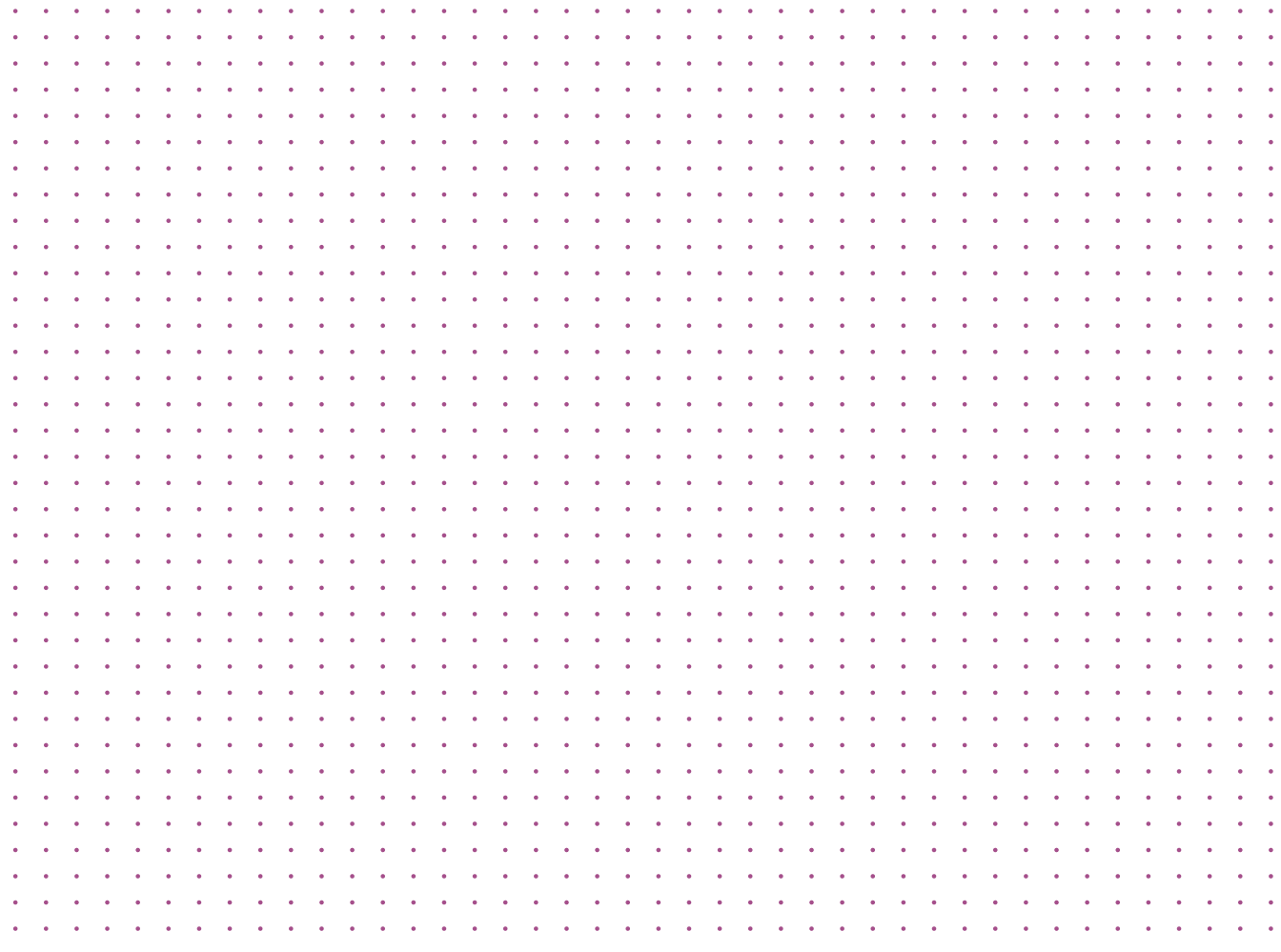


Steelcase Education

guide to personalized learning experiences



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Guide to Personalized Learning Experiences

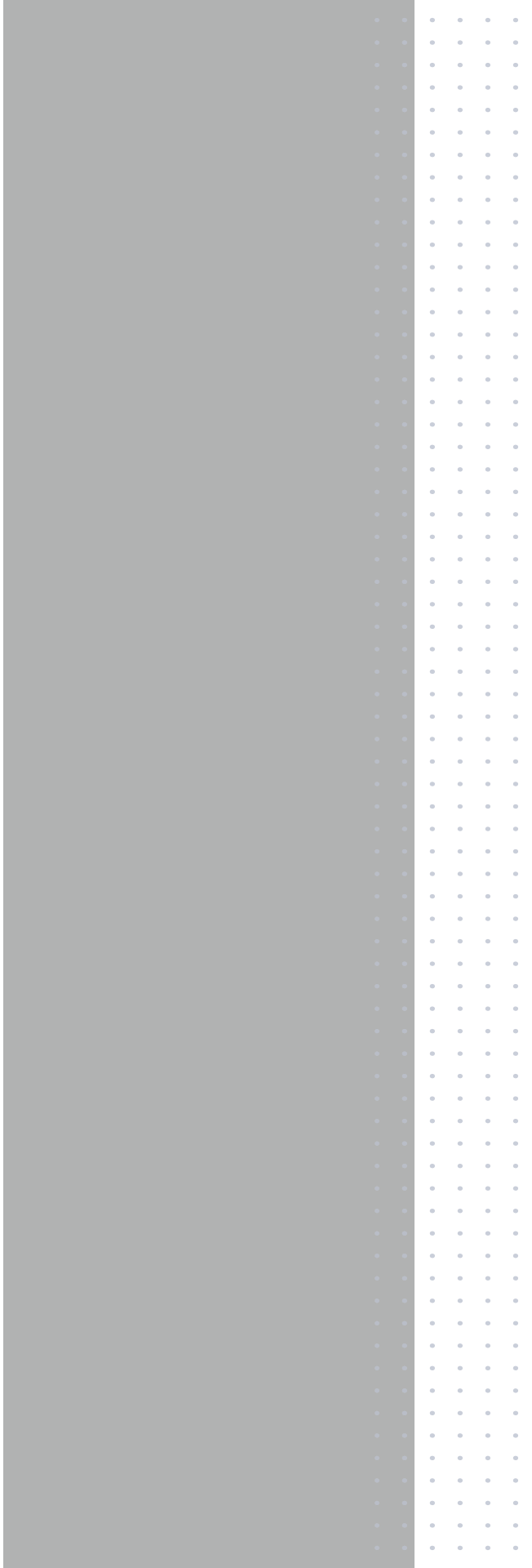
Personalized learning per se isn't a new concept. Every day, educators adapt lesson plans to ensure students meet learning objectives. Teachers draw on their professional experience and use a variety of techniques to help students learn and engage with the material.

While there will always be a need for this type of flexibility between students and teachers, there is rising interest in a more complete instructional approach that puts students more fully in control of their learning. This concept, called personalized learning, is emerging as pressures are coming at students, educators and schools from all directions.

- Students are expected to be creative and have strong critical thinking, collaboration and communication skills – skills that require them to be engaged, thoughtful learners.
- Employers want them to enter the workforce as adaptable workers who understand how to learn new concepts and skills when the need arises, work well with others and demonstrate leadership.
- Standardized testing and higher learning standards raise expectations on educators and students, even as early as kindergarten.
- Always-tight budgets are even more constrained in many districts.

Personalized learning can be a way to meet these challenges and re-establish engagement in the learning process. Personalized learning not only helps students learn more effectively, it also targets more holistic development of personal skills, hard-to-measure areas like deeper learning, socio-emotional skills and growth mindset.

Many educators and administrators equate personalized learning with self-paced, adaptive courseware. Although these technologies can be an element of personalized learning experiences, they're not a requirement.



Main Characteristics

It's challenging to create a single definition of personalized learning experiences when the very essence of the concept lies in its unique expressions. Like every family's favorite recipe for chocolate chip cookies, a personalized learning experience for one student, educator or school may be entirely different for another.

The U.S. Department of Education defines personalized learning as “an experience where the pace of learning and instructional approach are optimized for the needs of each student.” Whereas today, many educators might think of a common instructional approach and common set of content to meet learning objectives, in personalized learning environments those elements may vary in order to be meaningful to students' areas of interest.

Just as no two personalized learning experiences are the same, the adoption of personalized learning approaches will differ from one school – even one classroom – to the next, as the culture, context and community of the school influence its execution.

However, there are three characteristics that all personalized learning experiences share.

Student-Led

The primary hallmark of a personalized learning experience is a different level of focus on the student, one that considers how their needs, goals and interests are discovered and enabled.

It means ensuring students have agency in their choices, and that they are the drivers in the learning process, not the educator. This may shift traditional relationships between students and teachers to be more collaborative.



Character + Community Development

Personalized learning experiences also focus on building character development and community engagement.

Developing skills like empathy and curiosity, as well as interacting with peers within the school community and the larger surrounding community, can better prepare students for a successful future.

Dynamic Use of Resources

Additionally, creating personalized learning experiences means reconsidering how schools, educators and students plan and use their time, space and technology more as resources than structures.

Through diverse workspaces, more flexible blocks of time and technology resources, students can choose where and how to best use their time to complete tasks and achieve their learning objectives.



Adopting Personalized Learning Experiences in Your Classroom or School

Along with a review of the existing literature, Steelcase Education researchers conducted a qualitative research study involving schools, educators and students from across the U.S. and Europe to recommend the following strategies for educators, schools and districts seeking to implement more personalized learning experiences for their students. Researchers visited 13 schools and conducted 44 interviews.

Collective Envisioning

Create a vision that considers both short-term and long-term goals. Explore how a personalized learning approach will require shifting roles and responsibilities for students, parents, educators and administrators.

Collaborate with teachers, students and parents to build ownership and create transparency.

Consider all parts of the educational system and how they relate to one another. Shifting an existing system is complex, so it's important to think through the various moving parts and how they will affect each other. What's right for one district may not work for another.



Start Small and Iterate

Take small steps to begin. The size of the step will vary depending on the school and people involved. Allow room for everyone to step past their comfort zone, yet at a pace that will not create too much stress.

Encourage a growth mindset, as it's about trying new approaches, learning from them and iterating as needed. Adults are learners, too. We all need reminders that it's okay to learn from mistakes.

Think Global, Act Local

Connect with the wider world, as a school is not an isolated community. Students will be working in an interconnected, global society and schools should reflect the world around them.

Consider unique context and culture, as there is no one-size-fits-all. What works for one school may not be the best solution for another. Schools can learn from one another yet must discover what personalized learning experiences mean for their own community, school, students, teachers and culture.



Eight Strategies to Implement Personalized Learning Experiences

Regardless of how you choose to adopt personalized learning for your classroom or school, Steelcase Education researchers uncovered eight key strategies, and supporting methods and tactics. These strategies are essential for successful personalized learning experiences.

01 Know + Respect the Learner

Educators understand that each learner's interests, skills, goals and needs are different.

02 Develop Community

Enable the forming of student-student and teacher-student relationships to build social skills and sense of belonging.

03 Nurture Trust by Granting Freedom

Give learners opportunities to earn trust and practice agency.

04 Empower Student Choice + Voice

Shift the responsibility and pride in learning from the teacher to the student.

05 Establish Simple Guiding Principles

Guide and direct actions with concrete, realistic expectations and boundaries. Limit rules to guiding principles that give direction without over-restriction.

06 Intentionally Build Habits of Character

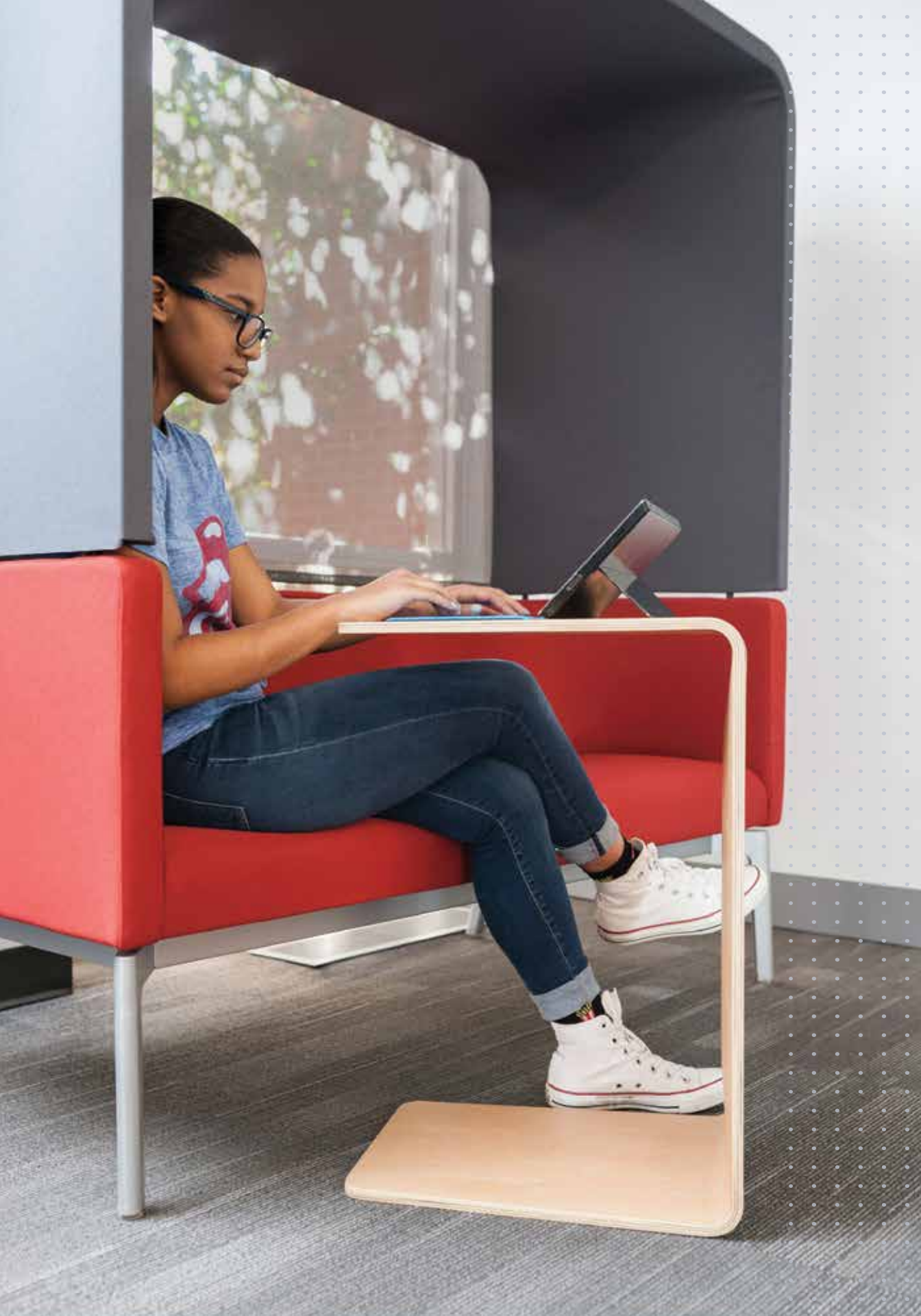
Reinforce desired values and character traits through thoughtfully designed experiences.

07 Encourage Reflection + Responsiveness

Give educators and students ample opportunity to reflect on the learning process and the ability to make changes to it.

08 Use Technology, Space + Time as Resources

Increase flexibility by using technology, space and time situationally instead of as fixed structures that limit learner behavior.



01 Know + Respect the Learner

Personalized learning experiences are about the individual, and knowing the learner as a person is the first step. For an authentic learner-centered, learner-led and learner-demonstrated experience, the student and their goals, interests and strengths need to be known, supported and respected. Many educators intuitively assess their students. Given your understanding of each student's needs, strengths and learning styles, you might use some of these methods to begin incorporating some explicit personalized learning experiences in your classroom.

Methods

Use learning profiles to help students better understand their learning strengths and gain more self-awareness. Reflect student-specific data from assessments, adaptive learning tools and more to provide baselines.

Have students set and manage goals for the short and long term. Students can then track and adjust their progress based on demonstrated learning.

Allow for different ways of expressing growth. Students choose how best to show the breadth and depth of their learning.

Launch Pad: Try These Personalized Learning Activities Today

Build Student Learning Profiles

Strengths, passions, interests, goals, learning gaps, learning behaviors and talents can all be included in a learning profile. Use multiple tools and methods, such as online strength assessments, observations and conversations, to create a holistic learner profile.

Define Learning Pathways

Learning pathways encompass student goals, processes and tracking mechanisms. Students set short- and long-term goals and determine how they will accomplish them.

Provide Opportunities to Demonstrate Learning

How can students share what they've learned and demonstrate mastery of a topic? Mediums like digital portfolios, learner and teacher reflection journals, creative projects or multidimensional rubrics can better capture and show the depth, complexity and levels of learning and growth taking place.



Story from the Field

A struggling student. A motivated educator. At one school Steelcase Education visited, a teacher shared the story of a student who was passionate about music but showed a strong lack of interest in traditional school subjects like math, economics, language arts and history. By designing a personalized learning experience for this student, one that viewed these traditional subjects through the lens of the music industry, the student was engaged and able to demonstrate mastery in the subjects in a broad range of ways.

02 Develop Community

Strong, positive relationships are the lifeblood of personalized learning experiences. Having strong connections between students, teachers, school leaders and the community creates a sense of engagement and belonging. When learners and educators feel engaged, they are more successful.

Methods

Create a rhythm of conferencing with learners to check in, with frequent and open communication.

Encourage frequent and multiple interactions with peers, teachers, leadership and community members.

Build teams of teachers who work together on cross-disciplinary projects and make decisions together.

Launch Pad: Try These Personalized Learning Activities Today

Use Explicit Signage

Clearly stating school or classroom priorities, such as goals or valued character traits, reminds everyone of their sense of responsibility and accountability to others.

Create Supportive Spaces

Physical spaces should encourage teachers and students to connect one-on-one and develop productive relationships.

Model Behavior

Engaging in and modeling ideal behavior is critical for students, teachers and school leaders.

Story from the Field

Steelcase Education researchers observed a sight familiar in many schools that actively implement personalized learning experiences: a genuine emotional connection between students and teachers and their principal.

Instead of functioning as a remote authority figure, the principal was engaged and interested in the school community. The principal crouched down to look at students eye-to-eye as they shared their feelings or answered a quick question about their classroom progress; teachers were stopped for a quick check-in to evaluate classroom activity or determine whether the teacher needed additional support. As a result, we saw students proactively flock to and high-five the principal like a local celebrity.

These frequent, friendly interactions underscored the shared understanding that relationships are essential to personalized learning experiences – and important contributors to creating a strong sense of community.

03

Nurture Trust by Granting Freedom

To gain trust, students must have the freedom and opportunity to make choices that build others' trust in them. Trust is the currency by which personalized learning experiences prosper in the complexity of a school system. Granting students a high degree of freedom may feel like losing control, but it's vital to the success of a personalized learning model and instilling independence in the students. Even if learners fail to use their freedom wisely, it becomes a valuable learning opportunity. By granting freedom, teachers practice taking a step back, which lets them see how students react and what they will gravitate to. By understanding how students behave when given freedom, teachers can adapt their approach and respond to learner needs and interests.

Methods

Give learners an opportunity to make choices, speak up and be heard. Allow students more freedom over where they work, assignments, pacing and demonstration of learning.

Reflect with students when they break trust and recognize when they might not be ready for autonomy.

Start small and take intentional steps over the course of the year, as students gain trust and teachers become more comfortable.

Shifting to a Student-Centered Model

Traditional Education Environments

In this model, the teacher is the primary director of instruction – designing activities, making decisions and in control of student learning experiences. Learners are taught to pay attention to the teacher.

Opening Up Space

Shifting from teacher-centered to student-centered experiences requires the teacher to take a step back so space can be opened and the student can step into the center of their own learning.

Evolving Education Environments

In this model, the student occupies the most space. Learners are designing activities, making decisions and in control of their learning experiences. Teachers are taught to pay attention to the student, and provide support and counsel when needed.



Story from the Field

One 2nd grade teacher described herself as a “control freak” and shared how unnerving it was to allow her students to have more freedom. She started out small, by placing some beanbags out in the hallway and allowing kids to work out there on their own. Over time, the learners slowly gained her trust by completing their work and staying on task. Students were then able to move down the hallway to work if they chose. What started out as a stressor, she shared, has now become a learning opportunity. She sees that she’s grown as a professional and her students have demonstrated their ability to handle more personal responsibility.

04 Empower Student Choice + Voice

In a traditional learning environment, it's not uncommon for students to feel the teacher is responsible for teaching them, not that they're responsible for their own learning. To cultivate a personalized learning environment, offer options and give students a choice for how they'd like to learn a topic. By allowing students to feel they have control over their learning, they make the shift from passive recipient to active owner of their knowledge. Owning their learning naturally leads to greater engagement.

Methods

Let students make choices over their goals, tasks, pace, process, environment and demonstration of knowledge.

Engage students in self-reflection over the choices they are making.

Broaden a sense of responsibility by having students engage in projects relevant to current events or that matter to the community.

Launch Pad: Try These Personalized Learning Activities Today

Facilitate Roles and Responsibilities

Let students know what's expected of them. Facilitate a discussion on classroom jobs and encourage students to take responsibility not only for completing tasks but offering suggestions for improvement.

Offer Choices

Give students a choice over with whom, what, where and how they complete their work.

Encourage Feedback

Create a forum for student feedback and recommendations for improvements.



Story from the Field

In one school, students are responsible for everything from determining what to do during a particular block of time to running class meetings to preparing and cleaning up after snacks and meals.

One teacher shared, “As students show growth, they gain ownership. They don’t ask about grades, they see connections between ideas. They are no longer little puppies, they are responsible people. The students themselves can articulate how they have changed. They utilize their freedoms differently. Little tiny nuances of behavior. Their goals, their plans become more real.”



05

Establish Simple Guiding Principles

Giving students freedom to make their own decisions isn't without its pitfalls. Some may feel uncomfortable with autonomy and could make a poor decision in the process. Rather than giving them complete freedom, providing guiding principles can offer direction without quashing independence. These principles are based on values and skills rather than behaviors. Simplifying guidelines communicates trust and encourages responsibility.

Methods

Eliminate detailed rules that communicate distrust to learners.

Establish core values to guide learners, teachers and leaders every day.

Imbue values in every part of the experience, like space, curriculum and how you communicate with students.

Launch Pad: Try These Personalized Learning Activities Today

Build Agreement and a Collective Vision

Invite the school community of leaders, teachers, students and parents to come together to establish guiding principles for the building or district.

Create a Culture of Accountability

Encourage everyone involved to hold each other accountable to living by the guiding principles.

Communicate with Parents and Community

Share these principles with parents and community members so they understand behavior expectations for students.



06

Intentionally Build Habits of Character

On top of lesson planning, grading papers and professional development, teachers are expected to strengthen students' interpersonal skills and positive character traits. In personalized learning experiences, thoughtfully designed learning environments grant students more freedom, shift some of the responsibility from educators to learners, and encourage the development of positive qualities like perseverance, accountability and curiosity.

For students to succeed in personalized learning environments, they need to develop qualities like resilience and integrity, and skills like conflict resolution. In addition to modeling these behaviors, teachers can strengthen students' interpersonal skills and character development by naming and explaining character traits, providing opportunities to work without explicit oversight and reinforcing positive behaviors.

Methods

Thoughtfully consider each interaction

with a student as an opportunity to practice habits of character.

Choose rewards that reinforce and celebrate desired habits and behaviors.

Introduce learning challenges that encourage students to practice habits of character like curiosity, self-management or growth mindset.

Launch Pad: Try These Personalized Learning Activities Today

Use Space to Encourage and Reinforce Behaviors

The learning environment encourages and enables habits of character like curiosity, creativity, expression and reflection.

Give Tools to Help Students Self-Evaluate

By providing freedom and choice in the learning environment, students are given opportunities to practice responsibility and self-management.

Encourage Social Learning

Community, empathy and a sense of others are critical parts of the personalized learning experience that are supported through various learning activities such as peer reviews or partner activities.



07

Encourage Reflection + Responsiveness

By introducing reflection into the learning experience, teachers and students can make adjustments together to improve the learning process. Bringing learners into this process fosters trust, ownership and self-awareness of strengths and areas needing improvement. Working alongside students to course-correct throughout the year keeps them engaged in the learning process and encourages them to think critically to achieve their goals.

Methods

Hold regular conferencing between students and teachers to gain insight into where the learner stands and how best to respond to their needs.

Ask questions to reflect on work progress and process. Involve the student in the reflection process (see *Launch Pad* for some ideas on what questions to ask).

Make formative assessments frequently as part of the learning process and reduce or eliminate summative assessments.

Allow for flexibility to change the learning approach as needed.

Story from the Field

At one school, a student asks a teacher, “Should I work on one thing for 45 minutes or should I do a couple things?” The teacher asks her what she thinks would work better for her at this moment. This prompts the student to reflect and consider her own learning preferences and goals, and make a decision.

Launch Pad: Try These Personalized Learning Activities Today

Teachers can give students an opportunity to reflect on their progress in one-on-one meetings, independent reflection or with a peer.

Questions for Reflection

Why

Why are you learning what you're learning? How might this help you discover new passions? How might it aid you in your purpose?

Setting

Where is the best place to accomplish your goal?

Goals

What is your goal for today?
For this week? For this month?
For this year? For your life?

Choices

What choices did you make? How well did they turn out? What might you try differently?

Time

How might you best use the time available to you?

Assessment

How well are you accomplishing your goals? Where do you need more work?

Support

What help do you need? Who might be able to help you? What resources could you go to?

Opportunities to Redirect

Change location

Change topic

Ask for help

Spend more time

Use a different resource

Continue doing what works well

Alter what doesn't work well



08

Use Technology, Space + Time as Resources

In traditional education models, technology, space and time are typically viewed as structures that place boundaries on learning. In the personalized learning experience model, they are resources that can flex and adapt to serve individual learner needs, giving students greater agency over how and where they spend their time to accomplish academic goals.

Methods

Designate large blocks of time

for students to go at their own pace and have freedom to figure out the best use of their time to accomplish their goals.

Use technology to support exploration and help learners meet their short- and long-term goals.

Create a variety of spaces to offer different experiences based on student needs.

Launch Pad: Try These Personalized Learning Activities Today

Leverage Technology

Whether it's 1:1 technology assignments or shared resources, consider how technology can offload routine tasks and engage students with knowledge and resources far beyond school ways (see *How Teachers + Students Can Leverage Technology to Enable Personalized Learning* for more ideas).

Create Alternative Spaces to Work

Many classrooms already have two or three spaces for students to work, such as an assigned desk or sharable group work area. Adding one or two other options (see *Personalized Learning Space Elements* for more ideas) can give students the freedom to choose where they work, based on their goal, task and state of mind.

Reconsider Time Constraints

If your school is able, consider how the master schedule might change to allow for larger blocks of time to be available for deeper work. If that's not feasible, you can still adopt techniques like a "flipped" classroom or designate one hour per week to independent study. This might work in the scope of a project, or even in the context of an entire year.



Story from the Field

How do other educators use time and space as resources? In one elementary school teacher's classroom, there are 13 different seating options, giving students the opportunity to make choices that fulfill their needs. He also dedicates Friday afternoons to "Genius Hour," when students can work on whatever they want, taking as long as they want. Since taking on this approach, this educator has gained more one-on-one interaction time with all students.



How Teachers + Students Can Leverage Technology to Enable Personalized Learning

Technology can facilitate personalized learning experiences by helping offload some of the routine tasks that teachers do and expand the possibilities for students.

Teachers

Operations

Expedite or automate routine tasks like taking attendance or grading.

Content Transfer

As an alternative to lecturing, students can watch videos, use courseware or find other sources from which to receive the information.

Amplification

In larger classrooms, teachers can use microphones to amplify their voices while maintaining a calm atmosphere and without straining their voices.

Delivery of Core Skills

Many core skills can be delivered through adaptive courseware, allowing teachers to focus on power/soft skills and deeper learning with students.

Learning from Student Data

Review courseware data to understand where students are struggling and adjust accordingly.

Parent Communication

Empower parents to check attendance, student progress and more with student information or learning management systems.



Students

Feedback

Student data allows for quantitative feedback and richer conversation with feedback from teachers.

Expanding Audiences

Use technology to share student work and interact with community members or social media networks.

Resource Variety

Technology offers access to a nearly infinite number of resources for students – such as research documents, videos and visual artifacts – without requiring them to leave the classroom.

Communication and Collaboration

Students use technology to communicate with their peers, from taking group notes to working on projects.

Developing Information Literacy

Accessing a variety of research sources allows students to practice information literacy skills, like knowing when there is a need for information, and how to identify, locate, evaluate and effectively use that information.

Unlocking New Concepts

New visualization tools can help students learn about concepts in new ways, such as using virtual reality glasses to explore the interconnections between systems of the human body.

Goal Setting and Growth Tracking

Students can use technology to track and manage to-do lists and progress against goals.

Optimizing Pace

Kids can accelerate their learning by moving quickly through content they easily understand and spending more time on topics that are personally challenging.



Personalized Learning Space Elements

The qualities of the environments that support personalized learning share spatial characteristics akin to art galleries, playgrounds, workplaces and homes. These four types of spaces are good metaphors for thinking about personalized learning spaces.





Chapter 5

Art Gallery

Art galleries can inspire, provoke, educate and invite public comment. Displaying student projects and written reflections in a gallery format is a tangible way for students to share their learning journeys and encourages peers, educators and community members to participate, comment and reflect on the learning process. In many personalized learning experiences, the students have agency to determine what artifacts are displayed, lending a degree of creativity and vibrancy to every nook and cranny of the classroom or school.

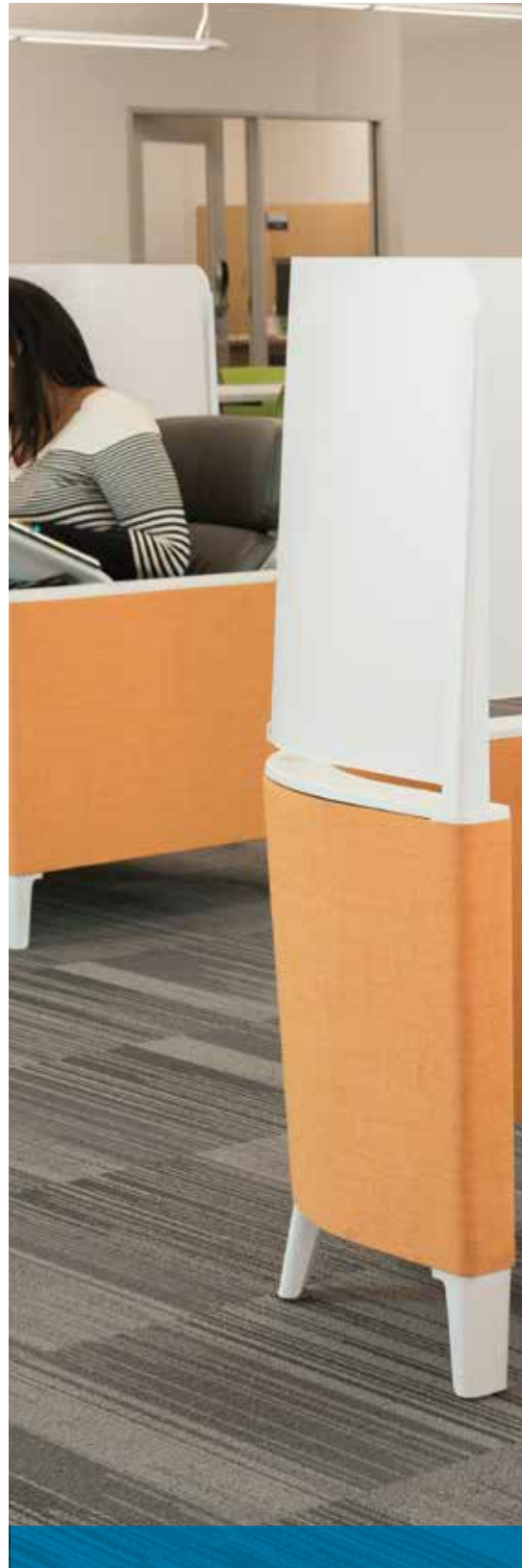
Student gallery spaces empower learner choice + voice and can encourage students to develop community with their peers and their teachers, giving them a better sense of belonging.



Home

Think of the way families relax in a living or family room. Soft lighting; comfortable, upholstered couches and chairs; and a mix of textures and objects (like a favorite photo or books on display, or warm, cozy blanket) all combine to create a welcoming, comfortable environment. Or picture how visitors always congregate in a kitchen at someone's home, hanging around a kitchen table (or near the snacks!). Bringing elements that resemble the best parts of home, from lounge seating to groupings of tables and chairs to individual getaway spaces, can create home-like personalized learning environments that students feel ownership over.

A quiet, relaxing place for students to reflect + respond allows them to slow down and examine their work progress and make adjustments as needed.









Workplace

School, however, is not all relaxing and hanging out. In fact, it's very much like a job. So, like professional knowledge workers in an office setting, students should be able to choose the mode of work that best meets their needs, whether that's working independently, collaborating, meeting one-on-one or in small groups. Thinking of the classroom or campus like a professional working environment can create an ecosystem of spaces – from assigned workspaces to project rooms, from open collaboration areas to private offices – that supports a variety of work modes.

By granting students the freedom to choose how best to accomplish their goals, you nurture trust and encourage self-sufficiency. Students in this environment can also demonstrate their respect for the guiding principles they've helped establish.

Playground

A playground isn't just a place for loud, fun expression, it's also a place for students to explore, discover and use their imagination. A playground encourages possibility without dictating what students should do. Playground elements are a key component to personalized learning environments. Providing multi-sensory learning spaces with a variety of materials, tools and resources encourages students to physically, cognitively and emotionally engage in self-discovery and curiosity around learning. Rooms like maker-spaces, STEM labs and design labs provide playground-like qualities for students.

By leveraging technology, space and time as resources, you give students the freedom to explore, discover and learn at their own pace and determine the best use of their time.







Chapter 6


Personalized Learning + You

As a foundation for student success, personalized learning experiences consider the cognitive, physical, emotional and social dimensions of a learner while better developing their knowledge, skills and personal development – and addressing the entire ecosystem of supports around learning.


Whether you choose to implement these strategies across an entire school, try new approaches in your classroom or even explore bite-sized projects with these experiences in mind, personalized learning can help students develop personally, gain new skills and internalize knowledge in lasting and impactful ways.



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