

Want to personalize learning  
for students?

# EXPERIENCE IT YOURSELF FIRST

BY AMY GEURKINK-COATS

**P**ersonalized learning for students is gaining steam across the country and pushing on traditional instructional practices. But many teachers have never experienced personalized learning themselves, making it challenging to implement it for students (Sawchuck, 2015). How do we develop professional learning for educators to support the success of these new efforts and ensure learning for all?

As personalization experts Tom Vander Ark and Karen Cator (2015) said, “If we want more students to experience powerful learning, we need to create development pathways that allow school and district leaders to benefit from the same blended, competency-based, and deeper learning



experiences that they seek to create for students.”

Parkway School District in west St. Louis County, Missouri, sought to develop a professional learning process that follows this advice and puts educators in charge of their learning. Just as effective teachers differentiate lessons based on student background knowledge, missing skills, and interest levels, we aimed to personalize professional learning.

## GETTING STARTED

In 2017, our annual educator needs assessment survey data showed a desire to include a personalized professional learning option in addition to the workshop-based professional learning structure most often used across the district. Educators wanted a flexible personalized professional learning model that ensured all educators could participate in meaningful, applicable professional learning. Administrators wanted a professional learning model that ensured application of new learning to the classroom.

The district professional development committee, a representative group of educators from all levels and areas, identified four critical components that would guide the development of a new, personalized professional learning option:

1. Educators should have the opportunity to select topics to meet current needs for students, content, or pedagogy.
2. Educators should be offered

## PERSONALIZED PROFESSIONAL LEARNING HANDBOOK

View or download the Parkway Schools professional learning handbook at [bit.ly/2XX7nv2](https://bit.ly/2XX7nv2).

- incentives to participate.
3. Flexibility in the timeline and mode of learning (online/ in person, individual/group) should be a priority.
4. Transfer of professional learning to instructional practice should be at the core of the process.

Over 18 months, our approach to achieving these four components evolved. Just as we expect our teachers to do, we learned from each experience, reflected, and transferred the learning into changed practices so that teachers and students could improve.

## FIRST ITERATION

We first looked to online microcredential modules. To complete a microcredential, the educator signed onto one of a variety of online providers, selected the topic to study from a list of offerings, completed the learning modules (typically reading articles or watching videos), created the required evidence, and submitted it to the provider. The scorer awarded the microcredential or provided feedback on what improvements were needed.

In our district, the educator submitted proof of the awarded microcredential to the district talent development coordinator. We incentivized the process by offering compensation, typically a \$75 stipend per completed microcredential.

The online nature of the system met the critical component of flexibility in timeline and increased the choice in topics available for educators to select. However, we faced several big challenges:

1. The list of offerings was not exhaustive, and several educators were interested in learning about topics not offered.
2. Because the providers were third-party vendors, district staff had no say in the requirements to earn the microcredential, and educators became frustrated by the wide variety of expectations from one microcredential to another.
3. Our criterion about transfer of the learning to practice was not at the core of the process, and we had no way to add it to the process of achieving the microcredential.

## SECOND ITERATION

An important shift in mindset occurred when we decided to stop looking for or providing content and focus on incentivizing *transfer* to practice. We had been struggling to meet the criterion of professional

TIER 3: <b>EVIDENCE OF IMPACT</b> SCORING GUIDE		
Requirement	Not yet on track	On track
Successful completion of Tier 1 and Tier 2 requirements.	Tiers 1 and 2 are not yet successfully completed. Return to Tiers 1 and 2, complete, and resubmit.	Successful completion of Tier 1 and Tier 2 requirements.
Submit data demonstrating progress toward goal (positive or negative). <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May be any type of data: formative, summative, survey, perceptual, checklist, etc.</li> </ul>	Data <b>are not</b> submitted.	Data <b>are</b> submitted.
Submit 250- to 350-word document or one- to two-minute video reflection: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Explaining the data submitted.</li> <li>2. Identifying the learning goal(s) measured.</li> <li>3. Reflecting on results (positive or negative) toward learning goal.</li> </ol>	Minimum requirement in length <b>is not met</b> .	Minimum requirement in length <b>is met</b> .
	1. Explanation of the data is somewhat muddled or unclear.	1. Explanation of data is articulate and specific.
	2. Learning goal(s) measured is/ are not identified.	2. Learning goal(s) measured is/ are identified.
	3. Does not reflect on results.	3. Reflection clearly considers the data results.

learning that applies to educators’ current needs for students, content, or pedagogy because we were unable to offer, or find a vendor that could provide, learning on the nearly infinite number of topics that educators wanted and needed. We also were not allowing educators to take ownership of their learning opportunities.

To earn a stipend in the second iteration, educators submitted an electronic request for approval to the coordinator of talent development identifying the learning topic, at least two sources of new learning from relevant or research-based resources, and an implementation plan.

For example, an educator interested in flexible seating might identify a book on flexible seating and a webinar on student-centered classroom redesign as two resources of new learning.

The plan for implementation might include surveying students multiple times to gain ideas for flexible learning areas and determine success of implemented flexible seating on student learning.

Another educator interested in implementing engagement strategies might list a workshop on high

engagement structures and an article from Learning Forward’s *Tools for Learning Schools* newsletter on the connection between engagement and achievement. The plan for implementation might include lesson plans redesigned to include engagement structures.

To demonstrate transfer, educators submitted artifacts — typically photos, lesson plans, short videos, or student work — to the coordinator of talent development with a short reflection. For the first time, any educator, teaching any subject pre-K-12, could participate in the learning they most needed to meet the specific, immediate needs of students. And because the educator was designing the learning, it could be completed online or offline, individually or with a group. Moreover, evidence of application was at the core.

The challenge proved to be the completion rate. While the compensation amount — \$300 — was considerable, the requirement to demonstrate evidence of learning was new to most educators and required a significant increase in the amount of work compared to our previous system of credit for attendance only.

### THIRD ITERATION

To address this completion challenge, we restructured the process and divided requirements and compensation into four tiers. Educators could determine which level of learning they were interested in pursuing and were awarded compensation after successful completion of each tier, as follows.

#### Tier 1: Evidence of learning.

Educators summarize and make meaning of new learning from two research-based professional learning resources. One resource may be a one-time event, such as a professional learning session at a conference or nonprofit organization or a visit to an industry site, museum, etc., but the other must be a researched-based professional resource such as a published text, article, or professional learning webinar or course. They submit evidence of learning via a 500- to 600-word written reflection or a two- to three-minute video. Successful completion results in \$75.

#### Tier 2: Evidence of

**implementation.** Evidence of application is what makes this process more potent than traditional

TIER 4: <b>EVIDENCE OF SHARING</b> SCORING GUIDE		
Requirement	Not yet on track	On track
Successful completion of Tier 1, Tier 2, and Tier 3 requirements.	Tiers 1, 2, and 3 are not yet successfully completed. Return to Tiers 1, 2, and 3, complete, and resubmit.	Successful completion of Tiers 1, 2, and 3.
Submit detailed lesson plan or overview of practice.	Detailed lesson plan/overview <b>does not</b> include enough explanation of lesson/project/ learning for others to implement.	Detailed lesson plan/overview <b>includes</b> enough explanation of lesson/project/learning for others to implement.
Submit 250- to 350-word document or one- to two-minute video reflection (can be embedded with above): 1. Explaining lessons learned. 2. Suggesting revisions if lesson/project/ action were to be implemented again.	Minimum requirement in length <b>is not</b> met.	Minimum requirement in length <b>is</b> met.
	1. Lessons learned were missing or superficial. 2. Suggested revisions if implemented again were missing or superficial.	1. Lessons learned were meaningful and specific. 2. Suggested revisions if implemented again were meaningful and specific.
Links to any resources required for others to implement.	<b>Does not</b> include links to any resources required for others to implement.	<b>Includes</b> links to any resources required for others to implement.

professional learning — and what really matters for students. The educator submits artifacts demonstrating implementation of the new learning in the form of pictures, work samples, anchor charts, whole- or small-group video, lesson plan, etc., along with a 250- to 350-word reflection or one- to two-minute video identifying the desired outcome of learning and explaining the artifact(s) submitted. The educator must define the connection to curriculum or professional best practices. Completion of Tier 1 and Tier 2 together results in \$150 compensation.

**Tier 3: Evidence of impact.** Educators measure the impact of their changes in practice. Not every change yields positive results, and even beneficial changes in practice may not produce significant positive results on the first attempt, but including measurement and data in the professional learning model helps us measure whether we are spending time on practices that impact student learning. For compensation at this tier, it does not matter if the results

were positive or negative. Payment is awarded for implementing a measurement tool and reflecting on the results via a one- to two-minute video or a 250- to 350-word reflection. Completion of Tiers 1-3 earns \$225.

**Tier 4: Evidence of sharing with others.** Too often, an educator implements a change in practice, but it goes unnoticed and uncelebrated by those right down the hall. At Tier 4, educators share their practice in a way that other educators can follow and implement in their own settings. Through a 250- to 350-word reflection or one- to two-minute video, educators summarize how they shared strategies and lessons learned with colleagues and describe next steps in their practice. Completion of all four tiers results in an educator earning \$300.

**FINAL TWEAKS**

The only core component remaining to address was allowing for choice and flexibility in the timeline for completion. Meeting this goal was the simplest, and most apparent, tweak of the entire process: removing the deadlines for

submission. By shifting from end-of-semester deadlines to open submission, we addressed all critical components.

The final step of the transformation process was communicating to educators about the new approach. Because educators were not used to having the ability to lead their own development, they needed a handbook to move them through the process step by step. We created a personalized professional learning handbook to outline the four steps in the process and scoring guides for each of the four tiers. (See the guide for Tier 3 on p. 52 and for Tier 4 above.)

**RESULTS**

Since fall 2018, over 200 educators in the district have participated in a personalized professional learning experience. In post-survey feedback, educators are overwhelmingly positive about the experiences with comments like these:

“This is awesome. ... Dollar for dollar, this is probably the best way to improve teaching. A lot of the larger

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between the collective and the individual. Key to the balance is remembering that what makes learning environments the most personal is a sense of belonging. The human connection that comes from belonging feeds us on an instinctual level, providing the energy source for a sustainable model for professional learning.

Considering personalized professional learning in three dimensions allows us to strike this balance and find sustainability. It allows us to break down the barriers between the desires of the individual and the needs of the collective, granting them the opportunity to exist in the same space and support one another.

I often compare the personalized classroom to an ecosystem to illustrate the fact that it is not the individuals themselves that make learning inherently personal and meaningful, it's the connections that do so. An ecosystem cannot survive in an unhealthy environment. Without a healthy school culture and environment that promotes pedagogical innovation, the three dimensions described here would be built on a faulty foundation, and personalized professional learning would not thrive.

A key element of a healthy climate is teachers feeling psychologically safe taking risks and making mistakes.

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Leaders can encourage this by showing teachers that an indicator of success is their willingness to take calculated risks and make mistakes in pursuit of curiosity and learning.

By creating such an environment and building on it with the three dimensions of personalized learning, we can transform the way professional learning occurs in schools. Doing so will create teachers who chart their own pedagogical paths and allow schools and systems to become hubs of innovation where all educators and students thrive.

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PDs are nice, but leave little time to work on implementation. I like that implementation is the direct goal of this."

"I am still using the new learning I gained every day in my classes."

The most promising data is the almost universal willingness among participants to pursue more personalized professional learning. Our next goal is to develop a database to share the personalized professional learning submissions among colleagues

to highlight and recognize the learning implemented.

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