Personalized LEARNING

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Prioritizing Personalized Learning:
District Recommendations

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What does it take? What do District leaders need to do to prioritize meaningful steps forward toward personalizing learning? Personalized learning seems such an overwhelmingly distant vision. It can be difficult to see (and plan) the steps forward. The future vision is so far off that often all we see are today's barriers right in front of us. The personalization vision appeals to us. We want to get there. But we need some practical paths to pursue. What are some organizing principles that District leaders can use to begin to negotiate those barriers and guide everyone closer to the vision? In 2016, the Personalized Learning Summit hosted by the Friday Institute in partnership with Digital Promise and the Oak Foundation, brought students, teachers, district leaders and industry experts together to address these hard questions. Over the course of three days participants created a vision for personalized learning and outlined organizing principles that can provide practical steps forward. This paper provides a pathway district leaders can follow to move forward with personalized learning in their schools.

During the summit, students and teachers were adamant about the importance of relationships and communication when building a personalized learning environment - addressing the social-emotional learning (SEL) components are essential. Students want to know their teachers better, and they want teachers to understand their passions. Teachers want time to get to know students beyond their academic achievement. Students want agency and voice. They want to be active drivers in their own learning. They need more intentional involvement in the learning design to ensure that it's relevant to them. And finally, the curriculum design needs to accommodate learner differences. Students and teachers emphasized that they each learn differently. Students want opportunities that address these learning differences. Thus, the curriculum design must accommodate those learning differences, leveraging the student voice and providing opportunities for metacognitive reflection on their unique strengths and challenges.

Reviewing the Practical Path Forward

We need to be explicit and intentional about updating current District planning processes. We need to be explicit and intentional about emphasizing research-based elements of learning design that encourage students to accept more ownership for their learning and result in increased academic performance (Farrington et al, 2012). We need to ensure that the explicit and intentional strategies are not deployed "on the side" of the District's curriculum planning and professional learning strategies. They must be seamlessly integrated into the daily life of the school system, showing the students and teachers that there is time to make the steps forward toward personalization and it's not just another "bolt-on" initiative.

We cannot make the assumption that all educators know and understand the benefits of integrating social-emotional learning (Jones et al., 2014; Vega, 2012, Weissberg et al. 2016), student agency (Briceño, 2013; Rate, 2013, Gerstein, 2013) and metacognition (Lai, 2011; Kaufman, 2010) into their instruction. We must emphasize the importance of these elements, not just by stating that they're important, but by updating Personalized Learning methods to model them for teachers as learners. We must be sure that the teachers have a solid grasp of how SEL, student agency and metacognition can support student ownership of learning before we attempt to inject change into the curriculum planning that require the infusion of these strategies into daily lesson planning.

PATH TO PERSONALIZATION

STEP 1	STEP 2	STEP 3	STEP 4	STEP 5
UNDERSTAND TEACHER MINDSET	CUSTOMIZE TEACHER TRAINING	ENSURE TEACHERS CAN "WALK THE WALK"	REDESIGN THE CURRICULUM WITH STUDENTS' INPUT	PARTNER WITH STUDENTS ON IMPLEMENTATION

Taking the First Five Steps on Our Path to Personalization

Step 1: Understand teachers' dispositions/mindsets related to the benefits of infusing aspects of social-emotional learning (SEL) into the curriculum and building agency and metacognition in their students.

Step 2: Customize teacher exposure to the research-based, learning theory benefits of student agency, training as you expose them to social-emotional learning (SEL) and metacognition based on their current dispositions and mindsets. Develop the teacher's basic understanding of the benefits and why they're essential components within the personalization vision.

Step 3: Ensure teachers can "walk the walk" before asking them to "talk the talk" - Be explicit about evaluating teachers' competence in applying agency, SEL and metacognition to their own activities (their own work lives) before asking them to seamlessly embed it into their lesson plans.

Step 4: Redesign the curriculum with students' input to explicitly and intentionally infuse strategies for agency, SEL and metacognition - Be explicit and intentional as a District curriculum, instructruction and assessment leadership team to provide teacher's time and student voice in redesigning strategies for seamlessly embedding these critical elements within the curriculum.

Step 5: Partner with students on implementation to ensure that the students build their own appreciation for the benefits of agency, SEL and metacognition - Teachers must explicitly cultivate SEL, agency and metacognition in students, providing students with greater capacity to "own" their learning.

STEP 1

Understand Teachers' Dispositions/Mindsets

Based on the outcomes from the past Summits, there was strong agreement on increasing the importance of SEL, student agency and metacognition in the curriculum to facilitate personalized learning. However, it would be a mistake to assume that all the teachers in a District have the same dispositions, mindsets and background knowledge regarding SEL, student agency and metacognition. Since our goal is to personalize learning for the students and teachers are the critical element to updating the learning environment to enable personalized learning, we must start our path forward by determining how the

teachers understand and actually feel about the importance of emphasizing SEL, student agency and metacognition within the curriculum. Once we better understand the spectrum of support for and knowledge of these important elements of personalized learning, we can personalize the professional development for our teachers that clears the path forward for implementing strategies for SEL, student agency and metacognition within the curriculum.

Customize Teacher Training

STEP 2

After evaluating the teacher's dispositions and mindsets, a more effective, personalized plan for professional development can be created. Teachers need exposure to the research-based, learning theory benefits of student agency, social-emotional learning (SEL) and metacognition. If the teachers are to implement these critical elements within the learning design, they must actually believe in their importance. To believe in their importance, teachers must be exposed to the research based benefits, and ideally that exposure would be personalized so they didn't waste time on professional development that was too remedial or too advanced. We all know how precious teacher time is. Let's not waste it. There are existing professional development solutions that provide the necessary research-based benefits of SEL, student agency and metacognition that can be incorporated into a personalized plan.

Ensure Teachers Can "Walk the Walk"

STEP 3

This third step is essential. It cannot be skipped. Once the District has designed and delivered on the personalized PD in the step two, they must be explicit about evaluating teachers' competence in SEL, agency and metacognition - not with students, but with themselves. Now that the teachers have a solid theoretical understanding and belief in the benefits of SEL, agency, and metacognition, they must gain competence in putting it into practice ("walk the walk"). Every teacher, as an individual, must learn what it means for herself/himself. In other words, they must be given time and specific guidance in how to incorporate SEL, agency and metacognition strategies into their personal learning and behaviors before asking them to seamlessly embed it into their lesson plans (Jones et al., 2013). They must truly understand it as a learner first before they can implement it as a teacher, and the District must be there to guide and evaluate their competence. Then, when the teacher has learned to "walk the walk" for herself, she can begin incorporating it with her students.

Redesign the Curriculum with Students' Input

STEP 4

Taking that important fourth step, Districts must explicitly infuse these strategies into their curriculum redesign. District leadership must focus on building SEL, student agency and metacognitive strategies into the learning design, not as a "bolt on" components, but through intentional student involvement that truly opens the lines of communication between teachers and students and allows both teachers and students to take greater ownership in the change (Harris et al., 2014). Open communication strategies honor the clear findings from the Summit - students and teachers were adamant about how important relationships and communication are to a personalized learning environment. Teachers must not feel burdened to "bolt" these strategies on top of tight pacing guide plans. These critical elements cannot be treated as "extra" components of learning. They must be seamlessly integrated into the expectations of how learning occurs.

STEP 5

Partner with students on implementation

As part of seamlessly integrating these critical elements into the learning process, it's more than updating the curriculum. Teachers must explicitly cultivate SEL, metacognition and agency within their students. Students should be explicitly taught about these critical elements and given opportunities to practice them daily. They should become part of the default learning culture within the District - a regular part of the way learning is done. First, students should be given time to communicate with their peers and their teachers on a regular basis about the learning experiences, while also receiving guidance from their teachers on the nuanced relationship between the social-emotional and academic aspects of learning (Elias, 2006). Second, students should be taught specific strategies that improve their metacognition, providing them time to reflect on their learning (Price-Mitchell, 2015). Third, students should be taught specific goal setting strategies that promote their agency (Tavenner, 2012) and should be given specific opportunities to lead conferences that allow them to demonstrate their ownership of their learning.

Conclusion

As mentioned above, students want to be active drivers in their own learning. They need more explicit and intentional involvement in the learning design to ensure that it's relevant to them and honors their learning differences. Once the curriculum redesign explicitly, intentionally and seamlessly incorporates SEL, student agency and metacognitive strategies into the culture of the District, teachers and students will find increasingly creative ways to move closer to the personalized learning vision.

About the Professional Learning and Learning Collaborative

The **Professional Learning and Leading Collaborative (PLLC)** at the Friday Institute for Educational Innovation promotes pedagogical shifts in digital learning environments in order to inspire, innovate and coach.

We engage educators at all levels to provide research based, job-embedded models and approaches for strategic planning and professional development with the belief that students deserve access to equitable, personalized learning experiences.

Our coaches are educational leaders who have extensive experience in strategic planning, leadership support and development, data-driven decision-making and professional development planning and design – all as they relate to digital learning programs. Our professional development is customized and tailored to fit the current needs of your schools and districts with a focus on adaptive student-centered approaches that provide concrete, quality, purposeful, reflective practices supported through technology.

Learn more about the PLLC at pllc.fi.ncsu.edu or by emailing Lauren Acree at lkmilam@ncsu.edu.

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