

CORE FUNCTION	EFFECTIVE	INDICATOR
Dimension B	Leadership Capacity	The district proactively supports and emphasizes student-centered instruction by seeking solutions to remove barriers, including those related to policies, practices, and traditions. (6832)

Explanation: Student-centered learning offers the potential to help students engage in deeper learning to acquire the competencies needed for 21st century success. Districts can foster this process by proactively identifying and seeking solutions to barriers that will likely arise due to conflicts with existing policies, practices, and traditions. Changes to policies involving accountability systems, grade progressions, staffing configurations, and seat time requirements will likely need to be considered, and state waivers may in some cases be necessary. Districts may wish to consider how they may change their practices and policies to better support student-centered learning and innovation across all schools in the district, rather than granting waivers individually to schools as requested. Districts will need to thoroughly explain the rationale for changes to long-standing practices and traditions to all education stakeholders.

Questions: *What process has the district used to identify potential barriers related to policies, practices and traditions that must be addressed for personalized learning to be implemented with fidelity? What changes will be needed to teacher/student accountability systems, grade progressions/seat time requirements, staffing configurations, and communication with postsecondary institutions regarding student competencies? What if any waivers are necessary from the state? How can the district work with the state to ensure PL implementation with fidelity in its schools? What is the district doing to transform its policies, structures, and support to support student-centered learning across all schools? How does the district communicate the need for changes to long-standing education traditions to all education stakeholders?*

In order to expand competencies to better prepare students for college and/or career, many researchers and educators are calling for *student-centered* instructional approaches that individualize instruction to meet each student's strengths and challenges, while continuing to hold high expectations for all learners (Friedlaender et al., 2014; Le, Wolfe, & Steinberg, 2014). Student-centered approaches are based on evidence from the cognitive and learning sciences and youth development that demonstrates positive learning outcomes for students when 1) education is personalized to their needs; 2) they advance upon mastery of clear learning targets; 3) they are provided with a range of both in- and out-of-school learning experiences; and 4) they can exert voice, choice, and agency into learning experiences (Hinton, Fischer, & Glennon, 2012; Jobs for the Future, 2013; Le et al., 2014; Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012). Personalized Learning (PL) is based on enhancing the degree to which K-12 education is student-centered to ensure positive and equitable learning outcomes for all students. North Carolina's conception of student-centered learning rests on four pillars of PL: learner profiles, individualized learning paths, competency-based progression, and flexible learning environments (see Glowa & Goodell, 2016). Successful implementation of these pillars, in some cases, requires the need for changes to long-standing policies, practices, and traditions, which otherwise can serve as barriers to student-centered learning practices.

What Barriers Do Districts Face When Implementing Student-Centered, Personalized Learning?

Substantive changes to structures, designs, and instructional practices are necessary as schools shift to incorporate student-centered instructional models such as personalized learning. For example, blended learning models, which use a combination of face-to-face and online learning to increase student personalization, likely will require teachers to take on different roles (e.g., coach or tutor rather than lecturer), use different instructional tools (e.g., online versus tradi-



tional curricula), and operate within restructured settings (e.g., “open” classrooms or the elimination of class periods) (Bingham, 2016; Bingham, Pane, Steiner, & Hamilton, 2018; Staker & Horn, 2012). These changes can represent barriers to effective implementation if not anticipated and planned for. Additional barriers identified relate to technological constraints such as access, hardware/software issues, and alignment between Learning Management Systems and multiple content providers (Powell et al., 2015). Tensions between digital methods and curricula used and state-adopted standards, and between state/district mandates and competency- or mastery-based learning progressions can present large obstacles in the shift to student-centered, personalized approaches (Pane, Steiner, Baird, Hamilton, & Pane, 2017; Tanenbaum, Le Floch, & Boyle, 2013). Some studies have shown that indeed districts attempting to implement PL strategies have faced these difficulties (Bingham et al., 2018; Gross & DeArmond, 2018; Pane, 2018).

In a study of PL implementation at a Gates Foundation Next Generation Learning Challenge Breakthrough Schools initiative, Gross and DeArmond (2018) found that PL practices rarely extended beyond a small number of pilot programs in most schools. One identified reason was that most district offices granted school waivers and exceptions rather than transforming structures, policies, and supports to facilitate sustainability and truly innovative practices in these schools (see also Phillips & Lockett, 2017). Conflicts arose between grade-based assessments and PLs’ emphasis on students setting their own learning pace, as described by one district leader:

What [teachers] have done is to allow students to progress based on their ability within a unit, but because testing is at a specific time, especially in courses like algebra, they don’t want them getting so far ahead. So we are working within the confines that are established by the state. (Gross & DeArmond, 2018, p. 15)

Additional barriers included misalignment between teacher evaluation systems and PL practices, and traditional accountability systems that do not reward risk-taking and innovation (Gross & DeArmond, 2018). This misalignment between how PL models measure success (mastery-based grading) and how external stakeholders understand and assess progress (e.g., standardized test scores or annual tests) has been shown in other research to impede PL implementation (Bingham et al., 2018). Bingham and colleagues further found that schools attempting to use PL strategies faced problems with communicating new student success measures to colleges and universities, as well as to students and their parents.

How Can Districts Remove or Minimize Barriers to PL Implementation?

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) gives states the flexibility to design student-centered, personalized learning systems; this flexibility can be used by districts implementing PL to remove or minimize many of the implementation barriers identified (KnowledgeWorks, n.d.). Districts and schools must proactively and thoroughly review current policies and practices to identify those which may create barriers to PL and consider and test out changes that can foster PL implementation. District policies and practices to enable the frequent and extensive use of digital tools must be in place *prior* to PL implementation (e.g., adequate bandwidth established), as should methods to ensure student data privacy/confidentiality, and student safety without unwarranted restrictions on exploration of online environments (Bingham et al., 2018; Chuong & Mead, 2014; USDE, n.d.). Changes to class size, seat time requirements, and staffing configurations may be needed to implement PL, and districts will need to understand what flexibility they have from the state and seek waivers if necessary (see Chuong & Mead, 2014 for a thorough discussion). For example:

The requirement a certified teacher supervise students for the entire school day also poses a barrier to personalized learning models. Paraprofessionals or other noncertified personnel may be able to adequately supervise students during the part of the day when they are receiving technology-enabled education, as many models call for. Allowing schools that use personalized learning models to apply for waivers of this requirement may encourage them to use staff resources creatively to achieve cost savings or optimize use of available resources. (Chuong & Mead, 2014, p. 33)

The rationale for these changes and how they can benefit students should be carefully explained to parents and all education stakeholders to avoid misunderstandings and potential resistance (Chuong & Mead, 2014). Districts can also study how best to communicate innovative grading practices and other measures of success to postsecondary institutions; a district liaison could facilitate this process (Bingham et al., 2018).



Once all relevant policies and practices have been carefully reviewed and changes made as necessary, districts will want to decide how they will guide and support schools as they implement PL. Gross and DeArmond (2018) stress the need for districts to provide maximum flexibility and supports for schools implementing PL, and recommend the following practices for district leaders:

- Be explicit with PL schools about what flexibilities already are in place and identify tensions they are experiencing or are likely to experience. Create feedback loops between schools and the various district departments to find ways to expand flexibility in policy and practice.
- Make sure all district office departments are engaged towards the goal of PL for students. Innovation should be a district priority rather than a special project, and leaders should help departments understand their role and how their office practices can be shifted to support PL.
- Provide more flexibility to principals and their supervisors to consider broader outcomes in evaluation. Some PL models involve students working with multiple teachers, so attributing learning gains to a single teacher may not be feasible (Chuong & Mead, 2014). District leaders can identify non-negotiable components of teacher/principal evaluation systems, and how systems can be tweaked and broadened to assess and encourage innovation.
- Districts that are not close to having the capacity to offer flexibilities to all schools should consider creating dedicated innovation zones that include just a subset of schools receiving flexibilities as a starting point (SRI International, 2018). Schools can also experiment with innovative approaches during the summer or after school as a way to mitigate the risks of failure. Districts may wish to assess their schools' readiness for PL and begin identifying teacher leaders and places where impact is likely to be quick and visible (Pape & Vander Ark, n.d.).

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Resources

For a district/state exercise to generate discussion about the policies, procedures, and practices needed to make a shift to personalized learning see: <https://all4ed.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/UTool-PersonalizedLearningPolicyProcedure-Practice.pdf>