

Learning Gets Personal

The nation's next education reform movement shifts to more customized learning to ensure students master skills before advancing.

By Susan McLester
March 2011

 [Printer-Friendly Page](#)

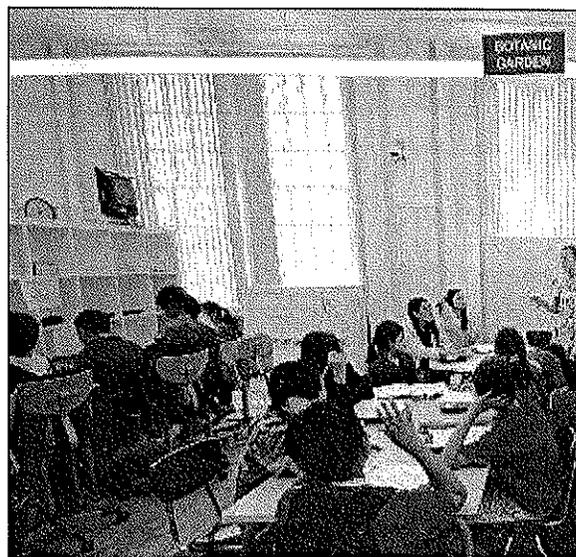
 [Email This Article](#)

At education conferences, as well as in professional association reports, as a target area of funding for nonprofit foundations and in the literature of industry vendors, the term, "personalized learning" has taken center stage in an arena already crowded with complex and long-standing issues and concerns.

Why personalized learning? And why now?

Education industry veterans know the concept of customized learning is not new. The terms "individualized learning," "differentiated learning" and "individualized learning plan" have long been part of the education lexicon. But the term "personalized learning" has only just cropped up. Its difference is that it makes the student key.

"A learner's needs, abilities, aptitudes, motivations, interests, skill levels, and most successful learning situations combine to provide a 360-degree view that reveals his or her best pathway to success," says Joel Rose, the founder of New York City's pioneering School of One math program, which personalizes student schedules on a daily basis.



At the School of One at IS228-David A. Broody, in Brooklyn, N.Y., students gather in a classroom with three "stations," which are labeled Botanic Garden, Prospect Park and Brooklyn Museum to distinguish the different learning styles.

The elements of 21st-century learning are part of personalized learning, but added to these is the more revolutionary component of a competency-based, time variable model in which students progress at their own pace as skills are mastered, rather than advancing through grade levels with peers. The rise of personalized learning in districts across the nation can be attributed to a convergence of multiple circumstances, including technological advances, nearly ubiquitous digital content, the Obama administration's support for school innovation, and the growing willingness of states to grant waivers for mandated "seat time" requirements and, in cases such as Alabama and Colorado, to eliminate those requirements altogether.

Education leaders and experts agree the current model of education in the country is incapable of meeting the personalized needs of students and that a systemic redesign—not just a tweaking—is needed.

Reinventing Schools

Beyond the talk, however, there is action. The nonprofit Re-Inventing Schools Coalition (RISC) is one group at the forefront of transformation. RISC was born of a mid-1990s initiative that threw out traditional grade bands and instituted personalized learning to turn around the failing Chugach School District in Anchorage, Alaska. The district Web site notes that in five years, composite scores on the California Achievement Tests rose from the 28th to the 72nd percentile, and the percentage of students

Symposium on Personalized Learning

In August 2010, more than 150 education leaders and experts met in Boston for a two-day discussion on

taking college entrance exams went from 0 in 1996 to 70 in 2001.



Larry Stupski, co-founder and chair of the Stupski Foundation, reflects on innovation at the Partnership for Next Generation Learning. The foundation helps states transition to new models of personalized learning.

Building on that concept, a former Chugach superintendent, Richard DeLorenzo, who led the transition to performance-based learning, co-founded RISC in 2002 with Chugach former colleagues Wendy Battino and Rick Schreiber. The organization supports schools and districts willing to leave behind traditional age-level and grade-grouped approaches to education in favor of a student-centered performance model. "The

incremental changes we've made in the past were clearly not getting to the heart of the problem," says DeLorenzo. "We still have 7,000 students [nationwide] dropping out of school every day."

More than a dozen schools and districts in Alaska, California and Colorado are implementing RISC, which also has a statewide contract with Maine. Working first with six districts in Maine exhibiting the most "readiness"—those with reforms already in the works—the program will

gradually expand.

Another group active in the personalized learning movement is the Stupski Foundation, which is focused on transforming public education so that all students are prepared for college and/or careers. The foundation has worked with districts nationwide since 1999 to help develop data systems and leadership capacity.

In 2009, the foundation and the Council of Chief State School Officers formed the Partnership for Next Generation Learning, choosing six states with "next generation" initiatives already underway for membership in their first "Innovation Lab Network." The network harnesses the Stupski Foundation's practical knowledge and in-depth research to help states design and transition to new models of personalized learning. Charter member states include Kentucky, Maine, New York, Ohio, West Virginia and Wisconsin, with 38 districts in those states using the program.

The Pioneers

Adams County School District 50

Westminster, Colo.

Consolidation and focus were what Superintendent Roberta Selleck identified as key starting points for getting Adams 50's schools back on track with their graduation rate. With 19 schools and 10,000 students, this district just north of Denver has 75 percent of its students on free or reduced lunch and includes 40 percent English language learners. With an annual teacher turnover of up to 25 percent, a graduation rate of 58 percent, and an academic watch

personalized learning. Initiated by the Software and Information Industry Association in conjunction with the Council of Chief State School Officers and the Association for School Curriculum Design, the symposium created the document "Innovate to Educate: System Re-Design for Personalized Learning."

[More...](#)

status under No Child Left Behind, Adams 50 presented its share of challenges to Selleck when she first arrived in 2007. "We had to stop the bleeding," she says.

With personalizing learning as a goal, Selleck took bold action. Adams 50 was spread thin with programs and options. Selleck closed six schools due to age and declining enrollment (recent "white flight" had nearly halved the student population) and retired ineffective or financially unsupportable programs, such as the Core Knowledge and Lindamood-Bell literacy programs and Earobics reading labs.

Selleck also laid off 200 teachers and upped starting teacher salaries by \$10,000. Under her influence the district

also passed a \$100 million bond for a new high school centered around health care, architecture, business, visual and performing arts, and liberal arts career academies. The new school, which opened in August 2010, places students according to aptitudes and interests. "We need some kind of hook for their passion," Selleck says.

In 2008, Adams 50 contracted with RISC, which has expanded to all of the district's schools and whose 10-step process (see "How RISC Works" sidebar) includes obtaining broad buy-in from stakeholders. "People successful under the old model don't see the need for change," Selleck says.

She spoke with hundreds of parents and educated all staff members through professional development in what personalized learning means and why they needed it. With permission from the state to waive elementary-level standards outside of math and literacy, and to revise those, Selleck worked with education consultant Richard Marzano to identify core "need to know" elements of the standards and had the WestEd education research agency review them for rigor.

The new system replaces grade levels with "readiness levels" of one through 16. As students master each readiness level—or set of standards-based skills—they move to the next, sometimes changing teachers. In middle school, the standards curriculum is broadened to include science and social studies. It's still too early to report improvements, but Selleck is sure good results are coming.

Forsyth County Schools

Cummings, Ga.

In 2010, Forsyth County Schools, which has established a clear vision of what personalized learning will look like in the district, received a \$4.7 million Investing in Innovation (i3) grant from the U.S. Department of Education to decrease the dropout rate and increase the achievement and graduation rates of high-needs students in grades 6 through 12. About 8 percent of



At the Adams County School District 50, a social studies teacher works one-on-one with a Scott Carpenter Middle School student.

How RISC Works

According to the Re-Inventing Schools Coalition, these are the 10 key steps that form their student-centered performance model:

1. Check for readiness at an organizational level.
2. Provide overview training to all staff, and gain consensus to move forward based on a formal process.
3. Deploy a shared-vision process.
4. Articulate standards and assessments in performance levels for all content and all levels.
5. Train administrators on district-level and school-level design and delivery.
6. Train teachers for classroom design and instructional design and delivery.



Students at FM Day Elementary post notes on an Affinity Diagram, which solicits and organizes input from the students.

secondary students have been identified as high risk. And the district will measure increased achievement by how many students identified as at-risk decrease, says Mike Evans, i3 project coordinator.

With a five-year plan to personalize learning through a model that closely connects student data to instructional practice, Forsyth is harnessing technology as the “game-changing innovation” to create a data system that provides real-time, detailed information on every student. “Students will be able to log in to a personal portal to see up-to-the-minute data on their progress, and teachers can log in to a ‘Learning Marketplace’—a repository of lessons and activities—to select content to place in each student’s individual learning plan,” says Evans.

7. Deploy the RISC coaching model to support implementation.
8. Develop policy and protocols to support a performance model.
9. Deploy Educate software, a data management program that tracks attendance, scheduling and assignments via electronic student portfolios, and serves as a performance-based management tool.
10. Refine practices using a continuous improvement process.

The Learning Marketplace will supply up to 15 multimedia lessons per standard and offer 24/7, anytime, anywhere access for students. The district will begin the personalized learning implementation this August with one middle school and one high school. Teachers have already supplied 1,700 learning objects for the Learning Marketplace, and additional content will include assessments from Edusoft and Scantron and digital textbook chapters from Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, among others.

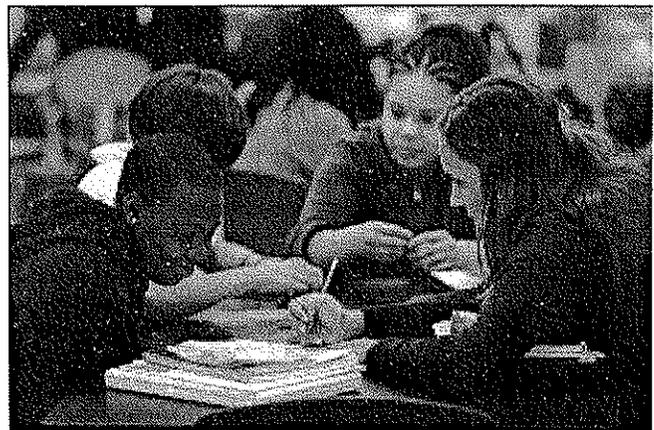
To help staff, parents, the community and other stakeholders understand the concept of personalized learning and visualize it in a practical sense, a graphic novel has been posted on the district’s Web site that walks viewers through a fictional day in a school that uses personal technologies such as iPods and cell phones, ongoing performance reports, and individual portal accounts to transform learning.

School of One

New York City Board of Education

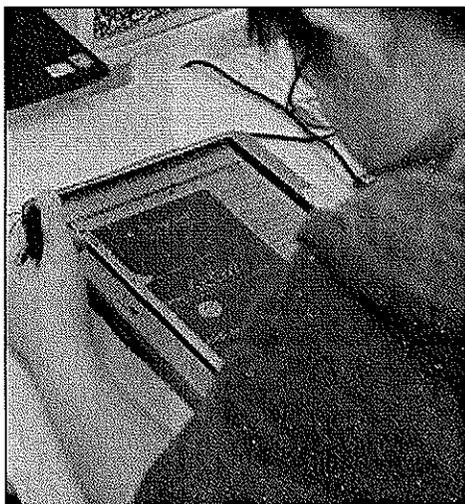
Ongoing assessment, sophisticated technology-based scheduling and consideration of each student’s best learning style, preferences and needs are at the core of the personalized learning approach of the New York City Department of Education’s School of One program, which operates in three schools in Brooklyn, Manhattan and the Bronx.

The brainchild of Joel Rose, a former Houston math teacher who saw kids struggling with the grade-level curriculum, School of One uses formative assessment to pinpoint each child’s exact performance level to concoct a daily “playlist” of lessons, activities and instructional strategies to help them learn the 390 math skills covered in the learning standards for grades 4 through 9. “Kids stay engaged with fresh tasks and sequences each day,”



At the School of One in New York City, a teacher facilitates small group activities, giving more personalized attention.

says Rose.



A student works with a remote tutor on lessons.

Data drives the daily schedule, not just as an indicator of performance but also to show how each learner learns best. "Schedules may include live online, small group, large group, individual tutor, video game instruction or other formats," Rose says. "Progress is anonymous and students experience success, not the constant failure many of them have in the regular classroom."

Instruction draws from a large repository of lessons and activities from about 50 partners, including Pearson and Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, and eInstruction's ExamView helps the district deliver assessments. School of One began in 2009 as a summer pilot program. Then last spring, School of One opened as an afterschool program. Last fall, it started its first full year and plans to expand to four additional schools this August.

As reported in School of One's brochure, an evaluation of the 2009 summer program conducted by the global nonprofit Education

Development Center found that "over the course of a 20-day program, students gained 28 percentage points from pre-test to post-test."

Big Picture Learning

Proving that personalized learning can be sustainable is the Big Picture Learning model. Instituted in 1995 and serving high school students, it is based on internships that teach students "real world" job skills. In Big Picture Learning, students must follow their interests and personal goals, and the curriculum must be "real world" relevant. Big Picture Learning has 67 campuses nationwide and 64 internationally.

At the Metropolitan Career and Technical Center, which is a state funded public school district and local education agency, which serves 690 high school students in six small schools across three campuses in Rhode Island, students choose their internships after exploring their personal career interests in part through job shadowing and other research, says co-director Nancy Diaz. Two days a week students work on the job site, and the other three days they complete extended work around the same topic with their advisor at school. Each student has an individual learning plan, developed with a team that includes the student, advisor, parents and internship mentor.

The school also offers a broad range of careers, which are represented through more than 1,500 internship sites, including hospitals, law firms, bakeries, bike shops, museums, horse stables, landscaping companies and veterinarian hospitals. "The Big Picture model works well for kids who need to be challenged in a different way," says Diaz. For example, Diaz continues, the school has a 93 percent graduation rate, and 98 percent of graduates get accepted into at least one college of their choice.



In Anatomy and Biology class, seniors at South Forsyth High School in the Forsyth County (Ga.) Schools make diagrams based on their observations. They also use smartphones to log their findings directly into their online course.

Spreading the Vision

While personalized learning is making some headway across the nation in front-running programs and districts, it still represents a sweeping, systemic change to American education—and one that the public and educators who are untrained in methods of

innovation are likely to find too threatening.

DeLorenzo and others agree that the greatest challenge to transforming learning is communicating a practical vision of what a "transformed school" would look like. Arming teachers with skills and resources and closing the knowledge gap between schools and communities might be part of a crucial step toward ensuring the future success of children.

Susan McLester is a freelance writer based in Berkeley, Calif.