

CORE FUNCTION	EFFECTIVE	INDICATOR
Dimension D	Planning and Operational Effectiveness	The district supports schools working toward creating the conditions for personalized learning. (6836)

Explanation: While student-centered instruction offers the potential to help students engage in deeper learning to acquire the competencies needed for 21st century success, schools will need district supports as they create the conditions to foster this learning. The conditions that must be addressed for personalized learning to flourish include areas such as curriculum, instruction, assessment, learning environments, student supports, school leadership, technology policies/infrastructure, comprehensive data systems, and community and family partnerships. Districts will want to carefully and proactively review policies, procedures, and practices to minimize barriers to implementation and maximize the support provided to PL schools as they create conditions for student-centered learning.

Questions: *Has the district created and communicated a clear vision of teaching and learning? Are multiple pathways developed to allow students to master the designated standards in the curriculum? What evidence is available to suggest that instruction is shifting from teacher- to student-centered practices? Have assessment processes been carefully reviewed to ensure that learning progress is assessed often, and are students given multiple and varied options to demonstrate their learning? Does the district have evidence that schools are incorporating flexible and collaborative learning environments? Are students receiving metacognitive supports during their learning, particularly when they are one-on-one with technology? What steps is the district taking to assess PL through a cycle of continuous improvement? How is the district providing professional learning supports to educators and enabling anytime, anywhere learning and collaboration? Does each PL school in the district have an educational leader capable of leading innovative instructional practice? Has the district developed technology infrastructure and data use policies to ensure equitable access and privacy for students and their families? How does the district develop community partnerships to support the conditions for PL implementation? What is the district doing to minimize barriers and transform its policies, structures, and practices to support student-centered learning across all schools?*

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). Schools need to create the appropriate conditions for PL implementation, and it is the district's responsibility to ensure that supports are provided to foster implementation to fidelity.



What Conditions Are Needed for Personalized Learning Implementation?

Schools working toward creating the conditions for PL will need supportive districts at every phase of implementation to allow PL to flourish (Alliance for Excellent Education, n.d.). One key component is the district's vision for teaching and learning. This vision should be collaboratively developed, with a focus on equity and meeting the needs of each individual learner and should be communicated throughout the district (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2018; Basham, Hall, Carter, & Stahl, 2016; Williams, Moyer, & Jenkins, 2014). This learner-centric vision should further "provide personal and authentic learning experiences for all students while implementing the needed policies and procedures to realize that vision" (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2018). Williams et al. (2014) synthesized research and conducted district leader interviews to determine their ideas on the conditions for scale of PL. These areas are discussed below, along with additional relevant research-based recommendations.

Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment: All three must be aligned to the district's vision for teaching and learning, and frequently reviewed to ensure continued alignment. Curriculum standards and learning targets should be made clear to all students; however, students will take multiple and varied pathways to meet standards. These multiple pathways should be informed by real-time data on student performance and engagement, and students' interests and goals (with appropriate guidance). Instruction must shift from a primarily teacher-led to student-led model that incorporates differentiated instruction, should be rigorous and relevant to students' needs and interests, and allow for progression based on mastery. Comprehensive assessment systems include formative, interim, and summative assessments, and data should be used to continually monitor progress and adjust learning activities accordingly. Students should have multiple chances to show their mastery on summative assessments, and multiple and varied means of demonstrating their learning through portfolios, capstone projects, performance-based assessments, etc. (Basham et al., 2016).

Learning Environments: Learning environments are the point of intersection of curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Districts should foster learning environments both inside and outside of schools, that support high expectations for all students while creating a culture of trust, support, equity and inclusiveness. Flexible and collaborative learning environments can account for student voice and choice (Basham et al., 2016), as they become more student-centered and student-led. PL learning environments provide opportunities for students to exercise personal responsibility and agency for their own learning, and "creat[e] a culture in which students are supported in developing the academic mind-sets, learning strategies, and self-regulated learning behaviors that are necessary for empowerment" (SRI International, 2018, p. 22). Instruction in self-regulated learning strategies (e.g., planning, goal-setting, monitoring, and self-reflection) will be essential in PL environments, as students interact with technology while they learn independently to some degree (Basham et al., 2016; McLoughlin & Lee, 2010; SRI International, 2018). PL learning environments in schools will be more likely to flourish with a district strategy of continuous improvement, which should be embedded in the culture of the district and driven by student achievement and other success indicators. District leaders will want to "continuously plan, implement, measure, reflect, and refine to sustain high-quality teaching and learning" (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2018).

Student Supports: Students should get the supports and interventions they need to be successful when they need them, not after completing a summative assessment at the end of the year. Student performance often varies across subjects, and personalized supports through the use of personalized learning plans allow educators to provide targeted instruction to students where they are. When students must demonstrate mastery before progressing to new material, some will need considerably more time than others, and additional time and supports must be incorporated to ensure equitable access and outcomes. Instructional supports should be informed by instant feedback based on frequent formative assessments, and, to the extent possible, be embedded in learning. Schools should be given the flexibility to use the time in the school day/year as they see fit in order to provide these supports.

Professional Development: Each district should provide job-embedded professional development that aligns with the district's vision for teaching and learning and to student needs. The professional development program should foster a culture of collaboration and continuous improvement while leveraging technology to create a customized, just-in-time experience for educators and allow for anytime, anywhere professional learning. Some PL districts have provided micro-credentials, or digital badges, for professional development successfully completed, allowing educators to develop professional portfolios that display their credentials earned. In some PL schools, educator roles may be restructured as



new staff positions created to address students' needs; for example, new staff may be hired to manage students working in small groups and during one-on-one tutoring or independent work, or to supervise students working in digital learning environments (SRI International, 2018). A district-developed technological platform can allow teachers to share lesson plans, assessments, or other best practices, and to interact and seek input from their colleagues.

Educational Leadership: Strong leaders are required to assume new responsibilities for implementing and sustaining PL models, which diverge significantly from traditional ones. PL leaders must “make new kinds of decisions about school culture, instructional leadership, staffing, capacity building, and development of physical and technological infrastructure” (SRI International, 2018, p. 25). A PL district should also have a leadership development program that identifies and develops leaders at the classroom, school, and district level. This includes involving educators and other staff members in the visioning, strategic planning, partnership cultivation, and curriculum review processes.

Technology Policy and Infrastructure: Infrastructure has been identified as one of the biggest obstacles to an effective technology policy, and districts must address any deficiencies in order to support a more connected student population at scale. Districts must have a technology policy that allows for student privacy and ubiquitous, safe access to the internet at all times of the school day. Device-use policies such as bring-your-own device and lack of home internet access can create inequitable student access issues. PL schools have “worked to find ways to provide low-income students and parents with connectivity outside school, for example, through partnerships with local companies to provide discounts on broadband and devices and partnerships with local community centers to provide technology hubs” (SRI International, 2018, p. 24). Districts should also ensure that responsive technical assistance is available to PL schools consistently, and create formal review cycles to replace hardware as needed (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2018).

Comprehensive Data Systems: Districts should maintain a comprehensive data system consisting of learning management, assessment, and student information systems. These systems should enable data-informed decision making, and be able to track student achievement history, teacher comments, supports, and interventions, and other indicators while also protecting student-level privacy. Clear student data policies, procedures, and practices that ensure this privacy/security and adhere to state and federal laws are essential and must be communicated clearly and transparently (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2018).

Partnerships: Each district should cultivate partnerships with parents, business, community, and higher education constituents in their communities. These partners should be involved in developing a district vision and strategic plan that is aligned with a broader economic and workforce development plan for the community. In addition, these partners should assist with creating various learning opportunities (internships, mentor programs, work-based experiences, service learning, etc.) and ensure that all students are aware of these opportunities. Williams et al. (2014) provide a district example:

Spirit Lake Community Schools in Iowa are careful to ensure that all partnerships benefit not only students but the community partners as well. The district offers internships, wrap-around services, and other opportunities to ensure college and career readiness for students while also aiming to meet the economic and social needs of the community through out-of-school learning experiences. Mutually advantageousness was a theme throughout discussions with many superintendents who said it was absolutely essential for sustained, successful partnerships. (p. 15)

How Can Districts Further Support Schools As They Implement 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. 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 should 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, Pane, Steiner, & Hamilton, 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).



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. 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>