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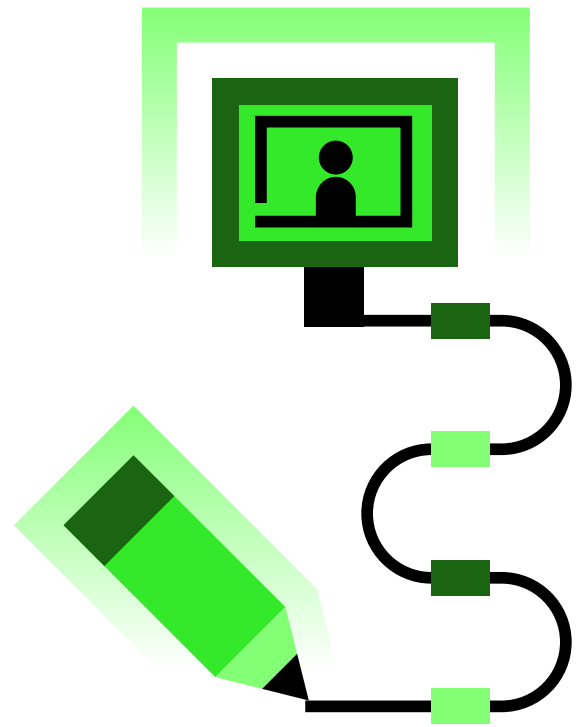# The K-12 Leader's Guide to Personalized Learning

Unlock student potential.

Every student has a unique academic journey. When it comes to navigating it, they may find that there are different ways of learning that work best for them. Maybe a student succeeds when class material is aligned to their interests, or they thrive in environments with specific pacing. Perhaps a student understands new concepts more quickly when they can work with a peer.

Educators are faced with the challenge of meeting these diverse learning style needs and expectations in classroom structure, content delivery and assessment design. They also have to adapt their teaching to each new cohort of students—sometimes more than once a year. So how can educators support each student's academic journey without having to constantly create new curricula?

The answer is to design educational experiences with student needs in mind. Personalized learning recognizes that every student learns differently and diversifies learning to cater to a wide variety of students. In this eBook, we define this teaching practice and share different ways to personalize learning for students.

This eBook also looks at how this educational model:

- helps address **gaps** in student learning
- teaches with the **whole** child in mind
- enhances traditional teacher **professional** development

What Is Personalized Learning?

At D2L, we define personalized learning as a teaching practice that works to support students in a way that best meets their needs and sets them up for success. With this model, learning activities, content, spaces and any other learning component are designed with every student's needs in mind to help them engage in educational experiences. This doesn't always mean creating individualized teaching plans for each student but rather creating pathways for students to experience learning. A key component in developing personalized learning is using technology, such as a learning management system (LMS), to place teachers in the driver's seat.

Types of Personalized Learning

1. **Competency-based progression:** supporting, measuring and enabling each student's progress toward academic and social learning goals

2. **Flexible learning environments:** adapting pacing and sequence, learning spaces, peer groupings, instruction, and delivery models to meet the learning needs and purpose of each student

3. **Personalized learning paths:** creating individualized learning processes for students that consider their progress, motivations and goals, and include different modalities and types of assessment

Tech-Enhanced Personalized Learning

Educational technology and digital tools have evolved to keep up with these changing educational needs, resulting in a plethora of options for schools and school systems. But just because these options are out there, it doesn't mean that they are right for your students and teachers. It's important to vet tools and select the ones that have the right features and functionalities such as:

- **Learner performance:** Educators can view a learner's performance by looking at grades, discussions, activities and progress toward objectives.

- **Learner engagement:** Teachers need dashboards to review student engagement and performance as aligned with content and teaching. This information enables educators to tailor their course delivery to the needs of the learners.

- **Learner outcomes:** Administrators also need data reporting tools with course-level views into system activity and usage to measure overall LMS adoption across courses, as this will help determine whether more tools will be required to continue improving learner outcomes.

It should also be a high priority for schools and school systems to select tools that place students' and teachers' security, data, confidentiality, availability and integrity first.

Personalized Learning Examples

As adapted from a **blog post** by longtime educator and blogger David Warlick, the chart below outlines the different ways schools and school systems can personalize learning for students, and examines the role of educational stakeholders in each approach.

	PERSONALIZED LEARNING ACTION	TRADITIONAL PERSONALIZED LEARNING	TECH-ENHANCED PERSONALIZED LEARNING
Teacher	• Employ a variety of educational approaches, including authentic learning, project-based learning or community learning • Increase the level of student choice by incorporating student voices into the learning process • Use competency-based assessments to track student progress toward learning goals and personalize next steps	• Set up a local field trip to connect curriculum to the community • Have a class conversation and vote on different topics and success criteria for a project • Keep anecdotal notes of each student to track their understanding of core learning concepts over time	• Organize a virtual field trip to an international location, or have a special guest virtually join a class • Have students research project ideas that align with their interests, then post on a class message board for peer feedback • Use a mastery-based learning dashboard that tracks student progress toward competencies, feedback and next steps
Parent/ Guardian	• Keep up to date with child's progress • Provide learning support at home • Help child connect their learning to the world around them	• Regularly check paper agenda and notes sent home • Ask child what they are learning in school and make connections to the world around them	• See into the classroom using a parent portal that shares child's progress, class updates and how to support at home • Leverage teacher-provided virtual resources to make learning real at home
Student	• Be an active participant in the learning process • Create personal learning plans or learning portfolios and reflect on academic and social learning goals, progress, and next steps • Connect learning to the communities and the world	• Make a folder that acts as a learning portfolio and keep track of favorite assessments or pieces of work • Talk to trusted community members, family and friends about learning	• Maintain a digital portfolio where learning artifacts can be connected to goals, reflected on regularly and shared at home • Create digital learning and career plans to track academic and social goals, progress, and connections to post-graduation

Personalized Learning and Learning Loss

The terms "learning loss" and "unfinished learning," as defined by **McKinsey & Company**, refer to learning deficits that are created when students are out of the traditional classroom setting for a period of time—for example, during summer months. Recently, we have seen the terms "learning recovery" and "learning acceleration" used to describe overcoming the academic achievement gaps that are caused by absence, vacation or living through a pandemic.

According to "**COVID-19 and Education: The Lingering Effects of Unfinished Learning**," a 2021 report from McKinsey & Company,

"the impact of the **pandemic** on K–12 student learning was **significant**, leaving students on average five months **behind** in mathematics and four months behind in reading by the end of the school year."

In order to bridge these gaps, schools and school districts need to transition away from a one-size-fits-all model that relies on academic strategies overemphasizing the transfer of knowledge. Instead, education systems need to meet each student where they are and give them what they need to succeed through authentic **deep learning experiences**. Robust educational technology, such as an LMS, not only helps overcome educational deficits but also helps create personalized learning opportunities for all learners. An LMS can be used to:

- understand how engaged in learning students are and help educators identify at-risk students so that they can intervene and get learners back on track

- provide surface enrichment opportunities for high performers through the conditional release of materials to scaffold learning so that students can comfortably progress at their own pace

- build student-centered paths that make the best use of teacher-student time by focusing on mastery of a learning goal rather than numerical academic achievement

- level the playing field for students by sharing content based on ability and skill level, allowing students to engage with material that interests them while bridging learning gaps

For the 21st century learner, it's simply not enough to track student achievement with numerical or letter grades. Instead, educators, parents and district leaders need to be able to check a student's progress while they're working through a class. That way, potential concerns can be addressed before it's too late, and student success can be catered to in the long run.

Personalized Learning and the Whole Child

Traditional K-12 curricula are based on educators transmitting content knowledge rooted in core disciplines such as math, science and reading. While these subjects are the building blocks of education, learning is far more than acquiring inert knowledge. Personalized learning transitions away from solely focusing on cognitive development and works to teach with the whole child in mind. This approach to learning understands that a child must have their social, emotional and personal needs met in order to develop their cognitive skills. Personalized learning supports the whole child through:

- continuous feedback loops that help educators get to know their students better and create a responsive classroom that maximizes student achievement

- individualized supports that address students' unique experiences, passions, strengths and areas for improvement

- diversified learning experiences that encompass district learning goals and are designed in a way to meet the individual needs of students

- flexible learning opportunities that encourage students to have a choice in how and when they participate in learning pathways and complete class activities

Schools and school systems that create teaching practices with the whole child in mind can help create an educational culture that not only responds to changing student needs but also helps students acquire the social and emotional skills, habits, and mindsets necessary to be successful in school and beyond.

Personalized Learning and Professional Development

Educators bring a variety of innate skills and traits to the classroom to teach a different set of students—all with their own distinct needs—each year. Traditional professional development (PD) often gathers a school's teachers in a room to participate in learning with the intention of universal classroom application. This strategy doesn't work anymore. If we want teachers to meet the needs of students, then schools and districts must have the right tools in place that allow educators to receive ongoing professional learning that addresses their learning gaps, challenges and goals.

So, while we personalize instruction for students, why are we not doing the same for educators at a school and district level? Personalized professional development takes the notion of individualized instruction and applies it to teachers. This type of PD takes into account the subjects educators teach, age-specific challenges they may face from students in their classrooms, and their learning gaps, and seeks to deepen knowledge as well as pedagogical skills.

Professional development encompasses a wide range of formal and informal opportunities for educators to improve their professional knowledge, competence, skills and effectiveness. At the simplest level, an LMS allows school systems and schools to create a library of general professional development courses that can be accessed by educators, administrators and education leaders.

A recent survey commissioned by D2L found that

82%

of educators were satisfied if PD opportunities were available frequently— on a regular, ongoing basis as needed.

This kind of LMS-based PD not only addresses school and district learning requirements for training and curriculum development, but it also opens up a variety of personalized learning opportunities for educators such as:

- being able to self-enroll in courses and choosing their own learning paths

- joining learning groups based on attributes (such as date hired, department, location or job title), making it easy to take part in courses with users who have similar needs

- receiving encouragement to participate in relevant and applicable learning opportunities outside of traditional professional development

Personalized learning helps facilitate academic success by providing learning experiences that meet the needs, interests and aspirations of each student. To offer truly student-centered learning environments, educators and districts must not solely rely on modifying assignments and instructional strategies. Rather, the focus must be on incorporating the right tools that keep learners engaged and on track and that don't leave teachers overworked and overwhelmed. By leveraging technology, like an LMS, it's possible to create a personalized educational experience that supports learning growth for all students.

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ABOUT D2L

D2L is a global learning innovation company, reshaping the future of education and work. We're leading the way into a new era of personalized learning, driven by the belief that everyone deserves access to high-quality education, regardless of their age, ability or location. Our signature technology products—D2L Brightspace and D2L Wave—enhance the learning experience for millions of learners at every stage of life, from the earliest days of school to the working world. Learn more at **D2L.com**.

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