

CORE FUNCTION	EFFECTIVE	INDICATOR
Dimension E	Families and Community	The district has established two-way communication channels to encourage transparency, feedback loops, and access to information for families and the community. (6837)

**Explanation:** Effective communication channels that are two-way and transparent are essential to help families and the community access the information they need about personalized learning and garner their support for these initiatives. Districts cannot simply distribute information to stakeholders, but must carefully develop a communications plan that includes communications goals that are aligned to the district’s rationale for choosing personalized learning to enhance student learning. They must identify targeted audiences, recruit effective messengers, develop key messages about the rationale for personalized learning, and figure out how best to get these messages out. Two-way communication is essential, and districts must regularly seek and act on stakeholder feedback. Districts should also assess the effectiveness of their communications and acknowledge and celebrate early signs of communication strategy progress.

**Questions:** *How has stakeholder input been incorporated in the district’s vision for PL? Does the district have a clearly identified plan for communicating about PL to key stakeholder audiences? What resources are already in place that can effectively communicate PL to stakeholder audiences, and what additional resources will be necessary? Who in the district is responsible for executing the plan, or are additional staff or supports necessary? Does the plan include goals for communication, and do these goals primarily reflect communicating about the technology or how PL will promote student success? Who are the key target audiences and what messages have been developed for each? Does the communications plan tailor messaging to each type of audience? Are two-way communication strategies incorporated into the plan to allow for stakeholder feedback, and is this feedback acted on? Who will be the district messengers for each audience? How will the district monitor the effectiveness of its communications about PL, as well as highlight and celebrate effective communications strategies?*

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). 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. Districts implementing PL will need to communicate its purpose and rationale for these changes to families and community members in a carefully planned and transparent, two-way communication that includes these stakeholders’ input.

### ***What Are Best Practices for Communicating with Education Stakeholders About Personalized Learning?***

Effective two-way communication within PL systems serves to establish trust, engagement and credibility with stakeholders; poor communication on the other hand can result in confusion, unrealistic expectations, and opposition to innovation, all of which pose a significant risk for district implementation (Chuong & Mead, 2014; Education Elements, 2016). One study, for example, found that schools attempting to use PL strategies faced problems with communicating



new student success measures to both students and their parents, as well as to colleges and universities (Bingham, Pane, Steiner, & Hamilton, 2018). Parents and other community stakeholders should be included at the outset in establishing the district's shared vision for teaching and learning in PL environments. This vision should be collaboratively developed, with a focus on equity and meeting the needs of each individual learner. Successful PL implementation further requires "transparency about what is expected of students both inside and outside of school walls, and how everyone has a role in pursuing the vision" (KnowledgeWorks, n.d.).

In their guide on communications planning for innovation in education, including blended and PL initiatives, Education Elements (2016) recommends the following steps:

- 1. Phase 1: Plan and Align** – Successful PL implementation requires more than just pushing information out to stakeholders in order for the initiative to take hold and be sustained. Families and community members must be equipped with the right information; well-informed stakeholders can reduce opposition and increase resilience when obstacles arise. PL schools must intentionally develop a culture of communication and work to create two-way conversations to build engagement. Districts should establish clearly stated communications goals that are aligned to the district's decisions to implement PL and its goals for students as part of the planning process. Failing to engage in this process is a common district mistake when adopting PL:

Districts often fall into the trap of talking more about the technology than the desired transformation of teaching and learning. Computers, tablets, and other education technology devices are simply tools that educators can use to enable greater differentiated instruction, data-driven interventions, mastery-based progression and improved student engagement. Your communications goals should focus primarily on building understanding and support for blended and personalized learning's role in achieving your district's definition of student success. (Education Elements, 2016, p. 5)

For example, a district may set communication goals around helping parents build clarity around what PL means for their child's learning, and instilling parent confidence that the changes being made are in their child's best interest. PL has been defined in a variety of ways in the literature, but districts will want to develop a clearly stated definition for communication purposes; this definition should include the fact that instruction in PL models is tailored to students' needs (Phillips & Jenkins, n.d.)

- 2. Phase 2: Foundations** – Assess communication resources by reviewing existing communication methods and tools and noting gaps and where enhancements are necessary. A district communications coordinator (either existing employee or someone willing to provide services from the community) who has familiarity with local stakeholders and strong writing and speaking skills can be responsible for creating and executing the communications strategy. This person should be included on the PL implementation team and will be responsible for filling identified communications resource gaps.
- 3. Phase 3: Design** – This phase is the core of the communications plan, and includes identifying key stakeholder audiences, determining the most effective messengers, drafting targeted messages, and determining successful tactics for message delivery. External audiences include parents, community/local business members, media, and funders/foundations. Districts must understand their audiences' needs through the use of regular surveys or other tools that can establish two-way feedback; these data can shed light on each group's top issues, concerns, and values. Identifying any special communications needs (e.g., language, email/technology access), and the best way to reach audiences (e.g., in person, social media, phone calls, etc.) is also essential.

Districts must identify trusted messengers to communicate to each audience. Teachers are the best messengers for families, and therefore their opinions about PL are critical; having their support and buy-in from the beginning will likely be significant to provide assurances and ease parents' concerns about PL (Phillips & Jenkins, n.d.). Students' voices and stories are also effective, as are principals, district, and community leaders. Key messages involve the "why" of PL, and should be customized for each district, but should always tie back to student learning objectives, be simple and avoid jargon, involve storytelling and the authentic voices of teachers and students, and signal that PL is not just another short-lived fad. Winning messages for families highlight how PL will benefit teachers and students (Phillips & Jenkins, n.d.); for example:



The student-teacher relationship is one of the most important factors in student success, but teachers too rarely have the time for one-on-one interaction with students. Blended and personalized learning enables more one-on-one and small group interaction between teachers and students and provides regular feedback to teachers, allowing them to closely monitor your child's progress. (Education Elements, 2016, p. 17)

Two-way communication will build engagement and help districts spot issues early, and districts should always remember to ask and listen through the use of surveys, focus groups, comment boxes on social media feeds, and in-person meetings. Listening is not a “one-and-done” activity, and districts must use feedback obtained to inform and guide their work.

- 4. Reflect and Iterate** – using success metrics and early wins. Districts should be iterative by continually circling back to check and adjust to ensure understanding of PL. They may wish to assess progress towards communications goals such as parent or community awareness by conducting a survey at the beginning of implementation and again periodically to gauge the effectiveness of the communication, for example. Other metrics may include the number of “stories” with teachers and students demonstrating PL in action that are shared with key audiences, or the number of positive news stories about PL in local media. Celebrating early signs of communication progress can build engagement with messaging for PL. For example, a principal who has conducted a highly successful parents’ night to garner support for PL can be acknowledged and share strategies at a district principals meeting.

## REFERENCE AND RESOURCES

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### Resources

For a communications planning worksheet and other communications planning tools see: <https://practices.learningaccelerator.org/artifacts/communications-planning-for-innovation-in-education>