



# **BIGGEST CHALLENGES IN PERSONALIZED LEARNING**

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**Learners of today.  
Ready for tomorrow.**





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# Overview

Over the course of several months in Spring 2016, Education Elements asked our website visitors to answer the following question: what is your biggest challenge in implementing personalized learning? This study is the result of an in-depth text analysis of 450 answers to that question, as of May 2016.

The number one challenge to personalized learning across all categories of respondents was the same: getting others to buy into it. The number two challenge varied by job title. Teachers and districts leaders struggle with support and training; school leaders struggle with implementation.

To offer next steps for those struggling with similar issues, our team has proposed solutions for each reported challenge. While the reported challenges are complex and the potential solutions are many, we focused on just two potential strategies for each challenge, because often less is more.

You can find a high-level overview of our study [here](#), or you can read the complete findings below.

## #1 CHALLENGE

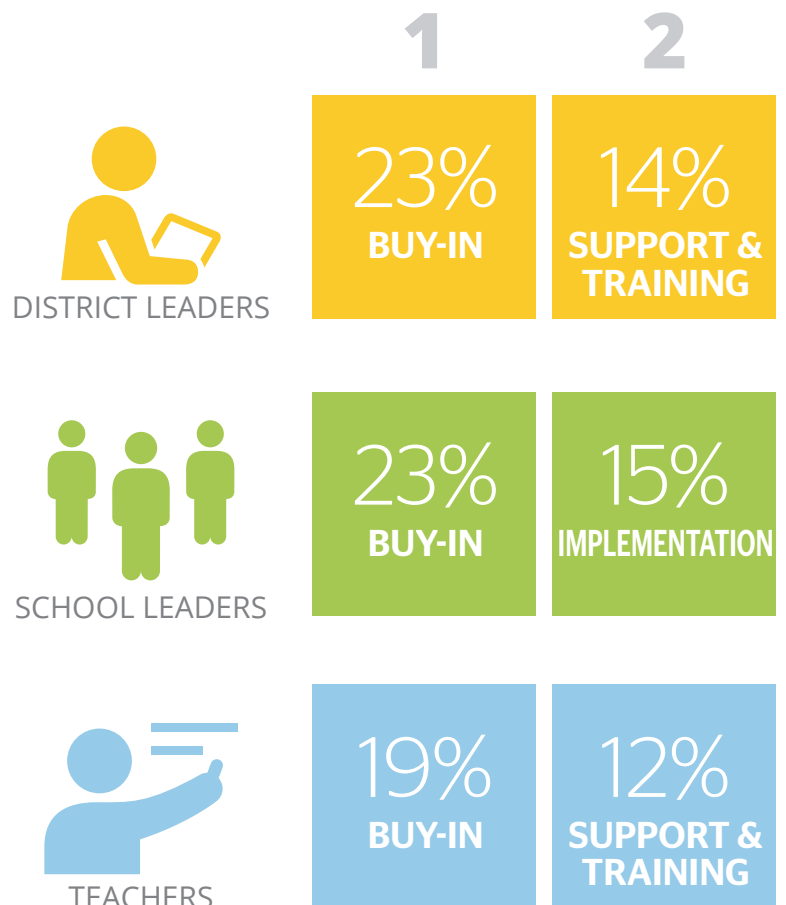
### Buy-In

The most common challenge of teachers, school leaders and districts leaders alike was buy-in.

What is buy-in exactly? We define it as getting your team or organization to understand, support and align on a unified approach, in this case for personalized learning. District leaders know that for personalized learning to be successful, those on the front line, in this case teachers and school leaders, need to be excited, committed and have “bought into” the idea.

Given the variety of definitions of personalized learning, it makes sense that buy-in is a challenge. By name alone, personalized learning sounds like just another jargon-heavy initiative. To convince an entire organization of the transformative instructional and mindset shifts that personalized learning entails, education leaders need a deep foundational understanding of the district’s definition and vision for this work – and a clear plan on how to do it.

## Top Challenges by Job Title



# 1st Solution

## Align It, Don't Add It

For your teachers, frame personalized learning not as something entirely new, but as an enhancement of existing practices. Most teachers already personalize learning in some way, and ambitious teachers are probably ahead of administration in thinking about this work.

A new district initiative of this type should focus on taking existing student-centered teaching techniques and combining them in a clear model that can be shared, adopted by and improved by others. Then, personalized learning becomes an ongoing dialogue around how current practices do and don't allow for student choice and voice, rather than a discrete initiative with a beginning and end.

This does not mean you should avoid focusing on specific deadlines, celebrating milestones and creating a district rallying cry around it. You should do all of these things. But you should do them while showing teachers that this is a systemic shift, something that takes principles of personalized learning they're already employing and amplifies them.

Among school and district leaders who are tasked with managing many other initiatives, you may also encounter resistance, skepticism or fear. To inspire buy-in from leaders, personalized learning must be framed as an enhancement of existing initiatives and aligned with those initiatives' goals.

For example, Loudoun County Public Schools had been implementing project-based learning (PBL) concepts for a few years before investing in a more personalized approach. The district team assembled to determine the connections between PBL and personalized learning and make sure everything was aligned for the relevant project stakeholders. They determined a personalized learning approach supports PBL by encouraging the following:

- 1 Access to significant content for students who may have learning gaps
- 2 New challenges for students who have shown basic mastery
- 3 Relevance for all students as their interests help shape the direction of "meaningful contributions to the world."

Another example of promoting leader buy-in through initiative alignment comes from Don Bavis, Superintendent of the Marion Central School District in New York. In a recent community news article [he addressed](#) how he planned to align initiatives by making personalized learning the one underlying initiative to connect them all – like a hub for spokes on a wheel.

## 2nd Solution

### Evangelize It

Before the first big football game there is often a pep rally. We suggest you do the same for the changes you want to see around teaching and learning. Find ways to get your leaders, teachers, students and parents excited. Make it clear what you are doing and why.

First, you'll need a great vision, rallying cry or "north star." Then, you need to tell everyone about that vision.

Some of our districts have created positive buzz around personalized learning by making it a celebration of learning. Don't be afraid to get silly – in the Metropolitan School District of Warren Township, they celebrated their launch of personalized learning with rockets and a space expedition theme. See some pictures from Warren's launch below, and check out their [twitter feed](#) to see the excitement they generated.



It's important to note that evangelizing personalized learning starts well before the first day of school or the launch of a school's specific implementation. It starts early, right as the district starts planning and designing.

This momentum has the best start when you identify your evangelists early. Don't only look for the usual suspects. Find teachers, coaches and building leaders whom others respect and follow, and get them involved. Also look for skeptics who you can convince by including them in the process. If the first time you think about buy-in and personalized learning buzz is during training, you have missed an opportunity. Involving others from the very start of the process, rather than just hoping they will cheer for it later on, will help your team cheer all the louder and cheer for much longer.

## #2 CHALLENGE

### Different for Different Stakeholders

While the second most common challenge for district leaders and teachers was support and training, school leaders stated they struggle the most with implementation. Why this difference?

Our take: district leaders must design the overarching district plan of support and professional development; teachers are worried about receiving that adequate support and training. Principals, as the site leaders and intermediaries between teachers and the district, have to carry out the district plans and make sure that teacher needs are met.

## #2 CHALLENGE *for District Leaders and Teachers*

### Support and Training

It is first important to recognize that the support and training envisioned by district leaders might be very different than what is desired by teachers. For comprehensive personalized learning implementation, a superintendent will consider communication plans, professional development calendars, infrastructure improvements and perhaps even legal exemptions for policies such as seat time. Teachers will be concerned about specifics – how to set up the classroom, how to manage devices and software, and what good personalized learning actually look likes.

### 1st Solution

#### Show and Tell

To deliver adequate teacher support and training, districts should opt for experiential workshops. Personalized learning needs to be modeled, not just described. District leadership can bring together school leaders, coaches and lead teachers to experience personalized learning while learning more about it. For example, they can design a three-station rotation where participants develop a shared understanding of personalized learning through targeted instruction, independent learning time and small group collaboration.

Once leaders have participated in an experiential workshop, they can replicate these activities in their buildings. Moving forward, they can conduct more and more professional development (PD) in this way, moving away from sit-and-get and trying strategies like flex models, flipped and playlists to support learning. It's important that district leaders simulate and model what they want to see in their classrooms.

**Small note:** don't forget to take the time to debrief after the experience. Talking about how it felt to be a learner will help your leaders, teachers and coaches to develop empathy and keep students in mind.



### 2nd Solution

#### Plan, But Don't Overplan

We would be the last to tell you not to have a PD plan; in fact, PLEASE HAVE A PD PLAN. Yet if in July you map out exactly what will happen during each training session for the entire upcoming year – with topics, timing and all – you are doing what we have done to students all along: you are assuming that everyone will move at the same pace, and have the same needs at the same time; you are eliminating choice and not providing teachers with the chance to learn what they want, based on their own goals and challenges.

Think about how you can make your professional development more personalized. Some things to consider:

- 1 Offer the same topics at different times during the year but let teachers decide when they attend. Let's say one topic is using data from digital content and another is classroom management. Some teachers may want to dig into data early and will sign up for that in September while for others, data is the last thing on their minds and they would rather get help with routines. You are talking to them about data but they are thinking about behavior; when they are ready to use data two months later, they will have probably forgotten everything you said anyway. You may want all teachers to attend everything at some point, but please do not dictate when.
- 2 Set aside the time but do not pick the topics. In districts that do classroom walkthroughs we often coach them to pick the PD topic based on what they saw in the classrooms, rather than what they thought they might see when they mapped it out months before. If you have a set of PD modules or experts you can turn to, you can do just-in-time PD and have it be more impactful than something you planned without understanding the real needs of your teachers.
- 3 Provide environments in which teachers can choose their own PD topic or modality. Build choice and voice into the sessions. Even if you have to cover certain topics on certain days, you can model personalized learning by how you present them and the role the teachers – your professional learners – play in owning and directing their learning.

## #2 CHALLENGE *for School Leaders* Implementation

Principals and site leaders have a lot on their plates – they often get multiple directives from the district administration and risk being shot as the messenger when conveying news to teachers. They need to sort through ideas and constantly prioritize, balancing what they have been asked to do with what they believe their teachers have the capacity to do. Add to that the needs and desires of the students and their parents, on top of everyday distractions like dealing with a disciplinary issue, and their hands are full. Understandably, the idea of implementing something this deeply transformative can feel overwhelming.

Site leaders worried about implementation are concerned about everything from training and support (addressed above) to device management, classroom management, parent communication and beyond. They need support to move from “let’s do this” to “it’s happening now.”



## 1st Solution

### Include Them

Have district administration invite site leaders to be a part of the design process. This collaboration is not only good for buy-in; it is essential for implementation. The leaders of each school site should not only be champions; they should be designers and experts. They should be one of a few go-to people in the building who deeply understand not just what personalized learning is in general, but also what it means for their school in particular. Leaders will provide essential input so that the implementation is a success, and be stronger supporters of the implementation, because they have built capacity along the way.

## 2nd Solution

### Empower Them

Since the days we created the current factory model of education, the emphasis has been on sameness and standardization. We still run the risk of repeating that, even with personalized models. Even in a district where all schools use the same devices, the same content, and even the same basic instructional models, if we do not allow for difference we will again build for the average and not the individual.

To make site leaders' implementations more successful, we need to support them in designing something that will work for their particular school. Perhaps that will require changes to the bell schedule, or differentiated classroom models for some teachers. Maybe it means a different pace of curriculum than other schools, or incorporating important elements of their culture. Know that you can provide centralized support and strong guardrails while giving building leaders decision-making power and autonomy.

Education Elements help school leaders build understanding, develop their vision and design safe-to-try instructional models for personalized learning in Design Academies. The Design Academy, drawing on the principles of design thinking from Stanford's d.school, guides school teams in creating a school vision, a roll-out plan and example classroom models for personalized learning. In [this video](#), the Warren Township district team discusses how the Design Academy supported their principals and lead teachers in designing site-specific personalized learning models.

# Our Takeaway:

## Educators Agree on the Challenges. Together, Let's Implement the Solutions.

We were a little surprised how clearly buy-in rose to the top in our data for all respondent groups. From conversations with district leaders, site administrators, and teachers we knew this was an issue, but the issue's popularity caught us off-guard. In fact, in an analysis of responses by the self-reported stage of personalized learning implementation, ranging from “just starting to think about it” to “already implementing it,” buy-in was also the biggest challenge for multiple disparate stages of implementation.

We were also excited to realize that, while each challenge is complex and varies from district to district, identifying viable solutions can be much easier. It's the implementation of those solutions that is most difficult.

Still, knowing which step to take first is a large part of the battle. Leaders and educators across the country can take comfort in the fact that they are not alone in their challenges, and that we can come overcome them together as a community of practitioners, experts, and education advocates.

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### ABOUT EDUCATION ELEMENTS

Education Elements works with districts to build and support dynamic school systems that meet the needs of every learner, today and tomorrow. We take the time to understand the unique challenges school leaders face, and then customize the Education Elements approach for each district. We have worked with hundreds of districts across the country. We bring deep expertise, design thinking, expert facilitation and the spirit of collaboration, along with our extensive toolkit of resources and technology, to deliver sustainable results.

Want to learn more about how to overcome challenges to personalized learning?

Reach out to us – we would be happy to chat!

**Learners of today.**  
**Ready for tomorrow.**



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