

Strategy Reflection Personalizing Student Learning



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What Is Personalized Learning?

Learning is an inherently dynamic process.

Students actively engage in, connect with, and derive meaning from new information and experiences to build their own understanding (Hinton, Fischer, & Glennon, 2012). Individual students learn and process information in different ways, however. Research suggests that students' prior knowledge and learning strategies, individual needs, and diverse backgrounds provide a unique context for how students learn in the classroom (Surr, Zeiser, Briggs, & Kendziora, 2018). To help each learner succeed, educators must understand the individual student's strengths, needs, interests, and personal context. Educators should then use this understanding to tailor learning opportunities that optimize the learning and potential of each student—that is, learning opportunities that **personalize learning**.

The American Institutes for Research (AIR) defines personalized learning as an educational approach that

- is **student-centered**, offering varied and flexible learning opportunities, modalities, and supports designed to meet the unique strengths, needs, and backgrounds of each student;

- promotes **agency** by harnessing student interests and enabling students to exercise responsibility, self-management, and decision making as they help drive their own learning;
- is **competency-based**, setting a high bar for learning, offering flexible place and pace for reaching goals, and awarding credit only when mastery has been successfully demonstrated; and
- promotes **deeper learning** by offering students content-rich, challenging, applied, and collaborative learning experiences as well as meaningful feedback and reflection as they build the broad knowledge and transferable skills they will need to continuously learn, adapt, and thrive in the 21st century.

AIR offers a suite of services and an interdisciplinary team of experts who work side by side with education leaders to facilitate and grow personalized learning programs. We bring evidence-based practices and a customized, comprehensive technical assistance and coaching approach that meets the unique needs and expectations of our clients.

The What, How, When, and Where of Personalized Learning

Embracing a personalized learning approach to education will necessitate changes at the state, district, and school levels. At the classroom level, a move to personalized learning can change the nature of teacher and student roles, relationships, and responsibilities. For sites that are newer to personalized learning or that are moving toward a new personalized learning strategy within a more developed program, the “What-How-When-Where of Personalized Learning” tool provides an overview of what personalized learning *looks like* and *feels like* in the classroom. The tool is designed to help clients identify what personalized learning practices are already present in their schools, districts, or states, and what personalized learning practices will require shifts in existing school and classroom cultures and structures.

There is no one right way to implement personalized learning. Education policymakers and practitioners can prioritize a wide range of policies, structures, cultural shifts, and classroom practices as they strive to optimize learning for each student. AIR recommends that sites use the personalized learning tool during the planning and early implementation stage as they work to prioritize new personalized learning strategies in participating schools and classrooms.

Personalized learning structures, strategies, and practices that educators might employ to tailor learning to address individual student needs are grouped in four themes in this document:

1. **What** students learn
2. **How** students learn
3. **When and where** students learn
4. **How** student learning is assessed and recognized

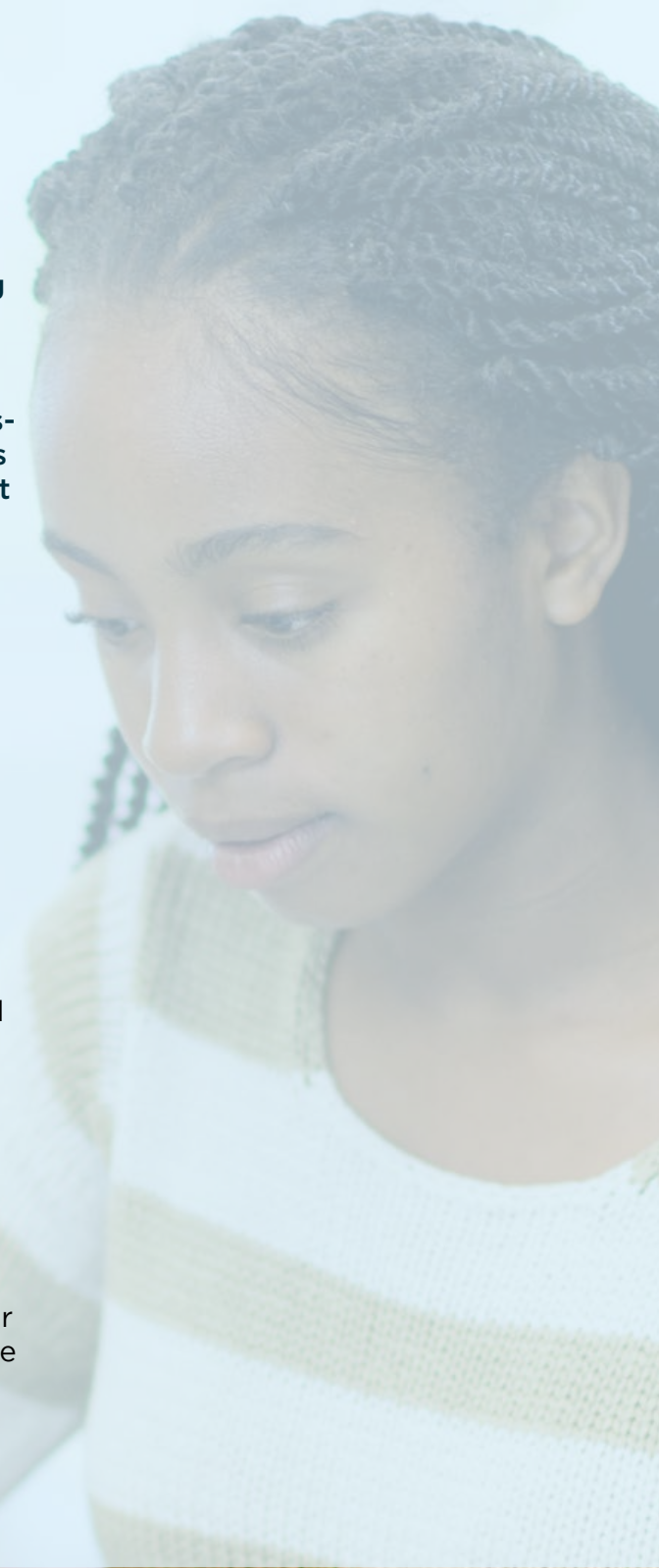
Regardless of the approach to personalized learning, the “how” of deciding what personalized learning looks like for each school, district, or state is crucial. A process that includes a collaborative design approach, thoughtful implementation, improvement feedback loops, and consistent and effective communication will lead to successful personalized learning. For more information about the stages, activities, and responsibilities at each implementation stage of personalized learning, refer to AIR’s helpful at-a-glance resource, the *Implementation Path for Personalized Learning*.

Directions

AIR recommends that you use this tool as part of a collaborative planning process with a personalized learning stakeholder group or leadership team. Groups can either complete the tool individually and then hold a consensus-finding discussion or fill the tool out as a group, engaging in discussion as part of the completion process.

The four tables below outline a sample of personalized learning structures, strategies, and practices that districts, schools, and educators might employ to personalize learning in four thematic areas: what students learn, how students learn, when and where students learn, and how student learning is assessed and recognized.

Use the tables on the following pages to reflect on the personalized learning approach in your own school, district, or state. Read about each personalized learning approach and explore the resources and examples that are pertinent to each theme. With your team, think about whether or not your site currently implements each approach and make notes in the boxes next to each personalized learning approach. After you complete the tables, engage in a discussion with your team using the reflection guide on page 9 to structure your conversation.



WHAT Students Learn

Table 1. WHAT Students Learn

Personalized learning approach	What this approach looks like and feels like in the classroom	We do this now in our school, district, or state	This is different from our current approach
<p>Learning is structured around competencies, not content or seat time.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instruction is standards-based, including academic standards, career-readiness standards, and other relevant skills (i.e., social-emotional skills.) • Learning progressions, assessments, grades, and/or credits are competency-based. 		
<p>Learning goals are clear, relevant, and rigorous. Materials are adapted based on individual student needs.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning goals and targets are explicit and shared with students. • Knowledge, skills, and individual interests are preassessed and used to build learner profiles to guide student work. • Teachers have high expectations for students' personal growth and achievement. • Teachers adapt curricular materials to reflect student interests, learning needs/levels, and cultural contexts. 		

WHAT Students Learn

Resources and Examples

Table 2. HOW Students Learn

HOW Students Learn

Personalized learning approach	What this approach looks like and feels like in the classroom	We do this now in our school, district, or state	This is different from our current approach
<p>Classrooms provide varied and flexible activities, options, and pacing.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Schools provide alternative schedules (blocks, flex, intensives), and classrooms offer flexible pacing.• Teachers provide varied and flexible learning opportunities, including collaborative, multiple modalities, levels of challenge, and project- and inquiry-based learning (designed and driven by students).• Teachers promote frequent peer learning, feedback, and collaboration.		
<p>Educators provide individualized guidance, feedback, and support.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Students create personalized learning plans and set learning goals in collaboration with educators.• Teachers provide individualized instructional supports and advising.• Teachers use a range of strategies to encourage students to be responsible for their own learning (e.g., questioning, discussion, collaborative planning).		

Table 2. HOW Students Learn

Personalized learning approach	What this approach looks like and feels like in the classroom	We do this now in our school, district, or state	This is different from our current approach
<p>Learning activities and approach offer significant opportunities for student voice, responsibility, self-management, and decision making.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students engage in self-assessment (e.g., student-led conferences, self- and peer assessment, work review and feedback protocols, student reflection protocols). • Teachers act as learning facilitators rather than primarily delivering content. • Students assume management of their own learning choices and decisions. 		
<p>Schools provide access to technology to meet individual needs.</p>	<p>Schools provide access to supportive classroom technology such as individual devices, learning management software, online learning options, and adaptive/assistive technologies.</p>		

HOW Students Learn

Resources and Examples

Table 3. WHEN and WHERE Students Learn

WHEN and WHERE Students Learn

Personalized learning approach	What this approach looks like and feels like in the classroom	We do this now in our school, district, or state	This is different from our current approach
<p>Personalized learning happens at varying times and in multiple places</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School and district policies (i.e., seat time/attendance policies, credit policies, scheduling policies, assessment timing or re-take policies) allow personalized learning approaches. • Schools establish external partnerships to offer remote or off-site learning opportunities (e.g., online courses, dual credit, work-based learning, internships, community service). • Teachers manage multiple learning modalities and collaborate with colleagues to support learning (e.g., teachers collaborate with intern supervisors to assess and adjust learning supports). • Students have access to individual devices. • Classrooms offer opportunities for learning through technology (e.g., flipped learning, distance learning). 		

WHEN and WHERE Students Learn:

Resources and Examples

Table 4. HOW Student Learning Is Assessed and Recognized

HOW Student Learning is Assessed and Recognized

Personalized learning approach	What this approach looks like and feels like in the classroom	We do this now in our school, district, or state	This is different from our current approach
<p>Learning is assessed and recognized in rigorous, flexible, and authentic ways.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Schools and classrooms employ data management systems for tracking student progress and proficiency.• Schools and teachers use varied formative and summative assessments including authentic student work (e.g., portfolios, capstones).• Schools allow flexible timing of assessments.• Assessment, grading, and credits are competency-based.• Student learning progressions are competency-based (i.e., allowing “testing out”).• Teachers share, describe, and model how to gather evidence of performance and how mastery will be demonstrated and assessed.		

HOW Student Learning is Assessed and Recognized:

Resources and Examples

Reflection Guide

Review your notes in Tables 1–4 and use the questions below to reflect on your (potential) approach to personalized learning. You can add additional notes in the text boxes below about your takeaways and next steps.

Are there personalized learning approaches related to WHAT, HOW, WHEN, and WHERE students learn or HOW student learning is assessed and recognized that you already implement in your school, district, or state? If so, what are they?

Are there personalized learning approaches related to WHAT, HOW, WHEN, and WHERE students learn or HOW student learning is assessed and recognized that are different than your current approach but that seem particularly interesting or relevant for your work? If so, what are they?

For any personalized learning approaches that you have identified as an area of future interest or relevance, what cultural or structural shifts would be needed to implement the approach?

References

- Hinton, C., Fischer, K. W., & Glennon, C. (2012). *Mind, brain, and education*. Boston, MA: Jobs for the Future/Nellie Mae Education Foundation.
- Surr, W., Zeiser, K., Briggs, O., & Kendziora, K. (2018). *Learning with others: A study exploring the relationship between collaboration, personalization, and equity*. Washington, DC: American Institutes for Research.