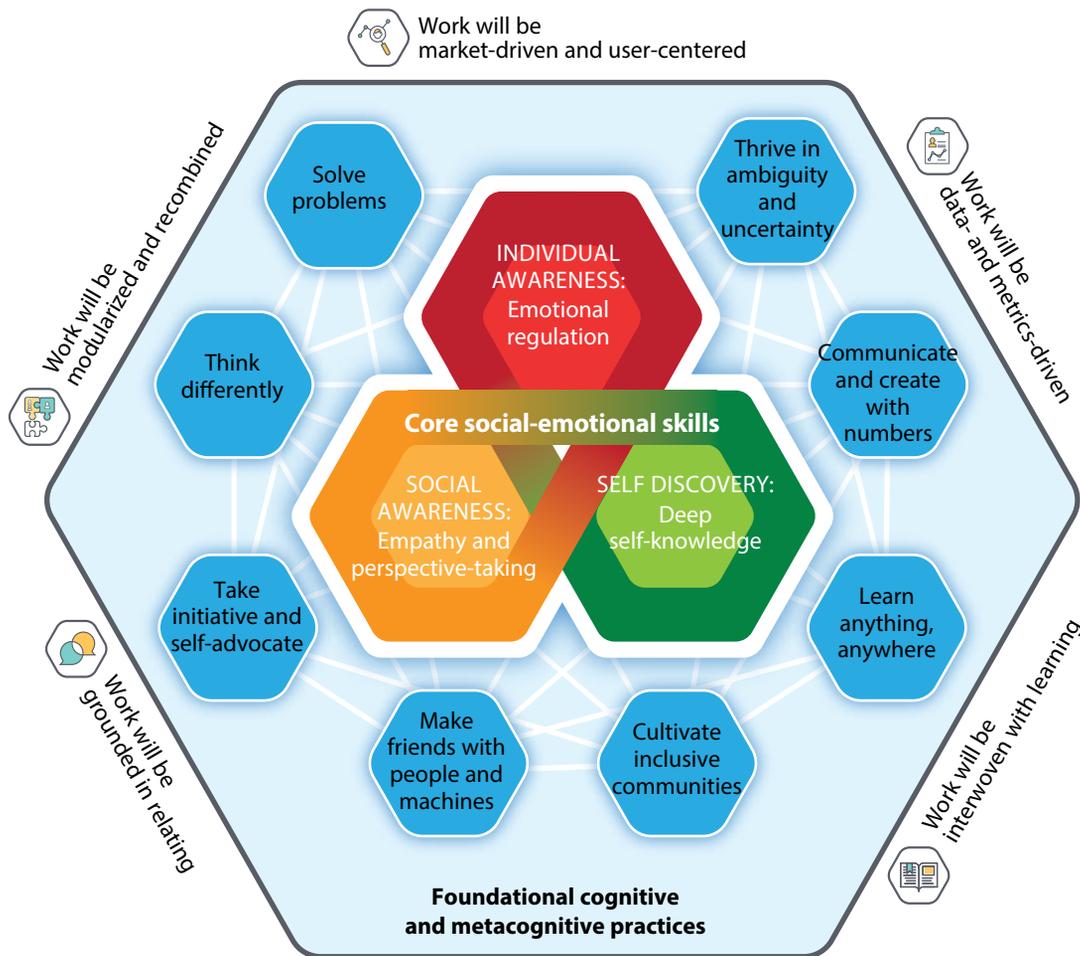
The two organizations then worked

with close to 100 state agency, district, school, and supporting educators and researchers to home in on what an educator's skills, knowledge, and dispositions would look like in personalized, student-centered settings (Jobs for the Future & CCSSO, 2015).

The document and accompanying

online tool identified four major domains of personalized educators: intrapersonal (need to process), interpersonal (need to relate), cognitive (need to know), and instructional (need to do). CCSSO is leading a coalition of nonprofits and associations to streamline and strengthen educator

**A NEW FOUNDATION FOR READINESS**



**PREPARING EVERY LEARNER FOR THE FUTURE**

Changes in technology, the economy, and other social trends are altering what it means for learners to be ready for life beyond high school. In preparation for this emerging world of work, as well as for the complexities of personal and civic life, learners will need to develop a strong foundation for readiness as illustrated at left.

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pipelines, including refreshing CCSSO’s InTASC Model Core Teaching Standards for effective practice (CCSSO, 2011) with a closer eye to culturally competent, student-centered competencies that align with the educator competencies.

No one claims shifting to personalizing learning is quick or easy. And most who advocate for personalized approaches for students recognize the irony of subjecting educators to nonengaging, traditional, one-offs as a way to learn to personalize for students. As a result, numerous organizations have developed means to help educators not only teach in personalized ways, but also experience personalized professional development.

Here are some examples: Fuse RI,

run by the Highlander Institute, is a teachers-helping-teachers fellowship that places active educators to coach other schools as they explore personalized methods. The Institute for Personalized Learning runs mixed modality professional learning workshops and coaching in Wisconsin. Next Generation Learning Challenges supports school networks using design thinking methods.

The LearnNext multiorganization initiative led by 2Revolutions provides open source courseware and learning progressions for educators. KnowledgeWorks partners at the district and state levels to help systems and schools move toward personalized, competency-based learning transformation.

**THE ROLE OF POLICY**

Growing interest in personalized learning has sparked significant policy change over the past decade, and those policies have implications for educator preparation and support. Federal, state, and local policymakers are championing reforms that range from pilot initiatives to statewide conversations about how to redesign the education system to support personalized learning for all students.

Thirty-five states have established an innovation or pilot program to empower local educators interested in personalized teaching and learning models (ExcelinEd & Foresight Law+Policy, 2019), and 39 states have leveraged new flexibility granted by the federal Every Student Succeeds

Act (ESSA) to embed personalized learning policies in their state plans (KnowledgeWorks, 2018).

These policy changes will require a new approach to instruction that empowers educators to meet all students' needs and design rigorous and innovative learning pathways that align to students' interests and career aspirations.

The U.S. has yet to see a state fully align its policy system to support a statewide shift that includes building educator capacity for personalized learning, but a handful of states are already leading this charge. For example, in 2019, South Carolina's Office of Personalized Learning held its first statewide professional development conference, North Dakota kicked off quarterly convenings with district design teams focused on personalized, competency-based education, and Idaho launched the Idaho Mastery Education Network with a dedicated appropriation of \$1.4 million.

As the movement grows, states will need to reexamine policies that support educators and leaders to intentionally align preservice, credentialing, professional learning, and evaluation systems to ensure educators have the skills to succeed in personalized learning environments. Equally important, states should ensure that educators benefit from the same level of personalization as their students.

Following the lead of the organizations and efforts mentioned above, states need to ensure educators and leaders have the resources and flexibility to master their own competencies and progress to deeper levels of expertise throughout their career.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Pulling these practice shifts and supports and policy trends together, the following are important implications for professional learning and leading:

1. Professional learning for adults should mirror the principles

of personalization that we are espousing for our students.

2. Educators should leverage technology to maximize impact, not to replace strong teaching and learning.
3. Higher education and policy need to support educators to keep pace with changes in learning approaches.
4. We should look through a research lens to determine if personalized learning is achieving its goals. If not, why not? Is it the instructional design or its implementation?
5. Equity must drive the work.

Personalized learning approaches are inherently designed to ensure all students get what they need, when they need it, to reach their highest potential. But good intentions aren't enough. Every decision in schools, from assessment to discipline and everything in between, needs to be viewed through the lens of, "Will this enhance equity and close opportunity gaps?" Administrators, teachers, and students need to support each other in making that question a regular and frequent occurrence.

The concept that learners should be at the center of teaching is not new. What is new in today's personalized learning approaches is putting equity in the foreground of the system. All teachers and students should be partners in the transformation of learning, and supporting educators to make that shift is a responsibility we all share.

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**Rebecca E. Wolfe (wolfer@knowledgeworks.org) is vice president for impact and improvement and Lillian Pace (pacel@knowledgeworks.org) is vice president of policy and advocacy at KnowledgeWorks. ■**