



Personalized Learning Guide



Learners of today. Ready for tomorrow.

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Introduction: Personalized Learning Definition



What is Personalized Learning?

Across the country, personalized learning is increasingly recognized as a promising strategy to close achievement gaps, increase student engagement, and prepare students as they become self-directed, lifelong learners by meeting their individual needs. While no single definition of personalized learning exists, the many definitions from leading experts share common general principles that include student voice and choice, customization to each student's strengths and needs, student agency, and flexibility of instruction.



iNACOL

Personalized learning is tailoring learning for each student's strengths, needs and interests— including enabling student voice and choice in what, how, when, and where they learn—to provide flexibility and supports to ensure mastery at the highest standards possible. ([Mean What You Say: Integrating Personalized, Blended and Competency Education Patrick, Kennedy, Powell, iNACOL 2013](#))

National Center for Learning Disabilities

Personalized learning allows all children to receive a customized learning experience. Students learn at their own pace with structure and support in challenging areas. Learning aligns with interests, needs and skills, and takes place in an engaging environment where students gain a better understanding of their strengths. ([National Center for Students with Learning Disabilities, Personalized Learning: Meeting the Needs of Students with Disabilities](#))

ISTE

[Personalized] learning that is tailored to the preferences and interests of various learners, as well as instruction that is paced to a student's unique needs. ([ISTE, Personalized vs. Differentiated vs. Individualized Learning](#))

Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

Personalized learning has four key attributes: learner profiles, personal learning paths, competency-based progression, and flexible learning environments. ([Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Continued Progress: Promising Evidence on Personalized Learning](#))



U.S. Department of Education

Personalized learning refers to instruction in which the pace of learning and the instructional approach are optimized for the needs of each learner. Learning objectives, instructional approaches, and instructional content (and its sequencing) may all vary based on learner needs. In addition, learning activities are made available that are meaningful and relevant to learners, driven by their interests and often self-initiated.

Digital Promise

Personalized learning, learning that is connected to each individual's development, background, interests, and experiences, provides an approach that broadly and equitably supports educators' efforts to empower learners as individuals.

Personalized learning offers a path to effectively support the growing diversity of the population of students by understanding how individual learners learn best and actively engage, motivate, and inspire them with the right resources at the right time, in the right medium, and at the right pace. ([Digital Promise: Making Learning Personal for All The Growing Diversity in Today's Classroom](#))

"We don't need a model of superhuman superhero teachers. We need to use the power of technology and educational design—combined with the high aspirations we all begin with—in order to create innovative learning environments that foster personalized learning for everyone."

— Anthony Kim, CEO and Founder, Education Elements

In many ways, the principles of personalized learning stand in stark contrast with traditional classrooms: with the teacher's guidance, students in personalized learning classrooms move at their own pace, pursue learning that aligns with their individual interests, and set goals to reach their potential. While the sheer number of districts that are starting to consider how to redesign classroom environments and include these principles is promising, the shift to personalized learning leaves many educators with many important and unanswered questions. You will find many of these below.



Why Personalized Learning?

1. Why Does Personalized Learning Matter?

Most of us have a story of the teacher that made a difference in our learning, or the learning of our child. That's not a coincidence – teachers who recognize our needs and interests, and provide unique support for us, end up making meaningful and lasting impacts on us. Consider the following examples:

- The story of the young child who wasn't yet meeting age-appropriate development milestones by age two and wasn't talking yet. The parents were nervous and frustrated, but a teacher recognized that a different approach, one of baby sign language, could be particularly helpful. The child thrived and had so much to say.
- The student who was regularly bored in math because it was too easy, so he daydreamed about other things. A teacher noticed and gave him new materials to read, and new skills to learn. He grew up to be a math teacher.
- A fourteen-year-old who was frequently disruptive and often sent to the principal's office. A teacher recognized that the student was reading at the first-grade level, so she received targeted small group instruction to help her read better. As a result, her behavior, attitude, and academic success changed.

When it happens for us – when someone personalizes for us, or a loved one – we know how valuable it can be.

Beyond this personal impact, we also know that:

Personalized learning promotes student agency - We hear consistently from employers that they look for people who are self-directed. We need to teach students to set goals and figure out how to achieve them, and to give them choices so they learn how to make their own decisions.

Personalized learning creates lifelong learners - Our students need to be prepared for a world with universal access to information, where the trick is not finding the information, but understanding it and applying it to improve our work and lives. We need to teach them how to learn.



Personalized learning increases student engagement - A recent [gallup poll](#) shows that as students get older, they become increasingly less engaged in typical schools. Personalized learning shifts this in two ways: through making meaningful connections between teachers and students we increase student engagement, and through making learning more relevant we make it more engaging too.

Personalized learning increases student achievement - Through personalized learning, students spend more time in their zone of proximal development and teachers spend more time addressing the needs of each student. With increased understanding of the types of supports students need, teachers can provide more targeted instruction and support, resulting in higher student achievement.

Personalized learning is what our students deserve - Students deserve equitable opportunities and supports to be successful and realize their fullest potential; they deserve opportunities to bring their whole selves to the learning experience. Read more in a [Hechinger Report article](#) in which Caroline Hill, from CityBridge Education, notes that we ought to “widen the aperture of the personalization conversation to include conversations about identity and who students are.”

Personalized learning is the future of learning - And this is what they said about it [All Things Considered: The Future of Learning? Well, it's Personal!](#)

Interested to know what parents think? Check out this article:

[Why Personalized Learning? A Parent's Perspective](#)



2. What are the Benefits of Personalized Learning?

Decades of research has shown the benefits of personalization and differentiation. And, while the term may feel like a fad, personalized learning is about good teaching strategies that have been in classrooms for decades.

More efficient and effective learning

According to [iNACOL's definition](#) of personalized learning, students' educational experiences are shaped by their strengths, needs, and interests and instruction is tailored to their needs. Students receive the content they need to master, without having to sit through content they already know. Every student is unique and special (see also Todd Rose's [End of Average](#)) and personalized learning takes that fully in consideration: It doesn't slow down students who are gifted, and doesn't rush students struggling to keep up with the rhythm. It doesn't simply group all students in the middle with a one-size-fits-all model, but instead meets each student where they are. And this is so much more efficient and effective than a model in which while trying to meet everyone, we actually miss almost everyone. When students spend more time in their [Zone of Proximal Development \(ZPD\)](#) [learning is more effective and efficient](#). And when learning is more effective and efficient, students can both learn more and go deeper.

More time for teachers to focus on each student

Instructional models centered around personalized learning provide time for teachers to focus on each student in different ways. In a project-based model, for example, teachers spend time understanding student interests as they help develop areas to study or projects to consider. In one-on-one tutoring, teachers/tutors get to know the needs of each student they support by doing things like reviewing their past work and working together on current assignments. And in blended learning – the path many of our district partners choose – teachers often use time and space differently to give students more time for small group or individual work. Above all, in these personalized learning environments, [teachers know their students better and have time to address each particular student's needs](#). These models allow for the delivery of targeted intervention to and acceleration of specific students. Teachers are enabled and empowered to give one-on-one attention to the students who need it most.



More student-centered and engaging:

Tailored to the individual needs, skills, and interests of students, personalized learning enables students to take ownership of their learning. Students feel happier about the learning process. The classroom becomes a space for discovery and joy; school becomes a place where they want to be; and courses become enjoyable challenges in which they want to engage. This leads to so many amazing things. Students develop into lifelong learners when we engage them early and often. We can empower them to set and achieve their own goals; we can help them to chart their own paths. And when they do all of this, they also almost always achieve more.

More prepared for college, career and citizenship:

The industrial era is over. We cannot teach our students the way we have been taught. The traditional model of education, born in the industrial age with a one-size-fits-all approach, [does not meet the needs of our modern economy](#). Personalized learning gives our students a personalized educational experience “that equips them with the skills, values, characteristics and knowledge they need to thrive in our modern society” ([Industrial Age Education Is a Disservice to Students](#)). Today information is easily accessible, but what we do with it, how we use it and how we apply it is the challenge. We do not need to teach our students to memorize facts, we need to teach them to use facts to solve problems. So the focus of our classrooms needs to change. What we want to teach and how we teach needs to be better suited to the world of work our students will enter. And personalized learning enables us to do this. It gives us a new approach to teaching that better prepares students for the connected age in which we now live.

Still looking for more information to make the case for personalized learning? CEO Anthony Kim describes the why, and the why now, behind this shift in classroom instruction, in his [Personalized Learning Playbook: Why the Time Is Now and How to Do It](#)



Download the
Playbook now



Examples of why school districts choose to pursue a personalized learning approach:

- **Enlarged City School District, NY** - Although small for a city district, the majority of students come from poverty and Middletown wanted to close the achievement gap between white and minority students, as well as lower the dropout rate.
- **Yuma Elementary School District, AZ** - For ten consecutive years, Yuma faced declining enrollment. The district wanted to be the premier district in their area to provide innovative programs, districtwide technology, and personalized instructional models to meet the needs of their students.
- **Syracuse City School District, NY** - Syracuse wanted to improve student achievement and engagement along with supporting social-emotional learning.
- **Loudoun County Schools, VA** - Loudoun County Public Schools was determined to prepare students to be successful in a global work environment. Through supporting them in aligning project-based learning and personalized learning, and developing a strategy for OER, they are helping them get students ready for the future.
- **Fairbanks North Star Borough, AK** - Despite facing the unique challenges of being an isolated, rural community, the Fairbanks North Star Borough School District in Alaska committed themselves to bridge the gap for their students and preparing them for 21st-century technology and careers.



Additional Resources:

- Podcast: [Personalized Learning Playbook with Anthony Kim](#)
- Article: [Bridging the Gap in a Rural School District Through Personalized Learning](#)
- Article: [Commentary: 5 Myths to Bust About Blended Learning, What It Is, and the Benefits It Has for Students](#)
- Article: [New study points to benefits of personalized learning](#)
- Report: Continued Progress: [Promising Evidence on Personalized Learning](#)
- Blog: [How Personalized Learning Can Benefit Students](#)
- Perspective: [Strategies for Implementing Personalized Learning While Evidence and Resources Are Underdeveloped](#)
- Report: Impact report 2014-2015: [The Positive Power of Personalized Learning](#)
- Report: Impact report 2015-2016: [The Positive Power of Personalized Learning](#)
- Report: Impact report 2016-2017: [Building Capacity for Personalized Learning and More](#)
- Report: Annual report 2017-2018: [School, District and Regional Transformation](#)
- Article: [New Evidence That Personalized Learning Can Produce Powerful Results](#)
- Research: [Historical evidence for Personalized Learning](#)



3. Can Personalized Learning Support Educational Equity?

Personalized learning can be a powerful tool for educators seeking to provide equitable outcomes for students. Equity can be the driver that empowers Personalized Learning tactics and associated instructional models in our efforts to provide all students equitable access to not only grade-level content and skills, but also equitable opportunities to achieve their very best.

Having said that, equity is not an inherent part of Personalized Learning. The teacher who personalizes learning experiences for students must be the one who actively applies an equity lens to their work. Simply using a station-rotation model will not automatically lead to more equitable outcomes for students. Educators and educational leaders engaged in this work must intentionally use an equity lens to give driving purpose to personalizing learning for students. This, in turn, influences how we use personalized learning frameworks and instructional practices, as well as how educators and students perceive this work.

Interested to know how equity and personalize learning intersect? Check out our blog posts:

- [How Can Personalized Learning Support Educational Equity?](#)
- [Personalized Learning and the Shift from a Pedagogy of Poverty to a Pedagogy of Plenty](#)

Additional Resources:

- Article: [Erasing the Look and Feel of Poverty](#)
- Paper: [Equity-Centered Design Framework](#)
- Research: [Equity and Personalized Learning: A Research Review by the Council of Chief State School Officer \(2017\)](#)
- Paper: [In Pursuit of Equality: A Framework for Equity Strategies in Personalized, Competency-Based Education \(2017\)](#)
- Paper: [Designing for Equity, By CompetencyWorks and iNACOL \(2018\)](#)
- Blog: [Making equity a first principle of personalized learning, by the Christensen Institute](#)

Starting with Personalized Learning



1. What Are The Risks To Avoid When Implementing Personalized Learning?

Without fail, one of the first questions district leadership teams ask us is, “What have other districts done that we should avoid?”

Through our work over the past several years, we’ve identified the six key risks for districts:

- **Risk #1: Lack of Clear Vision, Narrative, and Rationale**

Many districts struggle to paint a clear picture of how personalized learning looks different from what happens in classrooms today. Instead, they turn to educational jargon and say things like, “we want to see 21st-century skills and higher-order thinking skills.” Sounds great, right? But if I’m a teacher, I don’t know what I should be doing differently. Or if I’m a parent, I don’t know how my child’s experience will be different – much less improved – than before. And while school leaders and teachers may understand that they are being asked to focus on different instructional strategies, such as more small group instruction or flipped teaching, they may not be able to articulate why they are taking these new approaches. Without a clear vision and narrative, district leaders have trouble identifying early wins or proof points of success that would help them increase buy-in and offer exemplars of good practice.

- **Risk #2: Curricular and Instructional Misalignment**

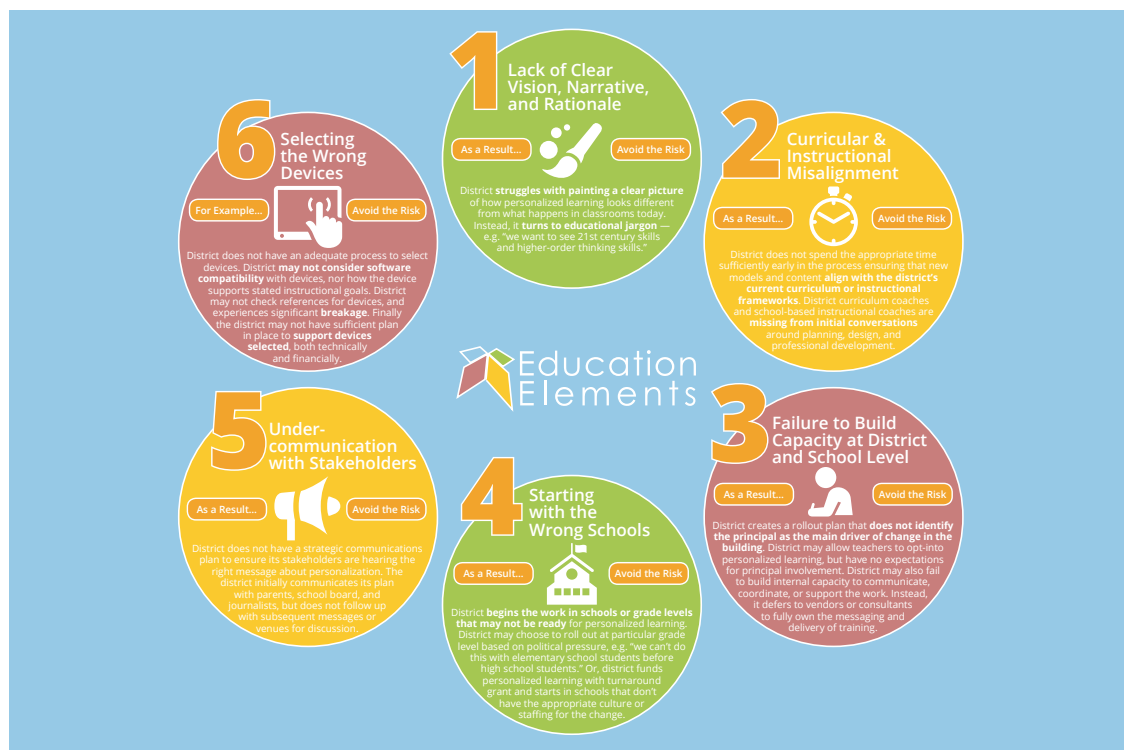
Many districts do not spend the appropriate time sufficiently and early in the process to make sure that new instructional models and content align with the district’s current curriculum or instructional frameworks. Often, district curriculum coaches and school-based instructional coaches are missing from initial conversations around planning, design, and professional development. As a result, school leaders and teachers are unclear on expectations and how the new instructional model “fits in” with what they were already doing – for example, what does differentiation look like in a personalized system? The lack of clarity can



often lead to a compliance mindset among school leaders and teachers. Schools that adopt a compliance mindset often put a new label on current practices -- “we’re already doing this, we just need to call it something different” -- rather than embracing the opportunity to go beyond current practices. Schools that adopt a compliance mindset also frequently miss the opportunity to increase student choice, to offer additional pathways for student learning based on need, or to rethink how to personalize their professional development for teachers.

- **Risk #3: Failure to Build Capacity at District and School Level**

Many districts create a rollout plan that only involves the principal in the periphery. For example, they allow teachers to opt-into personalized learning but have no expectations for the principal’s involvement. It’s hard for changes to stick at a school if the leader is not involved! Some districts also fail to build internal capacity at the district level to communicate, coordinate, or support the work. For example, they defer to vendors or consultants to fully own the messaging and delivery of training and do not build district capacity to support work. As a result, the district may have a few shining stars at the classroom level, but limited examples of excellent, whole-school shifts to personalization. Furthermore, once the vendors or consultants leave, there is no one with the capacity or experience to continue the work.





- **Risk #4: Starting with the Wrong Schools**

We often see districts begin rolling out personalized learning in schools or grade levels that may not be ready for the change. The decisions are sometimes made due to political or funding pressures. District leaders may feel pressured to start at the high school level to fix low engagement or poor academic results. They may worry that parents and community members will object to providing elementary school students with additional devices or technology before high schoolers when in fact, elementary school is a great place to begin personalized learning!

Additionally, we often see investment in personalized learning – technology, professional development, coaching positions, or design services – directed by the availability of grants for turnaround schools. We strongly believe personalized learning is the right approach for all students, and have seen great success in turnaround schools. However, turnaround schools sometimes do not have the appropriate culture or staffing to sustain the change that personalized learning requires. By starting personalized learning in places where it may take a long time to see success, district and school leaders may be unable to identify early wins that would help them increase buy-in across the district and with parents and school board.

- **Risk #5: Under-communication with Stakeholders**

Districts often fail to create a strategic communications plan to ensure their stakeholders hear the right message about personalization. A district may initially communicate their plan with families, the school board, and journalists, but they fail to follow up with subsequent messages or venues for discussion. Lack of a communications plan can have many implications. Families may only hear about the infusion of technology into classrooms, not the pedagogical changes, and think that students are not getting sufficient instruction from teachers – “teachers aren’t doing their job!” Many times the school board does not understand the criteria by which the district will measure the success of the work. They do not know the difference between “this is not working” and “this just takes more time,” and withdraw their support. We’ve also seen instances where journalists are not provided with consistent information about the rollout, and therefore write stories



with inaccurate information or cover schools with poor implementations. These messages get amplified and make it more difficult to scale and invest in future transformational work.

- **Risk #6: Selecting the Wrong Devices**

We've saved this risk for last because it's one of the most talked about. Poor device decisions often attract the most publicity, and for that reason, districts have a laser-like focus on device selection – a critical decision for sure, but we want to make sure this risk doesn't overshadow the others on the list. Districts often run into problems when they don't have an adequate process to select devices and thus encounter significant issues once devices are deployed to students. A district may not consider software compatibility with devices, nor how the device supports stated instructional goals. A district may not check references for devices, and as a result, experience significant breakage. Finally, a district may not have a plan in place to support selected devices, both technically and financially, which can result in unusable devices stacked in hallways and offices. Talk about a PR nightmare!

Discover the Six Risks to Avoid When Implementing Personalized Learning, and How to Avoid Them

To learn more about these risks, and most importantly, how to avoid them, you can check out and download our infographic on the [Six Personalized Learning Risks for School Districts and How to Avoid Them](#)



Download the Infographic now

Check Out These Two Related Resources:

- [6 Risks to Avoid When Implementing Personalized Learning Part 1](#)
- [6 Risks to Avoid When Implementing Personalized Learning Part 2](#)



2. How Do You Start Implementing Personalized Learning

Whether you're a district leader making the shift to personalized learning across your whole district, or you're a teacher shifting your classroom, it is difficult to know what to do first. There are so many unknowns, and so many questions, mainly: How do I start? And where do I start?

The answer? It depends. Each district is unique, with its own challenges, its own experience, and its own factors and community. But we can always rely on best practices based on our experience working with over 750 schools and 140 districts across the US.

If you are a leader, here are [Four Suggestions to Introduce Personalized Learning into Your Organization](#):

1. Start with a compelling and authentic “why”
2. Develop an operational definition specific to your district
3. Create meaningful experiential opportunities
4. Embrace the process of prototyping, testing, and iterating

Some of our district partners shared their experiences around starting their personalized learning journey. Check out these articles:

- [First Steps to Personalize Learning](#) (Waco ISD, TX): Here are a few ideas for how your district can get started. Personalized learning for students is a unique experience for each district and its community. It looks and acts differently based upon a community's needs and values, but there are some general resources available to help. Here are some of the steps to begin with:
 - A. First, seek out local and national organizations that are doing work around personalized learning and find out what resources they have that can help your district implement your vision.
 - B. Second, expand your network of leaders in the district and value the collaborative process necessary for implementing a personalized learning vision.
 - C. Third, embrace “not knowing”.



- [Personalized Learning Journey Begins with a Vision](#) (Loudoun County Schools, VA): When you are going through a large amount of change and such a significant paradigm shift in educational pedagogy, the culture and the relationships within the organization must be strong and nurturing. As a leader, you must be willing to be vulnerable with your staff and to celebrate and highlight risk-taking, the act of being willing to try. It is in the trying, the multiple attempts, and the revisions that you can start to see Personalized Learning taking shape in your classrooms.
- [Building momentum and leadership at the same time is important](#) (Yuma, AZ): Teachers are the key to implementing personalized learning and building momentum with district and site goals. They need the right amount of support and guidance to be able to move forward with new ideas. It is important to build leadership teams that will be fully dedicated to supporting all personalized learning agents on site to further develop leadership and momentum. Districts should focus on training their teams on their personalized learning vision and implementation, in addition to creating regular training focused on leadership development and capacity building.

If you're a teacher, you may be thinking about your classroom design, what tools and curriculum you will be using, and how you will be managing the students and allocating time to each one of them. All of these are real concerns, but before getting to those questions, the most important and [first step to personalize learning, is knowing your students](#). Knowing your students, consider [this tool for the first 20 days](#). And in this post, [How to Make the Most of the First 20 Days of Personalized Learning](#), you will find an overview of how this tool is set up, to help you make the most of your initial steps.

What Else to Consider?

Administrators should also consider clear parameters to roll-out personalized learning within their districts. Check out this infographic on Design Parameters, and its related blog post [Design Parameters for Personalized Learning](#).

But whether you are a teacher, principal or district leader, you don't have to go it alone. We created a Personalized Learning Design and Launch Toolkit for schools and districts that want to make the shift to student-centered learning on their own.



The [Personalized Learning Design & Launch Kit](#) includes:

- A fully baked project plan, meeting and workshop agendas, and slides and resources to guide the implementation of personalized learning
- A complete kit to enable district, school, and teacher leaders to develop staff through:
 - Building a shared understanding of the what, why and how of personalized learning
 - Designing classroom models centered on student needs
 - Providing opportunities for reflection and iteration
- Researched and tested activities based on the same Education Elements framework and methodology that has launched personalized models in over 750 schools across 140 districts.

Personalized Learning Design & Launch Kit - Case Study

One leader of instructional technology told us that **the old Do-It-Yourself way had been too time consuming** – he had been trying to go from nothing to something, a task which required a significant investment of time.

With the **Personalized Learning Design & Launch Kit**, the materials are **98%** all the way there.

He noted that the materials give him a sense that Ed Elements kept revisiting the way the materials are designed, using them with district leaders and regularly revising them. **“You guys have thought of all the things that are important for us to know.”**

In turn, his focus has quickly gone beyond research and explaining the history of personalized learning, to how to successfully change instructional practice.

“We haven’t come across anything where we’ve said, we aren’t using this.”


























3. How Do You Implement Personalized Learning? [A Framework]

Every time we sit down with a superintendent, CTO, CAO, teacher, principal, coach, board member, or dean to discuss their goals for personalized learning, they always want to know: “Where should we start? What should we learn from other districts’ mistakes? What should we focus on next?” After answering these questions multiple times, we started keeping a list.

We saw that if a district lacked a clear vision for personalized learning, schools and staff wouldn’t understand the rationale behind the initiative. Likewise, if there wasn’t a culture of innovation present, it was difficult to build ownership and sustain excitement and support. Even things like budgeting and staffing became major issues if districts did not account for how they might need to shift in this new, personalized environment.

We took this list of lessons learned and came up with a Personalized Learning Implementation Framework (AKA, Personalized Learning Framework or our “bingo board”) with five key categories, and five focus areas in each category. We use these [25 focus areas for implementing personalized learning](#) to guide our work at both the school and district level and to help school systems identify strengths, areas of need, and potential roadblocks.

PERSONALIZED LEARNING IMPLEMENTATION FRAMEWORK

STRATEGY	DESIGN	CURRICULUM & INSTRUCTION	SUPPORT	OPERATIONS
 PL Vision Alignment	 Culture of Innovation	 Curriculum Inventory	 Roles to Support PL Teachers	 Devices and Digital Tools
 PL Rollout Plan	 PL Instructional Models	 Online & Offline Curriculum Alignment	 PL Professional Learning Plan	 IT Support Plan
 Multi-Year Roadmap	 Students As Self-Directed Learners	 Digital Portfolio and Usage	 PL Resource Bank	 Infrastructure Upgrade Plan
 Initiative Alignment	 Schedule Aligned to PL Design	 Grading, Assessment, and Data Culture	 PL Coaching and Evaluation System	 3-5 Year Budget
 PL Expectations & Success Indicators	 Teacher Role in PL Instructional Model	 Strategy for Special Student Populations	 PL Communication Plan	 Workforce Plan
DATA ANALYSIS TO MONITOR SUCCESS AND CONTINUALLY IMPROVE				



[This personalized learning implementation framework](#) has been helpful to district leaders at all stages of the implementation process. For district leaders just starting their journey, the framework has given them clarity on priorities. For district leaders who have been moving towards personalized learning for several years, the framework serves as a check to make sure they haven't lost sight of essential building blocks and gives them guidance around what to do next. In this [personalized learning implementation framework white paper](#), you will find specific examples of how the framework has been and can be used.

For example, the personalized learning implementation framework forms the foundation of our readiness assessment. We ask schools to reflect on ten areas of the framework to determine their starting strengths and areas of need for personalized learning. We've also worked to help districts and schools better chart their course – set goals and priorities and determine the progress they are making throughout the year. The Personalized Learning Implementation Framework helps to articulate focus areas that we then set goals and actions around.

The focus areas are as follows:

Readiness Focus

Identifies the challenges, strengths, and opportunities that stakeholders will face as they begin personalized learning. Helps schools prioritize specific areas for growth.





District Focus Areas

To support our schools to design and implement PL based on the above goals and expectations, we commit to the following district focus areas and actions.



How will we know we're meeting our goal?
How can we get there?



How will we know we're meeting our goal?
How can we get there?



How will we know we're meeting our goal?
How can we get there?



How will we know we're meeting our goal?
How can we get there?

Personalized Learning in the Classroom



1. What Are The Key Elements Of Personalized Learning?

At Education Elements, we have established our own key elements of personalized learning, called the [Core Four Elements of Personalized Learning](#) – elements that will lead to a successful personalized learning classroom. These elements can guide educators in creating a winning strategy for their district, schools, and classrooms.



These four elements are:

1. **Student Reflection and Ownership** - encourages a focus on metacognitive strategies for learning and prompts students to pursue their passions and ownership of their work
2. **Data-Driven Decisions** - allows teachers and students to understand and act on their strengths and needs
3. **Targeted Instruction** - provides a critical structure for teachers and students to problem-solve with one another and meet individual learning goals
4. **Flexible Content and Tools** - creates a mix of resources responsive to student needs and interests that allows for differentiated path, pace and performance tasks



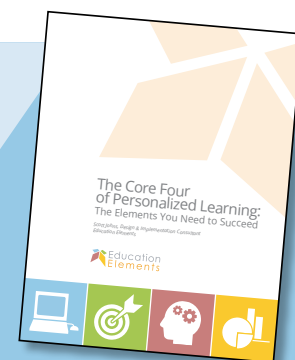
“The Core Four has provided a framework for our district in our implementation year for personalized learning. We were able to provide professional development around each of the Core Four areas to increase our teachers’ understanding regarding how to personalize learning for our students. We will continue to plan for deeper understanding and improved implementation as we move forward on our PL journey.”

— Dr. Suzanne Alka, Associate Superintendent, Yuma School District One (AZ)

To provide actionable ideas and insights from districts which have successfully implemented personalized learning using the Core Four Elements of Personalized Learning, we created the white paper, [The Core Four of Personalized Learning](#), which includes a framework that can help you get started or take the next step – for your whole district or within your own classroom. The white paper provides guidance on how to clearly communicate to your stakeholders the specific ways that instruction will change in a personalized learning environment.

Download the Core Four of Personalized Learning White Paper to Learn More About the Key Elements of PL

The Core Four white paper includes a framework, actionable ideas and insights from districts who have successfully implemented personalized learning. It can help you get started or take the next step - for your whole district or within your own classroom.



**Download the
White Paper**



Additional Resources:

- Blog: [The Core Four Elements of Personalized Learning](#)
- Blog: [Personalized Learning Requires Flexibility: An Update to Education Elements' Core Four](#)
- Blog: [Bringing the Core Four Home: Helping Parents Understand Personalized Learning](#)
- Blog: [The Core Four Continuum - a New Framework for Personalized Learning Implementation](#)
- Blog: [What is the Composition of Personalized Learning?](#)

2. What Does Personalized Learning Look Like?

Personalized learning is a practice that transforms the teaching experience for teachers and the learning experience for students. But it's difficult for many to imagine the difference, and before investing time and energy in personalizing learning, a lot of district leaders want to peek at existing Personalized Learning classrooms.

We have a few answers to these questions as there are some standards of practice that can apply to all personalized classrooms, like the Core Four. But the truth is, personalized learning varies from one classroom to another, from school to school and district to district. Instructional models vary to meet the needs of their students, the specificities of their population, etc.

- **EXAMPLES:** Having said that, here are Six Examples of What Personalized Learning Looks Like. The article includes examples from districts including Loudoun County Public Schools, VA, Rochester School District, NH, Wake County Public School System, NC, and the Enlarged City School District of Middletown, NY.
- **LOOK-FORS:** Teachers and school and district leaders also need look-fors, which is why we developed the Core Four Continuum of Personalized Learning. This rubric was designed for educators at all levels for to self-reflect and set goals across the Core Four. It is also meant to ensure personalized learning is implemented with high fidelity and success. Check out [the podcast](#).



- **ELEMENTARY:** How might Personalized Learning or the Core Four look in action? Middletown produced several terrific videos of classroom teachers modeling each of the Core Four and discussing how they make these elements come alive.
- **SECONDARY:** And if you are specifically interested in how personalized learning looks like in a secondary school, check out the articles *Seeing is Believing: Inside Personalized Learning at Myrtle Beach Middle School* and *Personalized Learning Instructional Models for Secondary Schools*, or view this video case study from Hartford Public Schools, CT.

Additional Resource:

A report announced by INACOL in 2017, in their blog post [What Does Personalized Learning Look Like in Schools?](#), defines and describes personalized learning and illustrates what personalized learning looks like in practice from student and teacher perspectives at the classroom and instructional levels. It contains a list of real-life examples to help you understand the potential of personalized learning to improve student outcomes, increase opportunity, and address current myths about personalized learning.

3. What Is The Best Classroom Design AKA Instructional Model For Personalized Learning?

This is a question that a lot of teachers and leaders struggle with. And from our perspective, there is no one answer to this question.

As Michael B. Horn says in his article [Choosing Your Blended Learning Model for Districts and Schools](#), *“There is no ‘best model’. The best model is the right model for your school—or classroom—given your circumstances, students, and objectives.”*

In fact, the best instructional model for a specific classroom is the one that meets the unique needs and circumstances of those specific students.



In this article about [How To Pick The Right Instructional Model For Your Classroom](#), an alumna team member introduces the three base models for personalized learning – station rotation, playlists, and flipped lessons – what they are, and which classrooms they are ideal for from both a teacher’s perspective and a student’s perspective. Please note that there are plenty of other models. The ones listed above are fairly common and successful ones, in other words, the need-to-know models. But keep in mind that these models can be layered, modified, and improved, and used at different times within the same class or school.

Additional Resources:

- Infographic: [Personalized Learning Models for Elementary Schools](#)
- Infographic: [Personalized Learning Models for Secondary Schools](#)
- Guide: [How to Build a Personalized Learning Playlist for Your Classroom](#)
- Book: [The Blended Workbook: Learning to Design the Schools of Our Future](#) (which offers a straightforward rubric to help make this decision simple for educators and allows them to customize it to their needs. You can download chapter one of this book and get a discount code [here](#))
- White paper: [BLENDED \(R\)EVOLUTION: How 5 teachers are modifying the Station Rotation to fit students’ needs](#)

Making the decision around which instructional model is better to use at a classroom level gets much easier for teachers when the district creates alignment across classrooms and schools and guides them with some [personalized learning design parameters](#). School leaders can facilitate this alignment by ensuring teacher autonomy is considered throughout the process of establishing these parameters for personalized learning and creating synergy across classrooms and schools. Download the [Personalized Learning Design Parameters Guide](#) or check out [this blog post](#).



4. How Does Personalized-Learning Align with Project-Based Learning?

- Choose a project that reflects their interests, strengths, and perspectives.
- Build the knowledge and skills necessary during a sustained inquiry.
- Receive the feedback and support to produce a quality project.

The Core Four framework illustrates the alignment between PL and PBL in the following ways:



Flexible content and tools build the key knowledge and understandings a student needs for any project. The differentiated path and pace allow all students to engage in sustained inquiry.



Targeted instruction facilitates a supportive critique of the project, allows for revision, and provides a structure for teachers to support students with similar interests or knowledge-building need.



Reflection supports the inquiry and the student's ability to choose a challenging problem or question that is meaningful to them. It gives students the tools they need to iterate their work and seek out support when they need it. **Ownership** ensures that projects are authentic for all students.



Teachers make **data-driven decisions** that allow them to choose those strategies and instructional models that will ensure all students are building the success skills necessary to produce a quality project.

*Underlined text identifies the *Essential Project Elements* of Project Based Learning, as defined by the [Buck Institute](https://www.buckinstitute.org/).



Personalized Learning and Project-Based Learning IN ACTION

- [Loudoun County Public Schools \(VA\)](#):

LCPS sees personalized learning as a crucial instructional framework to help students engage in “authentic, challenging problems” that lead students to deeper understanding. The division communicates the alignment between PL and the deeper learning initiatives of Project-Based Learning and Performance Assessments in their academic vision and professional learning workshops with Education Elements. As a result, students across the division develop projects that are meaningful and rigorous, and they receive the individual support necessary to be successful.

Advice for Teachers and Leaders Combining PL and Project-Based Learning.

- Students should take time to brainstorm possible projects and reflect on which are most meaningful to them. This reflection will ensure that students develop a project that they are genuinely curious about.
- Teachers could design a playlist that helps roadmap the process involved in developing a project. This will build student ownership in the process and allow teachers to focus on individual support.
- A station rotation model could be used to allow students to (1) independently research their project topic, (2) share and collaboratively brainstorm ideas with their peers, (3) receive feedback from the teacher in a small group.
- Teachers could use data to identify below-grade level students who should receive additional targeted instruction during the development of the project. This will ensure that all students are successful with grade-level content.
- Research using reliable digital sources allow each student to build knowledge of their specific project topic. Teachers could guide younger students to specific digital sources and teach older students to properly assess the reliability of sources.



- School leaders could create the time and space for students to publicly share their projects. This could be at a parent night, in a public and well-trafficked location in the school, and/or celebrated in school communication tool like a newsletter.
- Teachers and school leaders could leverage their personal and professional network to bring in “experts” who could provide additional knowledge for students, give feedback, and even help grade final projects.

Additional Resource:

- Blog: [Reflections on Personalized Learning and Project-based Learning](#), on how personalized learning could enhance project-based learning.

Personalized Learning Curriculum, Digital Content, Tools and Technology



1. How To Build Curriculum For Personalized Learning? (How To Select Content and Tools For Personalized Learning?)

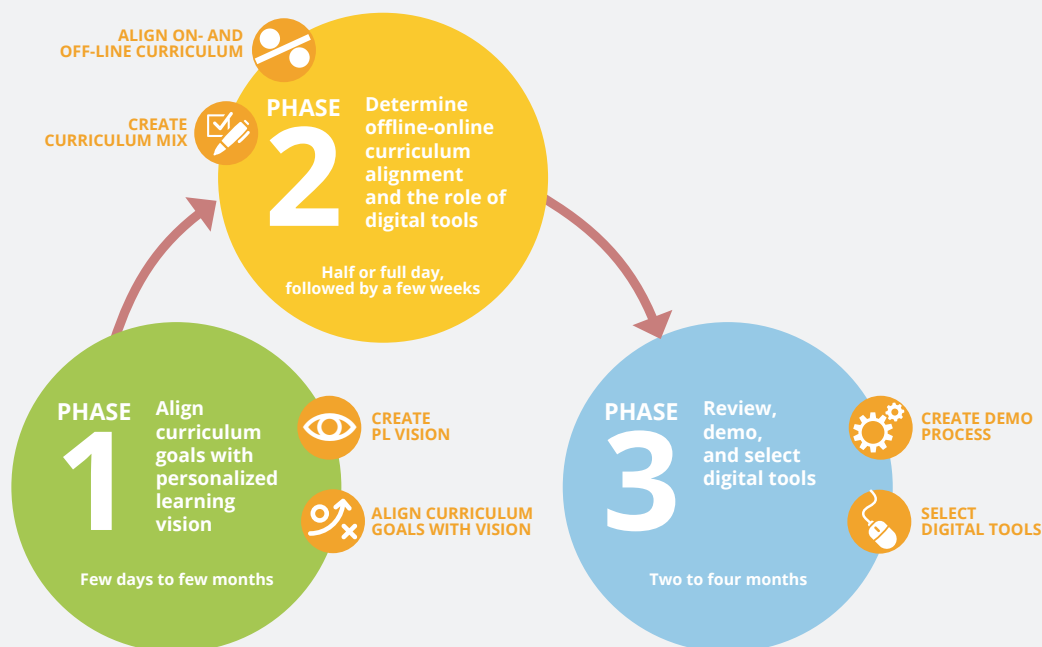
When it comes to curriculum, educators are typically very familiar with its use in a traditional classroom, but with the shift to personalized learning, curricular decisions can become more complex and bring up new questions to consider, such as:

- What is the role and function of curriculum and digital content and tools in a personalized learning classroom?
- How can we create a sense of alignment between online and offline curriculum?
- Does our current curriculum already work? If not, what needs to change?
- How can we navigate the hundreds of digital tools available?
- Who should be included in discussions about curriculum to support personalized learning?

At Education Elements, we believe that when it comes to personalized learning, districts need to think differently about curriculum, and that curricular decisions should not be siloed or disjointed. They should align with a widely shared vision and purpose for personalizing instruction.

Through our work with over 140 districts we have determined that while curriculum and online content selection can be a challenge, a structured approach makes all the difference. We have identified three phases of curriculum alignment and selection. These phases do not represent a one-time process, but rather an iterative cycle that school and district leaders should follow to ensure that their curricular resources meet the dynamic needs of students, teachers, and the community.

Three Phases Of Curriculum Alignment And Selection



PHASE 1: Align Curriculum Goals with Personalized Learning Vision

A clear vision for personalized learning is an essential first step before any decisions about curriculum, instructional models, support, or professional learning can be made. We recommend that districts identify their needs, vision, and strategy before developing a curriculum plan and digital content portfolio. Vision-setting can take anywhere from a few days to a few months and should include the voice of teachers, students, and school and district administrators.

PHASE 2: Determine offline-online curriculum alignment and the role of digital tools

Now that you've aligned your curriculum goals with your personalized learning vision, you're ready to determine your mix of offline and online curriculum tools. We recommend starting with a half- or full-day workshop on curriculum alignment followed by a few weeks of conversations, and including school administrators and teachers in discussions around curriculum needs, though you may host the first workshop with a core district team to start.



PHASE 3: Review, demo, and select digital tools

At this point you're ready to review, demo, and select digital tools. This phase is key to ensuring you get the right tools based on the specific needs of your teachers and students, and that you include key stakeholders in the process. We recommend demoing tools for at least a few weeks and including feedback from students and teachers. From start to finish, the review, demo, and selection of digital tools might take 2-4 months.

Additional Resources:

- White paper series:
 - GUIDE TO SELECTING CURRICULUM TO SUPPORT PERSONALIZED LEARNING Phase One: Align Curriculum Goals with Personalized Learning Vision
 - GUIDE TO SELECTING CURRICULUM TO SUPPORT PERSONALIZED LEARNING Phase Two: Determine Offline-Online Curriculum Alignment and the Role of Digital Tools
 - GUIDE TO SELECTING CURRICULUM TO SUPPORT PERSONALIZED LEARNING Phase Three: Review, Demo, and Select Digital Tools
- Blog: Defining the Purpose of Curriculum in Personalized Learning
- Blog: 9 Steps to Buying the Right Digital Content for Your District
- Blog: Three Things to Consider When Selecting Digital Tools
- Blog: New Bedfellows: the Marriage of Personalized Learning and High-Quality Curriculum



2. Do You Need Technology To Personalize Learning?

The answer is “no”. No, we do not need technology to personalize learning in general, but it is helpful to have technology to be able to personalize learning at scale. According to Adam Newman, founding partner of Education Growth Advisors (EGA), “technology isn’t actually required for personalization, but the tech makes it possible to personalize at scale.” In Education Elements CEO Anthony Kim’s book, [The Personalized Learning Playbook](#), he says, “The components of customized education have always existed, but never before have we had the capability to extend that personalized approach to all students of all abilities. The accessibility and effectiveness of technology is at a “tipping point” where it can deliver on its promise while creating more room for creativity and connection than ever before.”

To be clear, technology serves personalized learning. Personalized learning does not serve technology.

Additional Resources:

- Blog: [The Technology Trap: Can You Personalize Learning Without Devices?](#)
- Blog: [On This Episode of Mythbusters: Personalized Does Not Mean Digital](#)
- Article: [Without the Right Curriculum, Personalized Learning Is Just Another Fad](#)
- Article: [Personalizing Learning Without Technology to Address Student Needs](#)
- Article: [Personalized Learning Isn’t About Tech](#)



3. How Does Technology Support Personalized Learning?

“While technology access alone may not improve instruction or learning, when used effectively, technology has the potential to engage students, empower teachers, and connect them to each other and to some of the best resources the world has to offer. These results do have the power to improve instruction and learning and, for that reason, we include this priority to support projects that would leverage technology.”

— Source: U.S. Department of Education, Race to the Top—District 2012 Application

Technology supports and amplifies personalized learning in countless ways: it opens up the opportunity for teachers to provide students with immediate feedback within a student’s ZPD; it can create space for more small group tailored lessons; it can reach students who have come of age in a digital world; it can enable students to learn anytime and anywhere; and it can connect students to others. It is a fascinating tool (but not the only one!).

Teachers who try to provide personalized learning to students without the support of technology have a heroic task. It’s nearly impossible to sustain the long hours required to teach, review material, and provide individual feedback for student growth. For a teacher today, curation of information and helping students create knowledge is as important as delivering information, and that’s one primary place where technology comes in. Here are four ways technology amplifies the reach and role of the teacher:

- A. **Feedback:** Proper individualized feedback is critical to maintaining the rate of learning and favorable persistence. Most of the online courses and digital content programs are designed to provide students with immediate feedback and scaffolding. It would be impossible for a teacher to provide the same frequency of feedback to every student on a regular basis. It would be nearly impossible for teachers to create individualized quizzes for each student based on where they are in their learning progression.



- B. **Small Group Formation:** Teachers use a variety of formative assessment data to determine small groups. One source of this data can be through the use of technology; do students need additional time on a particular standard or concept, or is there a group ready for acceleration?
- C. **Collaboration:** Many of us have tried collaborating on hand written essays. We would send back and forth versions with notes and comments, but it can be cumbersome, time-consuming, and make collaboration challenging. Products which have a social aspect or sophisticated collaboration capabilities like Google Docs allow multiple authors to work on the same document at the same time, and writing, editing, and commenting can happen in real time and in the moment from teacher to student, and student to student.
- D. **Creation:** The barrier to entry to create anything is very low today. You can create and publish a movie on YouTube using your phone. You can publish a book in days online using Amazon, Blurb, or BookBaby, among many other services. Instead of die-casting a mold using machinery, a 3D printer can build a part within hours. Even an internet software company can be started on a shoestring; in 2000, the average startup cost was \$5 million, and in 2011 it was \$5,000 due to cloud computing. When used properly, new digital tools give us a unique opportunity to demonstrate our creations more frequently and easily.

In a variety of ways, technology holds promise to enable personalization to an extent that was not possible at a large scale in an earlier era. Technology's greatest role may be to manage the complexity of the personalization process. By occasionally providing instruction or supporting independent learning, technology can also enable educators to take a more personalized approach in their own teaching efforts and other activities they undertake to support student learning and development.

Additional Resources:

- Article: [5 Edtech Tools That Take Personalized Learning to the Next Level](#)
- Playbook: [The Personalized Learning Playbook: Why the time is now and how to do it](#)



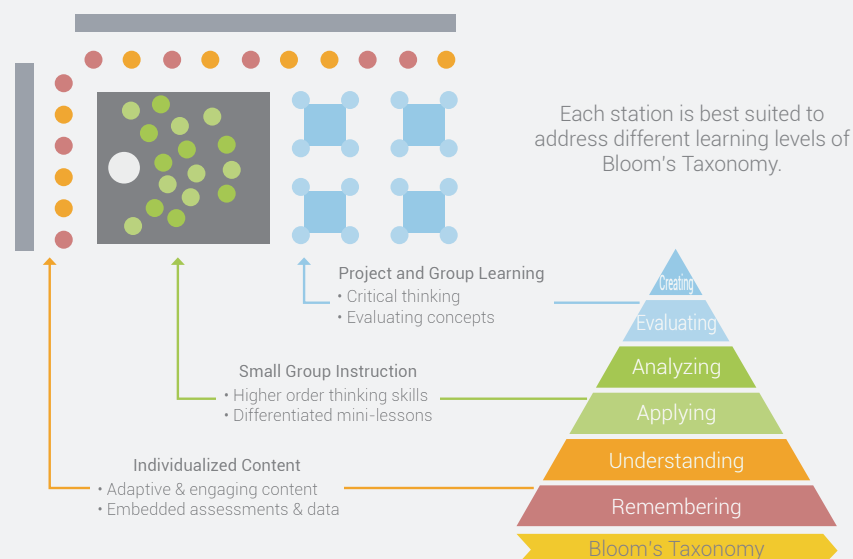
4. Will Personalized Learning Technology Replace the Role of the Teacher?

Personalized learning redefines the teacher's role but does not replace teachers.

The transition from a classic educational model to a personalized learning one isn't an easy shift for teachers. It's a departure from the familiar – the setting can be a new, physically different one; there can be changes in their roles and responsibilities.

Technology is not being introduced to replace teachers, as some might assume. In fact, while technology is a great way to offer more to students (e.g. through adaptive content), it still has limitations. No matter how “smart” a product or computer program is, it can't compare to the knowledge, life experience, and community that a teacher brings into the classroom. Computers can't create relationships with students. Programs can't connect learning to their lives the way a teacher who knows her students can.

In our experience, personalized learning amplifies the role of the teacher. Consider Bloom's Taxonomy. Technology is great for the bottom of the pyramid – for things like understanding and remembering. And while it can certainly play a role at the top, its introduction to the classroom often frees up the time of the teacher to focus on things like applying, creating, and synthesizing. In the diagram below, we model out how a 3 station rotation model maps to Bloom's Taxonomy and elevates the role of the teacher to focusing on higher order tasks and critical thinking.





It is hard to emphasize enough that technology should not replace teachers and that personalized learning should not either. The “personal” element of personalized learning really has more to do with people than it will ever have to do with devices.

Additional Resources:

- Blog: [On This Episode of Mythbusters: Personalized Does Not Mean Digital](#)
- Article: [Personalized Learning: The importance of teachers in a technology-driven world](#)
- Blog: [How Teachers Are at the Core of Personalized Learning, not Technology](#)

5. How Does Personalized Learning Align with Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)?

CASEL Framework for Systemic SEL

The Consortium for Academic, Social-Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) as “the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.” The Framework consists of the following competencies:

- **Self-awareness:** Know your strengths and limitations, with a well-grounded sense of confidence, optimism, and a “growth mindset.”
- **Self-management:** Effectively manage stress, control impulses, and motivate yourself to set and achieve goals.
- **Social awareness:** Understand the perspectives of others and empathize with them, including those from diverse backgrounds and cultures.
- **Relationship skills:** Communicate clearly, listen well, cooperate with others, resist inappropriate social pressure, negotiate conflict constructively, and seek and offer help when needed.
- **Responsible decision-making:** Make constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions based on ethical standards, safety, and social norms.



ASCD Whole Child

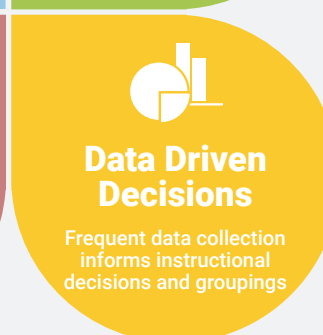
ASCD's Whole Child approach is an effort to transition from a focus on narrowly defined academic achievement to one that promotes the long-term development and success of all children

- Each student enters school healthy and learns about and practices a healthy lifestyle.
- Each student learns in an environment that is physically and emotionally safe for students and adults.
- Each student is actively engaged in learning and is connected to the school and broader community.
- Each student has access to personalized learning and is supported by qualified, caring adults.
- Each student is challenged academically and prepared for success in college or further study and for employment and participation in a global environment.

The Core Four framework further illustrates the alignment between PL and SEL in the following ways:

Flexible content and tools ensure that the materials and **environment** meet students' **social and cultural needs**, affording opportunities to build **social awareness**.

Student Reflection supports student **self-awareness**, including recognition of strengths and growth areas. **Ownership** ensures that students practice **self-management**; they own their learning by setting and working toward **personal and academic goals**.



Targeted instruction means that students are operating at their zone of proximal development, which supports **self-awareness**. **Intentional grouping by skill level or interest area** requires students to collaborate with peers, building their **relationship skills**.

Data-driven decisions support the development of a student data culture, providing **students an opportunity to use their data** to map out next steps in their learning and **make responsible decisions**.

***Orange text** identifies the *Core Competencies* from CASEL ***Blue text** identifies the tenets of ASCD Whole Child



Advice for Teachers and Leaders utilizing PL and Social-Emotional Learning

- Students could use mindfulness tactics to develop their self-management, and take ownership of their learning goals.
- Teachers could utilize morning meeting structures to support student reflection, ownership, and a supportive environment. Students will learn to monitor their personal and academic growth.
- SEL practices in the classroom and in the school can create a culture of responsiveness among teachers and administrators. A culture of responsiveness is a precondition for sustained change and capacity building.
- Leaders can offer a Personalized Professional Learning plan to emphasize the implementation of SEL to meet individual student needs in their school.
- Throughout the Common Core, there are ways to incorporate SEL and PL such as:
 - Self-awareness and management through the writing process (planning, revising, editing, rewriting).
 - Responsible decision-making by focusing on Math Practice 1: Make sense of problems and persevere in solving them.
 - Relationship skills by preparing for and participating effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively in literacy.

6. How Does Personalized Learning Align with Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS)?

As more districts adopt personalized learning strategies, Education Elements has increasingly been called upon to articulate the alignment between PL and other initiatives in education. This series of briefs seeks to illustrate the role of PL to support, guide, or drive other learning initiatives in ways that are tangible for teachers and leaders.



What is personalized learning (PL)?

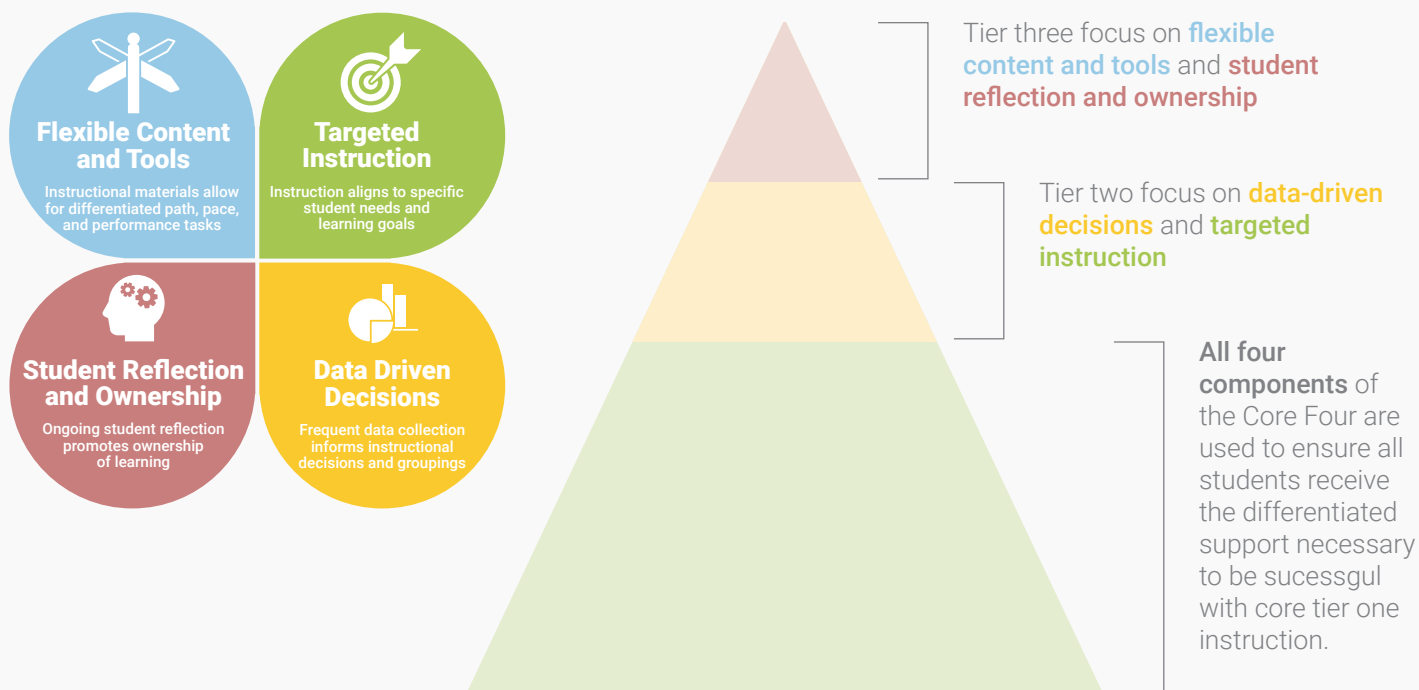
We believe that personalized learning means that students get the core instruction they need, when they need it. The Core Four of Personalized Learning identifies the four major shifts in instruction we would expect to see: the flexible use of online and offline content, targeted instruction, data-driven decisions, and increasing student ownership and reflection.

What is MTSS?

A multi-tiered system of support is a framework that integrates academic interventions and behavioral supports. These interventions and supports are divided between three tiers, often illustrated as a triangle. Tier one, at the bottom, represents the core academic and behavioral instruction and supports for all students, and tier three, at the top, are the most intense interventions for the top 5% of students.

If MTSS is the model, then PL represents the pieces that fill in that model.

- Personalized learning is how teachers successfully meet ALL student needs in core instruction.
- Two Core Four components, data-driven decisions and targeted instruction, explain how schools (1) identify tier two students, (2) provide them with additional support, and (3) monitor their progress.
- The other Core Four components, flexible content and tools and student reflection and ownership, explain how digital and offline content can provide remediation and help students build their individual agency.
- Often, successful implementation of MTSS requires districts and schools to be organized responsively. Education Elements CEO, Anthony Kim, wrote [The NEW School Rules: 6 Vital Practices for Thriving and Responsive Schools](#), which describes the six practices that lead to thriving, responsive schools.



Advice for teachers and leaders utilizing PL and a Multi-Tiered System of Support

- Personalized learning is the essential component of tier one. PL allows teachers to meet the needs of ALL their diverse learners. For example:
 - Teachers may use **targeted instruction** to ensure below-grade level students get more time with a teacher on grade-level work.
 - Students may engage with a variety of **content and tools** to practice and demonstrate mastery of grade-level standards. For example, a student could practice multiplication on a paper workbook, spatially illustrate multiplication with blocks, and visually on a digital content program.
 - Teachers and schools monitor **data and make decisions** to ensure all students are getting the differentiated support necessary to be successful with tier one instruction. They also use this to determine if students should receive tier two and three intervention.



- Increasing opportunities for **student reflection** is an important component of the behavioral supports required by MTSS. Explicit teaching of positive behavior can also build **student ownership**.
- Read more about how PL differentiates tier one instruction for ALL students in our [White paper on the Core Four of Personalized Learning](#).
- School and district use of data represents how tier two and three interventions are targeted and how those students' progress is continually monitored for effectiveness. [Read more](#) about how Education Elements supports schools and districts to manage change that supports robust student learning.
- MTSS is one way we provide equitable access to core instruction. Read more about how PL supports educational equity in [our blog post](#).
- Successful implementation of core instruction required by tier one often requires district adoption of a research-backed curriculum. See the [three-phase curriculum adoption process](#) that Education Elements has used to help districts ensure that every student interacts with a high-quality curriculum

Communicating Personalized Learning



“Effective communications is a cornerstone of successful blended learning implementation. Strong two way communications builds engagement, trust and credibility. Poor communications can lead to unmanageable expectations, confusion, and opposition to innovation. Communications is not expensive, but it takes a commitment of time and consistency.”

— (Communications Planning for Blended Learning: Step-By-Step Guide, by The Learning Accelerator)

1. How Do You Communicate Personalized Learning?: A Plan

School districts that develop thoughtful communications plans do more than just push important information out to their stakeholders. These districts build a culture of engagement, transparency, and trust that is critical for innovation to both take hold in the classroom and be sustainable and scalable across many schools. Poor communication can lead to unmanageable expectations, confusion, and opposition to change. If you are like most districts, you have many different priorities to juggle. There is a real risk that introducing personalized learning will be seen as “just another initiative,” and therefore will be received with confusion, apathy, or derision. Take time to think about all the messages you are sending to your teachers, families, and community members. How do blended and personalized learning align to, and complement, these initiatives? How does everything fit together to accomplish your district’s strategic plan or vision? Keep in mind that your efforts should not move in only one direction, from you to your audiences. Work to create two-way conversations that build true engagement with your stakeholders.

Education Elements, in collaboration with The Learning Accelerator, a national nonprofit and a catalyst to accelerate the implementation of high-quality blended learning across the U.S., developed a personalized learning communications guide entitled [Communications Planning for Innovation in Education: How to communicate about your blended & personalized learning initiatives](#). It is a guide to creating informed



conversations and preventing miscommunicating about personalized learning. The paper streamlines the planning process and clearly lays out the key steps for effective communications planning for those just beginning their journey, as well as practitioners who have been implementing for several years.

Here are some of the steps:

PHASE 1 – Plan & Align

Whether you are just beginning to embrace innovation in your school, or if you have already begun a personalized or blended learning initiative, taking the time to systematically plan your communications strategy and align it to your student learning goals is absolutely critical.

PHASE 2 – Foundations: Assess your resources

Assess your district's communications capacity and identify existing communications resources, as well as gaps in your capabilities and/or expertise. This process can be as deeply thorough or as high-level as you have time for, but the important step is to know what communications tools and resources you have at your disposal to execute your communications plan.

PHASE 3 – Design: Defining your audience, the messages, and messengers

Phase 3 is the core of your communications planning effort and includes identifying your key audiences, determining the best messengers for reaching your audiences, drafting targeted messages, and deciding on the tactics to deliver those messages. We've developed a Blended & Personalized Learning Communications Planning Worksheet (see page 28 of the guide) to help guide you through these steps and we discuss each element in this section.

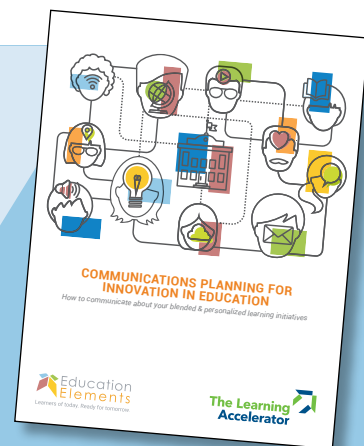
PHASE 4 – Reflect and Iterate: Define your measures of success



How you determine if your communications efforts are succeeding depends on what goals you set in your strategy. If parent or community awareness was a goal, consider doing a survey at the beginning of your implementation efforts and again periodically thereafter to gauge effectiveness. Similarly, a teacher “listening tour” at the beginning and mid-way points of your implementation efforts can highlight communications successes or problems. Download the guide for a detailed plan. Throughout the guide, you can find short profiles of districts that have partnered with Education Elements and are at various stages of this work. Successful communications is an ongoing effort, with many small wins as well as big ones, and invariably a few missteps too. We encourage you to use this guide to customize a communications strategy for the unique needs of your district.

Communications Planning For Innovation In Education

Effective communication is a cornerstone of successful innovation in education. Education Elements and The Learning Accelerator have been deeply involved in the work of blended and personalized learning from early on, as implementation experts and catalysts. Together, we have created this new personalized learning



[Download the Guide](#)

2. HOW DO YOU COMMUNICATE PERSONALIZED LEARNING TO PARENTS AND COMMUNITIES? Getting the Right Message Out There

The lack of understanding, alongside a lack of knowledge of the benefits of personalized learning, remains a consistent barrier to large-scale systemic change and support. It is of critical importance that you are able to effectively communicate your vision and plan not only to educators (which is hard enough) but also to families, in ways less steeped in education jargon and practices.

Districts need a strong culture of communications to be able to get buy-in from families



and stakeholders. It's not just about getting the information out there, but about getting the right message with the right verbiage and the right tone. Districts have to talk to families about personalized learning in a way that ensures the community can see the vision, the need for change, and ultimately champion the idea of personalizing learning for students.

Our partner, [ExcelinEd](#), an organization that supports state leaders in transforming education to unlock opportunity and lifelong success for each and every child, conducted a national survey of 800 voters to gauge their understanding of personalized learning and why it might or might not interest them. In response to the learnings that came out of this survey, Ed Elements provided district leaders with a guide on how to talk about personalized learning in a way that all stakeholders can see the vision and the need for change. The white paper: [Communicating Personalized Learning to Families and Stakeholders: Terminology, Tools and Tips for Success](#) provides readers with engaging messaging, outlines the best messengers, shares real-world examples, and provides a set of lessons learned.

Additional Resources:

- White Paper: [Strategic Communication for Families and Stakeholders](#)
- White Paper: [Communicating Personalized Learning to Families and Stakeholders: Terminology, Tools and Tips for Success](#)
- Blog post: [Bringing the Core Four Home: Helping Parents Understand Personalized Learning](#)
- Guide: [Core Four of Personalized Learning: Overview for Parents](#)

Personalized Learning Measures of Success



1. How To Measure The Success Of Personalized Learning?

When it comes to personalized learning, people are understandably apprehensive about how to measure its impact. After years of thinking of students as either “proficient” or “not proficient,” many still reach for end-of-year summative data. How did our students perform on academic indicators, such as state or nationally normed tests?

While end-of-year measures are important, they can falsely imply a binary outcome: you are either successful or you are not. Meanwhile, growth in academic skills, relationships with students, and innovative teaching techniques all develop week-to-week in classrooms and risk going undiscovered. To students, parents, and teachers, these may be the “measures that matter most,” as [NGLC points out in its 2016 report](#) of the same name, and on their [website](#) that showcases the various approaches and tools districts are using to measure success.

Bearing all of this in mind, we’ve made a similar pivot in how we think about measuring success. While we continue to look at student achievement on nationally or regionally normed assessments, we are also focusing on helping our districts and schools take a more proactive approach. We’ve started to frame the conversation as “charting your course.” That phrase implies a journey and aligns with our belief in [design thinking](#) – it is imperative to set a vision for your district or school, to not be afraid of failing fast, and to constantly iterate your approach in service of that vision. District and school teams that chart their course must rely on indicators throughout the year or risk losing their way. It’s all part of a [personalized learning mindset](#) in which constant learning and creative response are expectations for all stakeholders, from students to superintendents.

What might this look like in practice? Check out the full article on [Charting the Course in Personalized Learning](#) for examples from a few of our schools and districts that have used short-term measures to chart their course.



Short term measures include:

- Classroom walkthroughs
- Digital content data
- Mid-year student and teacher surveys
- Professional learning tracking
- [Onpoint](#) - a national benchmark for Personalized Learning initiatives

We would never argue that a district or school shouldn't be focused on end-of-year outcomes, but we're suggesting that districts and schools that only focus on these measures miss an opportunity – they are less able to course correct, if necessary. They also are less able to identify early proof points of success – such as teachers or schools that are doing amazing things – that can be used to create enthusiasm for the work.

Additional Resources:

- The entire blog post on [Charting the Course in Personalized Learning](#)
- Guide: [The Personalized Learning Classroom Walkthrough: The Core 4 Look Fors](#)
- Report: [Measures that Matter Most: How Do Next Generation Educators Measure Success?](#)



2. Does Personalized Learning Work? How Do I Know if Personalized Learning is Working For My District?

We are often asked, “Does personalized learning work?” That’s an urgent question that we take very seriously.

Since 2010, we’ve worked with more than 40,000 teachers, 750 schools and 140 districts across the nation, to personalize learning and improve learning for over 630,000 students. Each school year since 2014-2015, we have released an annual report on how our personalized learning work impacts districts, schools, teachers, and students. Our findings each year have been positive, and we are thrilled to say that after five years of reports, we continue to see the cumulative benefit of personalized learning over time, and that is reflected in our reports shared below.

[Annual Report 2017-2018: School, District and Regional Transformation - Highlights](#)

- The Enlarged City School District of Middletown, NY saw sustained academic growth year after year. This year, 57% of Middletown students in grades K-8 tested proficient in ELA, up from 40% five years ago and 62% tested proficient in math, up from 44% five years ago.
- At Rochester School Department, NH, 83% of school leaders report that students are more engaged since starting personalized learning.
- In Minnesota, District 197’s pilot of personalized learning with the “Vanguard” teachers was very successful. Survey results show that 90% of Vanguard teachers feel more effective since implementing personalized learning and Vanguard teachers also report higher student engagement and more students passing their classes.

>>Download the full 2017-2018 report for details. You can find a snapshot of this report on the blog post **Five Stories of Transformation from Our Fifth Annual Report**



Impact Report 2016-2017: Building Capacity for Personalized Learning and More - Highlights:

We continue to see the cumulative benefit of personalized learning over time. Just a few examples from the report:

- In the Enlarged City School District of Middletown, NY, 65% of all Middletown K-8 students hit their reading growth targets, an increase of 21% since 2013-2014; 67% hit their math growth targets, an increase of 23%.
- In Horry County Schools, SC, 57% of grade 6-8 students hit reading growth targets, an increase of 7% since 2013-2014; 64% hit math growth targets, an increase of 17%.
- In Piedmont City School District, AL, 72% of students in grades 3-8 tested on target in reading on the ACT compared to 28% in 2014-2015, and 55% tested on target in math compared to 35% in 2014-2015.
- Across our district partners, leaders are seeing changes in teacher practice and student engagement. Since their districts started personalized learning, 92% of district leaders say that teachers are more effective and 90% say that students are more engaged in their learning.

>>Download the full 2016-2017 report for details. You can find a snapshot of this report on the blog post Personalized Learning Delivers Results.

Impact Report 2015-2016: The Positive Power of Personalized Learning - Highlights:

- An analysis of 17,000 students in districts that worked with us showed 142% growth in reading and 121% growth in math on the NWEA MAP exam, compared to national norms.
- Districts going into years three and four of their implementation saw student growth increase each year:



- The Enlarged City School District of Middletown, NY, completed their third year of personalized learning. Compared to their first year of personalized learning in SY 2013-2014, Middletown saw 33% more students achieve their growth targets in reading and a 39% more in math.
- We surveyed 168 school and district leaders across 11 districts: 85% of district leaders said that students are more engaged in class and 75% of school leaders said that students are taking more ownership of their learning since implementing personalized learning.

>>Download the full 2015-2016 report for details. A snapshot of this report is available on the blog post **[A Year of Personalized Learning: 3 Things You Need to Know.](#)**

Also, explore an article by Michael B. Horn, **[Education Elements Gets Results](#)**, on the impressive personalized learning outcomes of this school year.

[Impact Report 2014-2015 - The Positive Power of Personalized Learning - Highlights:](#)

- Personalized learning impacts student achievement on nationally normed tests: students in personalized learning classrooms showed 135% growth in reading exams and 119% growth in math (compared to the national norms of NWEA).
- Blended learning helps teachers teach better: 91% of teachers agree or strongly agree that they feel more effective teaching in a blended classroom and
- Personalized learning makes meeting the needs of students easier: 100% of district and school leaders and 95% of teachers agree that personalized learning enables teachers to provide more differentiated instruction.

>>Download the full 2014-2015 report for details. You can find a snapshot of this report on the blog post **[On Storytelling with Data and the Power of Personalized Learning.](#)**



Additional Resources:

- Paper: [Blended Learning Research Clearinghouse 1.0](#) by The Learning Accelerator, on historical evidence of personalized learning
- Report: [Early Progress: Interim Research on Personalized Learning – Report \(Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation\)](#)
 - [Summary here](#)
- Report: [Continued Progress: Promising Evidence on Personalized Learning – Report \(Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation + RAND Institute\)](#)
 - [Summary here](#)
- Case studies: [Proof points: Blended learning success in school districts by the Christensen institute](#)

3. How Do You Measure or Quantify Personalized Learning? (How yo Assess the Quality of a PL Implementation?)

When it comes to personalized learning, it doesn't matter if a district is just getting started, or has been on the journey for years – there comes a time when each district and school leader starts asking the following questions. “How do I know if my school or district implementation of personalized learning is on track?”, “How can I assess the quality of my implementation?”, or “How does my district’s implementation compare to other districts?” Considering how much change a district can experience, and the level of investment of both time and money it requires, it makes sense that you want to know: is this working? What should I do next?

How do you know how you compare? The answer is to see how you compare against a national benchmark.

Our team of former educators and administrators works side-by-side with districts to personalize learning. And for 8 years, we have been working with districts to build and support dynamic school systems that meet the needs of every learner, today and tomorrow. Through our experience with over 140 school districts across the country, we



have developed [Onpoint, a personalized learning benchmark score](#), as a single number score that gauges school and district implementations of personalized learning. It helps district leaders track their implementation progress and narrow their focus for future investments of time and resources.

Onpoint combines expert assessment from Education Elements consultants with teacher and leader survey results to arrive at a single number score, which can range from 200 to 1,000. The score has seven components, aligned with our [Personalized Learning Implementation Framework](#).

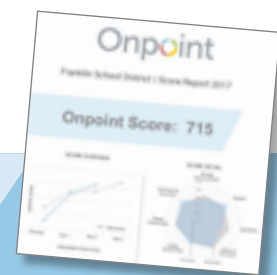
It helps district and school leaders:

- Compare against benchmarks
- Track progress over time
- Identify strengths and focus areas

The Onpoint report includes feedback on multiple components of a personalized learning implementation, alongside a set of recommendations, so that school and district leaders can focus their efforts to improve individualized instruction. By comparing your district's Onpoint score to a benchmark derived from a growing dataset of school districts and thousands of survey responses, you can measure your progress and identify where to start or continue your work to implement personalized learning for all students.

Onpoint - the Personalized Learning Benchmark Score

Track the progress of your personalized learning implementation by requesting your districts Onpoint report.



**Request your
Onpoint Score now.
It's free!**



Additional Resources:

- Blog: [Tracking the Big Picture: Onpoint for Personalized Learning](#)
- Blog: [Four Landmarks on Your District's Personalized Learning Journey](#)
- Blog: [How to Assess Your District's Personalized Learning Implementation](#)
- Blog: [How Might Schools Quantify "Personalized Learning?"](#)

4. List Of Districts That Are Implementing Personalized Learning With Success [Case Studies]

Since 2010, we've worked with more than 750 schools and 140 districts across the nation to personalize learning. We are so grateful to have the chance to work with so many districts and look forward to many years of working with many more. Throughout our work implementing personalized learning, we've worked with a wide array of districts and schools. Each district has their own unique strengths, challenges, and goals, but they all share a common commitment to personalize learning for every student.

We are immensely proud of two of our earliest districts, Enlarged City School District of Middletown, NY, and Horry County Schools, SC. These two districts are pioneers in personalized learning. Both Middletown and Horry started their journey more than five years ago. We're so pleased to share on their behalf that for the fifth year in a row, more students in the Enlarged City School District of Middletown, NY, and Horry County Schools, SC, are meeting or exceeding nationally normed growth targets, and both districts have shown the cumulative benefits of consecutive years of personalized instruction.



CHECK OUT SOME OF OUR DISTRICT STORIES BELOW:

HORRY COUNTY SCHOOLS, SC

Despite outperforming most districts in the state, Horry County Schools (HCS) realized they could do more to raise academic achievement for all students. We started our work with HCS by developing a personalized learning instructional model and support plan for one pilot middle school. That led to creating a strategy and supporting the design, implementation, and rollout of PL across the district. [Watch their story.](#)

ENLARGED CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT OF MIDDLETOWN, NY

Although small for a city district, the majority of students come from poverty and Middletown wanted to close the achievement gap between white and minority students, as well as lower their dropout rate. Education Elements started working with them in 2013, and over five years, we have transformed the district together. [Discover their story.](#)

In addition to Horry and Middletown, who have been among our first PL adopters, you will find below a shortlist of some of the districts we work with that are implementing personalized learning and have much to teach others. We are excited to share their stories on behalf of all the teachers, principals, coaches, and district leaders:

FAIRBANKS NORTH STAR BOROUGH SCHOOL DISTRICT, AK

Despite facing the unique challenges of being an isolated, rural community, the Fairbanks North Star Borough School District in Alaska committed themselves to bridging the gap for their students. Education Elements worked with the district to win community support, empower teachers, and prepare students for 21st-century technology and careers. [Check out their case study.](#)



WAKE COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM, NC

As the 15th largest district in the country, Wake County Public School System (WCPSS) was faced with keeping up with the demands of a rapidly growing population. WCPSS worked with Education Elements to design a new “personalized learning school” from the ground up, with a fresh approach to traditional structures and processes along the way. [Watch their story.](#)

WAYNE-FINGER LAKES BOCES, NY

The Wayne-Finger Lakes BOCES is a unique model in which many school districts work with both Education Elements and each other to rethink their instructional models while meeting the varying needs of each district. The districts demonstrated a high level of cross-collaboration, combined with direct support from Education Elements, to revitalize teaching and learning. [Check out their story.](#)

HARTFORD PUBLIC SCHOOLS, CT

Hartford Public Schools in Connecticut knew that the primary roadblock to their students’ success was a high poverty rate and large opportunity gap. The district worked with Education Elements to introduce blended learning into their high schools, which provide targeted career preparation and opportunities and focused on professional development for teachers. [See the whole case study.](#)

LOUDOUN COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS, VA

LCPS sees personalized learning as a crucial instructional framework to help students engage in “authentic, challenging problems” that lead students to deeper understanding. The district communicates the alignment between PL and the deeper learning initiatives of Project-Based Learning and Performance Assessments in their academic vision and professional learning workshops with Education Elements. As a result, students across the district develop projects that are meaningful and rigorous, and they receive the individual support necessary to be successful.



RACINE UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT, WI

Racine Unified School District was experiencing declining enrollment, especially at the middle school level, due to economic conditions and state policies which allow students to transfer in and out of districts. Education Elements worked with the five middle schools to turn them into places where parents and families are confident their students are central to the learning environment. [See their story.](#)

UINTA COUNTY SCHOOL DISTRICT #1, WY

In 2014, Uinta County School District #1 knew that they wanted to do more to support student-centered learning but did not know where to start. Since then we have worked with them to support school teams as they design classrooms where the experience is personalized for every student. [See the whole case study.](#)

METROPOLITAN SCHOOL DISTRICT OF WARREN TOWNSHIP, IN

Warren knew they were not getting a return on investment from their technology. Education Elements helped them to reset and focus on their vision of personalized learning to then leverage their devices effectively. [Discover their story.](#)

SYRACUSE CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT, NY

Syracuse wanted to improve student achievement and engagement along with supporting social-emotional learning. Education Elements helped them to align their initiatives, anchor on personalized learning, and create classrooms where students have all of the support they need to succeed. [Watch their story.](#)



FULTON COUNTY SCHOOLS, GA

Fulton had a vision for personalized learning but needed help to implement it. Over two years, Education Elements supported 95 schools in designing and implementing new personalized learning instructional models. [See the whole case study.](#)

YUMA SCHOOL DISTRICT ONE, AZ

When Yuma decided to implement personalized learning, they decided to go big and launched in all 17 schools in their district at the same time. With our support, they designed and implemented personalized learning successfully in all their schools, with an eye on continuous improvement and a passion for doing what is best for every student in their district. [See their story.](#)

GOSHEN POST ELEMENTARY SCHOOL (VA)

Goshen Post Elementary School is committed to creating daily, authentic learning experiences for their students, which requires teachers to change their traditional pedagogy of teaching, to one that is student driven with an authentic purpose. We know as educators, by personalizing instruction with experiences that are meaningful, it increases student engagement and promotes a deeper level of learning. The Personalized Learning framework greatly supports PBL instructional practices, as it allows for students to reflect, respond and investigate on their own to solve real life problems and/or challenges. Best teaching practices occur when PL and PBL are blended to meet the needs of all our students. It is a seamless approach. Students become empowered when they are given the opportunity to learn through a personalized, problem based experience. As Goshen Post moves forward as Loudoun County's first PBL Design School, we not only want to ensure our students learn through the PBL process but also are given the opportunity to excel by ensuring a personalized approach through a differentiated pace and path for all our students.



Additional Resources:

- Case studies: [Proof points: Blended learning success in school districts by the Christensen institute](#)
- Impact Reports:
 - [Impact Report 2014-2015: The Positive Power of Personalized Learning](#)
 - [Impact Report 2015-2016: The Positive Power of Personalized Learning](#)
 - [Impact Report 2016-2017: Building Capacity for Personalized Learning and More](#)
 - [Annual Report 2017-2018: School, District and Regional Transformation](#)
- Blog: [10 Personalized Learning Superhero Snapshots](#)



You Want to Accomplish Great
Things in Your District?

CONTACT US

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.

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