Personalized Learning at a Crossroads: Early Lessons from the Next Generation Systems Initiative and the Regional Funds for Breakthrough Schools

Center on Reinventing Public Education

I think we all instinctively know that it's the most natural, effective way to teach and learn.

-Classroom Teacher

Moretown, VT
Providence, RI
New Haven, CT
Chicago, IL
Washington D.C.
Oakland, CA
Loveland, CO
Denver, CO
Colorado Springs, CO
Riverside, CA
Locust Grove, GA
Dallas, TX
New Orleans, LA
Clermont, FL
Clearwater, FL
St. Petersburg, FL
Seminole, FL

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How are schools designing and implementing personalized learning?

How is the system helping (or getting in the way)?

- Moretown, VT
- Providence, RI
- New Haven, CT
- Oakland, CA
- Loveland, CO
- Denver, CO
- Colorado Springs, CO
- Chicago, IL
- Washington D.C.
- Riverside, CA
- Locust Grove, GA
- Dallas, TX
- New Orleans, LA
- Clearwater, FL
- Clermont, FL
- Seminole, FL
- St. Petersburg, FL

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How are schools designing and implementing personalized learning?

How is the system helping (or getting in the way)?

17 cities and towns

39 schools

Moretown, VT
Providence, RI
New Haven, CT

Oakland, CA

Loveland, CO
Denver, CO
Colorado Springs, CO

Chicago, IL

Washington D.C.

Riverside, CA

450 interviews

Locust Grove, GA

4000+ teacher surveys

Dallas, TX

New Orleans, LA
Clearwater, FL
Clermont, FL
Seminole, FL
St. Petersburg, FL

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Bottom lines

- Schools tackled PL with enthusiasm and some success, but most early efforts fell short of their original ambitions

- Early shortcomings were less about implementation failure and more about struggle to innovate in systems not designed for innovation

- Leaders need to build strategic systems for innovation for the PL movement to move forward at scale

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Clues that the system wasn't designed to support innovation

- Goals for students were weakly defined or misunderstood
- Teachers were rarely prepared or supported to prototype and learn through iteration
- Principals let teachers define personalization for themselves
- PL reforms were not central to sites' system improvement initiatives

Vague goals for students were problematic

- Goals for students were hard to grasp, either ill-defined or misunderstood

- Even when goals were well-articulated, educators struggled to make sense of them (CEI Next Gen Learning Vision)

- Teachers tried many things without guidance, exhausting themselves and neglecting students on the margins, and overlooking critical instructional elements like rigor

Supports for prototyping were missing

- Teachers had few supports to learn what was working. They often relied on professional judgment and student engagement to evaluate their work

- Traditional "best practice" PD often missed the mark

- Central offices underestimated the amount of support schools needed

- Without supports for learning, schools and systems learned "micro-lessons" but did not develop models or replicable strategies

Decentralization meant PL stalled in classrooms

- Schools took decentralized approach because of uncertainty, desire for buy-in, and resonance with professional culture

- But weak goals and unengaged leaders meant PL efforts rarely got beyond the teacher and classroom level

- With no school wide approach, teachers were left figuring out PL on their own, efforts within schools varied

PL was rarely the central initiative

- Flexibility for PL schools was often negotiated rather than institutionalized

- Curriculum & Instruction departments were often unengaged, focused on evidence-based approaches rather than innovation

- Knowledge management relied on single individuals

- Since PL wasn't central, few systems made major changes, C&I departments and assistant superintendents were passive (or resistant), concerns about test scores curtailed some innovation efforts, and knowledge management was ad hoc

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To me, it all boils down to that executive leader.

-District PL Director

Establishing innovation as a district priority: Four areas of focus

- Help schools get clear on **problems** that need to be solved, and what needs to change to address them

- **Create flexibility** in the system (time, space, staffing, experimentation)

- **Support adult learning** and prototyping to generate, reproduce, use and share new knowledge

- **Identify vanguard schools** poised to design new models and schools poised to adapt and adopt an existing model

Implications for system leaders

Help schools **get clear on problems** that need to be solved, and what needs to change to address them

- Set clear expectations for what the district should accomplish for students..

- Bring together educators to identify important problems and issues that keep schools from delivering on those expectations.

- Review the landscape of your schools to identify cases of school-level problems to solve.

Implications for system leaders

Create **flexibility** in the system (time, space, staffing, experimentation)

- Be explicit about what flexibilities already exist and specific tensions for innovating schools.

- Engage all central office departments in personalized learning goals for students.

- Give principal supervisors and principals more flexibility to consider broader outcomes in evaluation.

- Establish a dedicated autonomy zone

- Encourage schools to innovate in dedicated spaces

Implications for system leaders

Support adult learning and prototyping to generate, reproduce, use and share new knowledge

- Build embedded coaching supports for prototyping and iteration in schools.

- Create structured support systems that help school leaders for change management.

- Create and implement a knowledge management plan with the goal of getting knowledge in the hands of many educators.

Implications for system leaders

Identify vanguard schools poised to design new models and schools poised to adapt and adopt an existing model

- Seek interested and motivated leaders by hosting discussions on personalized learning and goals for students.

- Establish communities of practice to recruit and support collaborative learning among educators from several schools.

- Consider a design competition that provides resources and support for schools to map out a new personalized design

Are you committed to knowing more about your kids and developing a plan that's going to be in their best interest, in an environment that's going to work for them and allow them to demonstrate their understanding when they're ready to, .. all while giving back to some learning community?

-District PL Director

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