

CORE FUNCTION	EFFECTIVE	INDICATOR
Dimension C	Professional Capacity	The LEA designates a central office contact person that supports a cohesive and consistent implementation of the district's vision for improvement. (6834)

**Explanation:** Student-centered learning offers the potential to help students engage in deeper learning to acquire the competencies needed for 21<sup>st</sup> century success. Districts will have to consider how they will support student-centered learning and innovation across all schools in the district, and a central office contact person can lead this charge. This person can coordinate the monitoring of strategy implementation in schools and identify and disseminate innovative and effective practices district-wide. The central office contact can also create feedback loops between districts and schools so that the appropriate supports are in place for implementation to fidelity and lead the process of ensuring that the district's offices are focused on supporting the implementation of student-centered learning. The district may also wish to consider additional leadership structures that can further support implementation of innovative practices.

**Questions:** *Has the district designated a central office contact to lead the implementation of personalized learning in schools? If so, what are this person's defined roles and responsibilities? What are the expectations for the frequency and nature of contacts with each school? How can the contact person lead the monitoring of implementation of innovative improvement practices in each school? Have feedback loops been created between the district and its schools? Has the district (and contact person) reviewed policies and practices to minimize the barriers to implementation of PL? How are best practices being aggregated and disseminated to schools? In addition to a contact person, what if any other leadership structures must the district create to support PL implementation?*

*Student-centered* instructional approaches individualize instruction to meet each student's strengths and challenges, while continuing to hold high expectations for all learners and preparing them with 21<sup>st</sup> century competencies (Friedlaender et al., 2014; Le, Wolfe, & Steinberg, 2014). 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. District supports are crucial for schools as they attempt to implement innovative instructional practices that address the district's vision for personalized learning for students; this support can be provided in part by designating a central office contact person who guides schools in this endeavor.

### ***How Can a Central Office Contact Support School Improvement?***

A close relationship with district personnel can foster school improvement. Partnering each low-performing school with a central office staff member (or members) who is responsible for monitoring the school and responding to its needs within the improvement process redefines the role of central office from one of oversight to support (Cawelti & Protheroe, 2007; Knudson, Shambaugh, & O'Day, 2011). Having a skilled district leader or liaison who can facilitate schools' navigation of district policies and procedures, monitor and assess implementation fidelity of initiatives, and provide constructive feedback to school leaders and staff, contributed to positive gains in low-achieving schools in Massachusetts



(Lane, Unger, & Rhim, 2013). Lane, Unger, & Souvanna (2014) describe how these district systems to support turnaround have evolved:

Specifically, districts have reorganized and re-tasked central office staff to work directly with schools, developing systems that allow for monthly and sometimes weekly monitoring of turnaround efforts. An important distinction is that the “monitoring” provided by district leaders is predicated on having a solid relationship with the school principal, to the extent that district/school interactions are supportive and intended to promote professional improvement and growth, rather than focusing solely on monitoring the implementation of a written plan. (p. ii)

This increased capacity allows districts to provide customized, targeted, and real-time response to support schools (Knudson et al., 2011; The Center on School Turnaround, 2017).

Districts must also establish expectations for frequency of contact and communication with school decision-makers; communication is key to ensuring that everyone is cognizant of school goals, roles, and expectations so that they can be accountable for progress (Cawelti & Protheroe, 2007). Regularly scheduled meetings (minimum of twice a month) to discuss progress communicates the urgency for change; these meetings may be between the school’s leadership team and district liaison, or the liaison and principal (Redding, 2007). More frequent contact may be desirable; in schools that were able to exit improvement status in Massachusetts, district staff worked weekly with schools to monitor, support implementation, and facilitate communication (Lane et al., 2014).

These approaches can be adjusted as needed towards a focus on successfully supporting PL implementation in improving schools.

### ***How Can a Central Office Contact Support Implementation of 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 traditional 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). Additional barriers include 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.

The role of central office staff must shift to address these (and other) issues as schools undertake innovative improvement approaches, and increased support and consultation for these initiatives will likely be needed. Districts and schools implementing PL must proactively and thoroughly review current policies and practices to identify those which may create implementation barriers and consider and test out changes that can foster PL implementation. 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.).

A designated central office contact can provide leadership and support to address many of these areas. This person can coordinate the process of ensuring that all district office departments are focused on the district's vision for student-centered learning, adjusting practices as necessary. The designated contact person can also play a key role in knowledge management, as described by Gross & DeArmond (2018):

With different degrees of formality, the districts and partners in our study aggregated lessons from early innovators and shared them with other schools. At the beginning of the initiatives, it was common for a single person—typically the district personalized learning champion or an external partner—to do this work. As the initiatives unfolded, however, district personalized learning directors and their partners started to codify elements of personalization by developing and disseminating observation and evaluation rubrics, as well as training and credentialing tools. (p. 26)

Duggan (2018) suggests that districts first define the work that needs to be done before establishing leadership structures. Districts may wish to create teams to build internal capacity and support implementation of personalized learning and consider how to establish a layered support structure to develop distributed leadership and a feedback loop between district and school teams. Duggan (2018) describes an example:

We think that most districts need to establish a core Project Team (typically 1-3 people) to drive the work forward day-to-day; a heterogeneous District Council (typically 10-12 people) to set strategy, provide diverse perspectives, and serve as a core decision-making body; and a School Personalized Learning (PL) Leadership Team (typically 4-6 people) at each school to distribute leadership across principals, coaches, and teachers, and lead the design and implementation of blended- and personalized-learning models.

## REFERENCE AND RESOURCES

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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>