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# Stimulating a Gradual and Progressive Shift to Personalize Learning for All: There is Magic in the Middle

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## Stimulating a Gradual and Progressive Shift to Personalize Learning for All: There is Magic in the Middle

### Cover Page Footnote

Dr. Autumn R. Turk currently serves as the Director of Curriculum and Development at Burrell School District. She has previously served as a middle school assistant principal, upper elementary assistant principal, academic intervention specialist, and first grade teacher. Dr. Turk would like to show appreciation for the work of the researchers who laid the foundation for this paper, as well as the tremendous support she has received from her family, friends, and colleagues within the Burrell and Point Park communities. Dr. Turk completed her dissertation research and doctorate degree through Point Park University, a master's degree in School Leadership from the University of Pittsburgh, and a bachelor of science degree in Elementary and Special Education from Clarion University.

## Stimulating a Gradual and Progressive Shift to Personalize Learning for All: There is Magic in the Middle:

Autumn R. Turk, *Burrell School District & Point Park University*

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### Abstract

This essay contends that personalized professional learning can support the shift towards a culture of personalized learning at the middle school level, with the potential to make a district-wide impact. If you have ever worked in a middle school, you would agree there is a sense of magic and contagious energy within middle school students. Middle school is often an overlooked and untapped resource when considering efforts to transform school and district culture. Middle school students start to develop passions and a voice for advocacy, making agency a powerful accelerator when students channel their collective energy towards a shared vision for change. This past year has placed tremendous pressures on our educators, school leaders, students, and parents; yet, it has also offered us a remarkable opportunity to re-imagine our educational system by focusing on a more personalized approach to learning for both our students and adults. Educators have re-**entered the learner's seat with** an immediate urgency to enhance their instructional practices so they may engage students in learning and manage their classrooms in new and nontraditional learning environments. The result of this shift has yielded many benefits, such as the use of technology for learning and curation of digital curriculum resources; however, it has also created a renewed need to focus on the efficacy and professional learning of educators. Rising concerns with equity, learning loss, and mental health have added additional pressure for school leaders, teachers, and support staff. Therefore, there is a need to reimagine our vision for the future of education and strategically plan flexible pathways to make our vision a reality. A vision for embedding ongoing personalized coaching within professional learning communities can improve teacher efficacy, enhance collaborative data analysis and lesson planning, and transform school culture to maximize personalized learning for all students.

### Introduction

Middle school is a time for social, emotional, physical, and academic growth. There is a renewed sense of advocacy and a contagious positive energy when middle school students become empowered to have their voices heard. Rather than fighting against this natural tendency, middle school educators can gain leverage for learning by empowering student agency and activating career future ready skills through project-based and personalized learning experiences. The middle school concept of block scheduling, team teaching, and collaborative learning provides a foundation to build upon and is conducive to the professional learning community process in which educators work collaboratively to ensure a high level of learning for all students. Although this seems obvious, shifting the mindset and cultures within schools requires a great deal of efficacy on the part of the students, teachers, and administrators. Personalized professional learning and ongoing, embedded coaching can be the accelerating factor that many school districts are missing. This reimagined system of education also

requires the department of education at the state and national level to allow local school districts relief from the constraints placed upon them with standardized assessments so they may shift to a competency-based system of accountability that will better align with and support a student-centered, personalized culture for learning.

### **One Middle School's Journey Towards Personalized Learning**

After completing her dissertation research study, the author found that efficacy seemed to be a trending concern within her own school and district. Although there were pockets of excellence with personalized and project-based learning, it seemed as if some teachers lacked confidence and the feeling of safety in trying new things. When combined with the stress of covering the curriculum in order to meet standardized testing requirements, the focus often shifted from a discussion about learning to a discussion about teaching and content coverage. Upon talking with teachers about what would help them with this shift, many staff shared an interest in learning from their peers

through more of a personalized professional development model. We first offered this type of professional learning for staff over two days in which staff could choose the sessions they would like to attend and could offer sessions they would like to lead. The feedback from this first attempt to differentiate professional development was positive and some shifts in classroom instruction occurred as teachers started to try some of the methods modeled during their sessions. The one element we were missing at the time was the ongoing and embedded professional learning needed beyond these two days of professional development.

This school year we further enhanced our personalized professional learning model by offering teachers flexibility in what they learned, how they learned, and when they learned. Google Classroom is used as a hub to share **resources, store each teacher's personalized** professional learning playlist, and submit certificates of completion when staff has finished the requirements for their must-do and get-to sessions. The must-do sessions are required and have due dates for completion; whereas, the get-to sessions are voluntary to promote teacher agency in choosing professional learning that is meaningful and relevant for them. We also offered several in-person sessions that staff could choose from using a choice board at our beginning of the year professional learning days. We have been intentional about using active learning strategies in our sessions to help teachers experience them first as a learner to build a sense of comfort and confidence in trying the strategy with their students. Successful evidence of this adult learning strategy has been seen across grade levels, such as using Kami to augment the learning experience through technology in kindergarten, promoting student voice and choice through a list of must-dos and get-tos in a 4<sup>th</sup> grade class, engaging all students in meaningful discussion using a silent conversation technique in middle school, and the use of a personalized learning student profiler in the high school to better understand the learning preferences, strengths, and interests of our students.

Although our efforts started in the middle school, the effects are spreading district-wide from pockets of excellence to district-wide transformation of pedagogy and practice towards promoting learner agency and ownership, including students in co-creating their learning, engaging students in social

construction through flexible pathways and project-based learning, and using a competency-based system of accountability as evidence of adult and student learning. Although our district has seen decreases in student achievement at a startling rate as a result of the pandemic, we are choosing not to focus on our standardized testing results and instead focus on the evidence of student and adult learning that is occurring right in front of us each and every day. This essay contends that personalized professional learning can support the shift towards a culture of personalized learning starting at the middle school level, with the potential to make a district-wide impact.

### Building Capacity for Personalized Learning

In shifting to a culture of personalized learning, it is vital teachers focus on the essential skills and understandings they want students to know and be able to do by engaging in broad and deep levels of learning, often occurring simultaneously (Kallick & Zmuda, 2017; Virgin, 2015). Once these big ideas are established, teachers develop competencies to determine if students have learned the concepts and often work with students to co-create goals for the learning process (Kallick & Zmuda). Students put these goals into action by applying what they have learned to real-world problems and collaborating with others to achieve their goals. Students and teachers are more likely to form positive connections, improve conceptual thinking, and develop trust by sharing ownership of the learning process (Virgin). This gradual and progressive shift in practice from teacher-directed instruction to student-driven learning requires teachers to consider the instructional practices they are using and the best approaches for meeting students by name and need through empowering learning that has the potential to extend beyond the classroom. The priority shifts from the delivery of content to ensuring learning for all students (DuFour et al., 2016).

Personalized learning offers a solution for providing quality instruction that meets the needs of the whole child by activating higher order thinking in a collaborative learning environment (Rutledge et al., 2015). The inquiry-based instructional strategies and collaborative practices of the core attributes of personalized learning empower students to have a voice in their own learning, while the design

elements of personalized learning allow teachers to act as mentors and facilitators of learning; shifting the focus from teaching to learning (Jacobs, 2017; Olofson et al., 2018). Personalized learning stimulates highly self-regulated environments with teacher and student agency incorporated into flexible pathways to understanding (Basham et al., 2016).

As schools shift from teacher dependence for learning to an interdependence on learning, it is vital the core attributes of personalized learning align with the systems and structures most present. The core attributes of personalized learning are student voice and ownership, co-creation of personalized learning plans, social construction through flexible pathways, and self-discovery through a competency-based system of accountability (Kallick & Zmuda, 2017; Olofson et al., 2018). These core attributes are essential in creating a gradual and progressive shift toward student-centered personalized learning practices. Instructional practices also become progressively student-driven with the incorporation of the design elements of personalized learning: personalized assessments, use of technology for learning, whole group learning, and out-of-school learning (Netcoh & Bishop, 2017). When combined with the core attributes of personalized learning, the design elements have the potential to transform instruction and improve student-learning outcomes in ensuring all students are learning at high levels. These personalized learning practices inspire higher self-efficacy in students by developing the habits of mind, emotional intelligence, and workforce ready skills that prepare them for life (Kallick & Zmuda; Olofson et al.).

A common misconception is that personalized learning is limited to teacher-led practices such as differentiated instruction, technology-driven customized learning, and individualized learning plans; however, agency, relationships, and collaboration are anchored within the foundation of all of the core attributes and design elements of personalized learning. The core attributes of personalized learning encourage students to collaborate with teachers in their learning to improve their communication skills, self-management, and persistence (Jacobs, 2018; Kallick & Zmuda, 2017). Teachers target instruction to support student needs, monitor progress, and stimulate growth within a guaranteed and viable

curriculum (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2017). Personalized learning helps students transcend traditional learning limitations by inspiring inquiry, maximizing relationships, and offering access to rigorous coursework to ensure all students are learning at a high level (Alliance for Excellent Education; Netcoh & Bishop, 2017). Rather than focusing on implementing all of the core attributes and design elements of personalized learning at once, it is wise for school leaders, personalized learning coaches, and teachers to narrow the focus to the attributes and elements that will provide the biggest impact on student learning. Leaders must ensure that professional learning communities are working through all four of the essential questions of the process to ensure a high level of learning for all students; however, the pathways to get there may be personalized **based on students' strengths, needs, interests,** and agency.

### A Gradual and Progressive Shift Towards Personalized Learning

Recent change initiatives in middle schools are emphasizing the need to move toward more learner-centered and personalized practices (LeGeros et al., 2021; Olofson et al., 2018). Teachers must balance meeting the social-emotional needs of students with their academic needs (Rutledge et al., 2015). Many middle level educators believe their core purpose is to create a culture that students are responsible for making choices in their learning and have an opportunity to create their own destiny (Edwards et al., 2014). The unique emotional and academic needs of middle school students require a caring and engaging classroom environment in which the student is actively engaged (Range et al., 2013). Middle school provides an opportunity to promote social progress, racial equity, and help students develop the life skills that are necessary for being productive citizens (Harrison & Bishop, 2021; Edwards et al.). Teachers and school leaders must consider who our traditional educational system is not serving and how our practices can become more student-centered and focused on ensuring learning for all students, especially those who are traditionally underserved within our community (Harrison & Bishop).

This transformation in school culture from traditional instructional practices and classroom structures to a personalized learning environment requires a renewed focus on

professional learning, collaboration, and growth. Teachers often default back to traditional learning structures and directive instructional practices due to the constraints of standardized testing, the pressure to meet rigorous academic standards, and struggles with classroom management; yet, our schools continue to produce startling trends in student achievement (Netcoh & Bishop, 2017; Turk, 2020). In order to overcome these barriers and improve student achievement, school leaders and teachers must work collaboratively to promote professional growth, strengthen relationships, and motivate student engagement through personalized instructional strategies and learning experiences (Prewett et al., 2019; Turk).

### Relationships and Trust are the Foundation for Personalized Learning

Shifting to a personalized learning environment may be uncomfortable for educators trained with and who use traditional instructional practices common to secondary education; therefore, professional collaboration and a trusting relationship with the school leader are essential in creating a safe environment for change to occur. The growth of educators is the catalyst for student growth; therefore, it is vital teachers are provided with job-embedded personalized professional development and coaching within a professional learning community that is data-driven, founded in relevant research, contextual, and collaborative (DuFour et al., 2016; Muhammad, 2018). Personalized learning and professional learning communities are rich social processes that encourage people to shift from being a product of their environment to a producer by transforming their environment through personal, proxy, and collective agency (Bandura, 2000; Campbell et al., 2007).

Schools must shift from the ideology of making students fit into past educational models and allow new models of thinking and learning to evolve through personalization. Our global education system has failed traditionally unserved students, such as those living in poverty, minority populations, and immigrants (Harrison & Bishop, 2021). Teaching strategies that empower young adolescents to have a voice in their own learning use less direct instruction and more inquiry-based and cooperative learning practices (Olofson et al., 2018). Agency empowers learners to produce and shape their own experiences in order to actively construct

knowledge that is meaningful and is essential in adolescent development and social consciousness (Bandura, 2000; Edwards et al., 2014). Students benefit from engaging in opportunities to connect their interests, needs, and learning preferences to the learning process, while the interpersonal elements of personalized learning help students feel connected and supported (Netcoh & Bishop, 2017; Surr et al., 2018).

Intellectual engagement requires meeting **students' social, emotional, and behavioral** needs (Costa & Kallick, 2000; Surr et al., 2018). Their habits and environmental conditions influence the physical, emotional, and social health of our students (Bandura, 2001). Middle school students are often in search of who they are and may need help in developing self-efficacy, confidence as a learner, and habits that will lead to success (Tomlinson, 2005). Teachers expect students to perform at higher levels of thinking in middle school, yet the thought processes of adolescents tend to be more impulsive and situational, as the part of their brain closely related to reasoning and higher-order thinking is still developing (Kallick & Zmuda, 2017). Students benefit from engaging opportunities that connect their interests, needs, and learning preferences to the learning process (Netcoh & Bishop, 2017). Further, the interpersonal factors help students feel connected and supported by others, improve behavior, and encourage students to be more focused (Surr et al.). Middle school students yearn to connect socially and emotionally to others; yet this time of transition often leaves students feeling bored and disengaged (Range et al., 2013). Students need to feel connected to the adults and students they are working with and thrive in positive social-emotional environments with high instructional quality (Hanover Research, 2015).

### Connecting Efficacy and Personalized Learning

Teacher efficacy is one of the most influential factors for promoting student growth within the learning environment, yet personalized learning may challenge educator efficacy when faced with meeting the diverse needs of struggling students, providing opportunities for student engagement, and managing student behavior (Muhammad, 2018; Surr et al., 2018). When considering a shift to a personalized learning environment, leaders must consider the personalized

professional learning needs of their teachers in addressing their readiness for change and their ability to ensure a high level of learning for all students (School Leadership Learning Community, 2005). Efficacy is the foundational element in agency and is pivotal to social cognitive theory because **it affects a person's** ability to adapt, be resilient, and exercise control of their environment (Bandura, 2001). A **teacher's sense of self-efficacy** relates to their perceived ability to shift instructional practices, influence student behavior, engage students in meaningful learning, and promote a culture of high expectations (Bandura, 2001; Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk-Hoy, 2001). Efficacy also affects collaborative processes, social problem solving, and beliefs about the collective capacity and agency of members of the professional learning community (Bandura, 2000; DuFour et al., 2016; Muhammad, 2018). People must believe they can produce the desired results and then follow through with actions to support those beliefs; therefore, intrinsically motivated, high-performing teachers produce intrinsically-motivated, high-performing students (Bandura, 2001; Schwahn & McGarvey, 2012).

Personalized learning has the potential to help students develop personal efficacy by taking responsibility, improving decision-making, and demonstrating competence, which are critical developmental skills for middle school students (Netcoh & Bishop, 2017). This sense of self-**efficacy attributes to the students' beliefs,** interests, and competencies; however, social pressures and environmental factors easily influence efficacy (Bandura, 2001). Social cognitive theory suggests relationships influence efficacy beliefs, as collective efficacy gives power to situations in which one cannot overcome a challenge or accomplish a task on their own (Bandura, 2000). Therefore, the social interaction and collaborative processes are even more valuable for traditionally underserved students in classroom settings due to cultural, economic, and linguistic needs (Surr et al., 2018). Students are more apt to drop out of school and engage in negative behaviors when they do not feel connected and their basic needs are not met (Range et al., 2013). Community, home, school, and classroom culture affect how efficacy and agency are developed within social structures; therefore, it is essential leaders consider how their systems and structures are promoting prosocial behavior and collaboration within personalized learning environments (Bandura, 2000). Efficacy beliefs can be

situational in nature and can decline over time, especially when academic achievement and self-concept decrease (Maclellan, 2014). Sadly, motivation for learning often decreases during the adolescent years, leading to an increased risk of absenteeism and attrition (Peetsma et al., 2005). Many students, teachers, and families are struggling with mental health concerns and acquiring the appropriate level of support for their children which presents a need to focus more intently on the preventative and proactive measures we as teachers are taking to support the social, emotional, and behavioral health of our students within our schools.

Teachers can reverse this negative cycle by allowing students to develop a healthy self-concept through incorporating their voice and choice into learning activities, master content according to curriculum competencies, and allow for flexibility in the learning environment (Valentine et al., 2004). Students gradually take responsibility and ownership of their learning as they develop self-regulation, metacognition, and emotional responsiveness (Maclellan, 2014). This shift in agency is a fluid process in which the students and the teachers share the burdens and arduous work, while reaping the benefits of having influence in their decision-making and ownership of their learning (Bandura, 2000). **The student's improved self-concept** then leads to a level of metacognitive confidence, which can **serve as a significant factor in a student's** academic achievement and social development (Petty et al., 2007). Interestingly, the social-emotional components of learning are the strongest indicator of high performance in schools, likely because the adults make deliberate efforts to connect with students and focus on the needs of the whole child in the learning process (Rutledge et al., 2015). Likewise, schools can be places for high levels of learning for all students regardless of student background and faculty attitudes and beliefs should reflect that (Muhammad, 2018).

Habits and environmental conditions influence the physical, emotional, and social health of students; therefore, it is essential to reimagine what learning looks like and feels like for students and consider how leaders can make cultural and technical changes to better support teachers in shifting their instructional practices and beliefs about student learning (Bandura, 2001; Muhammad, 2018). Personalized learning has the capacity to level the playing field for students and educators by mobilizing material

and social resources in schools of varying classes, creating a new method of school reform (Beach & Dovemark, 2009). It is the responsibility of teachers and school leaders to advocate for the unique developmental needs of young adolescents and remove systems, structures, and policies that hinder the wellbeing of all students through a commitment to culturally-responsive practices (Harrison & Bishop, 2021).

#### Increasing Engagement through Agency, Ownership, and Social Construction

When personalizing learning, teachers meet learners where they are, accommodate for how they learn best, and encourage student agency by listening to their voice and choice of content they are personally interested in (Olofson et al., 2018). Students are involved early in the learning process on what they will be learning and how they will be learning it (Kallick & Zmuda, 2017). Students given a voice and choice in their learning are often more motivated, engaged, and challenged to complete their work and perform at high levels (Hanover Research, 2015). This is an essential element when working with middle school students as they are often naturally resistant to authority and tend to be more engaged when they have some responsibility for their choices and ownership of their decisions. Student agency may include customized learning, personalized assessment, out-of-school learning, and using technology to enhance learning (Olofson et al.). The level of agency is an investment of cognitive energy to acquire and refine knowledge and skills (Deed et al., 2014). This awareness serves as a formative assessment to help the student reflect on their progress alongside others and make necessary changes (Jaros & Deakin-Crick, 2007).

Middle school students are also deeply concerned with the social elements of school and their emotions and actions within these dynamics can have a ripple effect on their engagement in school and relationships with others. Students must balance being engaged in the social aspects of learning with their own personal needs as a learner, while continuing to refine their practical knowledge (Deed et al., 2014; Jaros & Deakin-Crick, 2007). Students learn to react, regulate, and reflect on their learning, which becomes a deliberate influence on their efforts and actions toward attaining a goal (Bandura, 2001). Personalized learning helps students take control of their learning by

realizing the power of how their ideas shift and evolve throughout their journey (Kallick & Zmuda, 2017). It is important for parents and educators to consider how they are modeling the skills students will need in life outside of school and customizing the support students need to develop their futures (Virgin, 2015).

#### Maximizing Personalized Learning through the Middle School Concept

Personalizing learning, assessment, intervention, and extension for all students by name and need is an unreasonable task for teachers when they are solely responsible for curricular decision-making and differentiating instruction (Virgin, 2015). The team concept of middle level education allows cross-curricular grade level teams to focus on essential learnings and work collaboratively on common areas of focus in providing support for students. Further, teachers working in the isolation of their silos may be unaware of the effects of their teaching and believe that they are providing all students with an equitable opportunity to learn; even though learning conditions are often more favorable for certain groups of students than for others (Bloom, 1984). This inequity creates a teacher lottery and academic obstacle course in which students are expected to perform despite systemic constraints and institutionalized predeterminations they have no control over (Muhammad, 2018). In turn, teachers will often cling to the systems, content, and instructional practices that are driven by teaching preference rather than student learning. Equity, diversity, and inclusion are not isolated concepts, but are beliefs that middle level educators can practice in all aspects of teaching and learning (Harrison & Bishop, 2021).

The middle school concept of team collaboration shifts this mindset by breaking down the walls between departments and helping teachers shift their focus to one thing they all have in common – student learning. Additionally, the block scheduling or modified block scheduling systems many schools use allow for more opportunities for project-based learning, cross-curricular connections, and co-teaching. The flexibility in scheduling also allows teachers to look for opportunities to provide personalized intervention and extension for students as a team. Personalized learning blocks relieve pressure to cover curriculum by allowing teachers to work collaboratively to learn about **students' interests, improve relationships, and**

create shared norms that facilitate peer interactions (Netcoh & Bishop, 2017). Systems-based changes, such as creating time for **personalized learning in a school's schedule**, contribute to the potential success of the school (DuFour et al., 2010). However, the culture of the school must also shift to be more collaborative and growth-minded so teachers use instructional time and assessment data most effectively.

The collaborative environment of professional learning communities embedded within the middle school model lends itself well to personalized learning, as teachers collaborate **about students' learning needs and co-design** instructional support systems that promote growth (Campbell et al., 2008; DuFour et al., 2016; Yonezawa et al., 2012). The professional learning community process is grounded in shared norms, common goals, and four essential questions: 1) What do we want students to know and be able to do?; 2) How will we know if students are learning?; 3) What will we do to intervene and remediate when students do not learn?; 4) What will we do to extend and enrich when students have learned? (DuFour et al.). Teams work collaboratively to create a guaranteed and viable curriculum that all students will have access to, regardless of teacher or circumstance, and common formative assessments to measure learning and inform instructional practices in providing personalized intervention and extension (DuFour et al.).

### Evocative Coaching: Ongoing, and Embedded Personalized Professional Learning

Personalized learning requires a collective capacity for change and shared responsibility to ensure learning for all students (DuFour et al., 2010). It is essential to focus on the positive movement and courageous actions of school leaders, teachers, and students within a school when developing a vision for personalized learning (Kallick & Zmuda, 2017). Rather than focusing on past educational practices, teachers are encouraged to remain flexible and relevant in providing the best possible support for the students in front of them each day. This shift in practice is stressful and even messy at times; therefore, leaders are called to be supportive and forgiving and teachers are encouraged to try new ideas and take instructional risks (Kallick & Zmuda). A crucial factor for increasing efficacy and agency among teachers when shifting to a

culture for personalized learning is offering personalized professional development that is intrinsically motivating, relevant to their current practice, and personalized to their individual needs (Bandura, 2000; Karmeshu et al., 2012; Turk, 2020). The ever-changing demands on educators require a high level of social consciousness and responsibility, yet a spirit of unity and a collaborative culture can alleviate some of the pressure and make the demands feel more manageable (Dewey, 1922-1923). Collaborative influence has the power to instill positive change and collective action; therefore, leaders need to ensure they are instilling a safe professional learning community which **supports teachers' efficacy, empowers a sense of agency and ownership of their instructional decisions and mistakes, and capitalizes on the synergistic power and collective energy to improve student learning** (Bandura; Fisher et al., 2012). The key is the ongoing, embedded, and personalized approach that supports each educator by name and need to promote growth, encourage courageous action, and empower forward-thinking.

Personalized learning is a collaborative process that requires listening with understanding and flexible thinking; therefore, leaders must be cautious they are not falling too hard into their own ideas and are responding evocatively to their teachers (Kallick & Zmuda, 2017). The evocative coaching model is anchored in the ongoing and embedded LEAD philosophy: listen, empathize, appreciate, and design (Tschannen-Moran & Tschannen-Moran, 2020). As many schools courageously shift from traditional standardized practices toward an environment of personalized learning and innovation, there is an increased need to support teachers in changing and refining their instructional practices (Tschannen-Moran & Tschannen-Moran). Traditional professional development practices interfere with adult learning, lack relational connection, and limit collaboration; whereas, evocative coaching approaches are research-based, proven, and an effective means for promoting and sustaining lasting change in transforming school culture (Tschannen-Moran & Tschannen-Moran). Evocative coaching is grounded in adult learning theory and positive psychology, providing personalized, ongoing, and embedded relationship-based professional development (Tschannen-Moran & Tschannen-Moran). This person-centered, strengths-based process is anchored in building trust, focusing on

possibilities rather than problems, and a shared sense of accountability.

### Removing Systematic Structures and Policies that Constrain Acceleration

Educators are a product of the systems in which they learned and are under immense pressure to perform. This is truly a clash of public policy with professional practice and needs to be addressed at the state and national level to allow teachers to shift from adherence to standardized and rigid practices to a genuine system that supports student learning and is flexible to their unique learning needs. Almost 80% of middle school classrooms still use direct instruction models for teaching, presenting a need to **reimagine learning in our nation's public schools** and shift our instructional practices (Netcoh & Bishop, 2017). Teachers must possess a strong sense of efficacy in instructional strategies, classroom management, and student engagement to shift from traditional teaching practices to a progressively student-driven model of learning (Kallick & Zmuda, 2017; Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk-Hoy, 2001). Many teachers yearn to make a difference and thrive when they are engaged in meaningful work (Fisher et al., 2012). National, state, and local leaders have the power to help their teachers and students thrive and grow; however, it requires courage, creativity, and a collaborative effort to make it happen.

**Personalized learning for our nation's students** and educators requires state and national-level leadership to challenge the status quo and lift standardized testing constraints on school districts so they may be more flexible in meeting **students' and teachers' learning needs and promoting collaborative practices**. Federal and state legislators should include local administrators, educators, parents, and students in redesigning accountability measures that encourage personalized practices that are founded on essential learnings and competency-based accountability measures at the local level, rather than over-relying on outdated standardized assessment practices that only **offer a glimpse of a child's learning proficiency**. This systematic change would allow school and district leadership to utilize strengths-based approaches to leadership by lifting the pressure to fix problems and instead focus on opportunities and solutions. A transformed educational system starts with placing trust in local school districts and our teachers. The most

**influential factor in a student's academic growth** is teacher efficacy, not a standardized test that is likely to diminish both teacher and student efficacy (Muhammad, 2018).

### Shifting the Focus and Transforming School Culture

If middle schools continue to stand by the traditional structures and practices for the sake of preserving ways they have always done it, they will continue to get the same results of startling student achievement trends (Schwahn & Spady, 2010). Although educational reform has standardized teaching practices, with leaders feeling as though they need to fix the problems through systematic and structural changes, a spirit of courage and persistence can overcome these challenges (Schwahn & Spady). School and district leaders who conform to traditional practices and make no effort to reinvent learning in their schools are more likely to hire and retain incompetent teachers (Dewey, 1903). Surface-level types of reform provide temporary relief but do not promote lasting organizational change. True organizational change stems from individual and collective efficacy, founded in core values and belief systems that learning can and will occur.

School transformation involves listening to **teachers' and students' voices to truly** understand what learning looks like and feels like for our students (Kallick & Zmuda, 2017). The best minds in education favor environments where their creative spirit and hard work are realized, appreciated, and activated (Dewey, 1903). Educators can embark on this journey of self-discovery through a willingness to learn about themselves and others by co-creating a shared vision for implementation and using social construction as a means to understand how others personalize learning (Kallick & Zmuda). Teacher efficacy is one of the most influential factors in student growth (Muhammad, 2018). Teacher belief systems and instructional methods that promote growth for every student can become a haven for learning and an accelerator of growth within a school culture (Muhammad). It is vital to focus on the positive ways the school is implementing personalized learning in making a vision for a reimagined educational system a reality as a professional learning community (Kallick & Zmuda; Schwahn & Spady). The process is likely to be messy, with many bumps along the way;

however, there is no better time than the present to begin (Kallick & Zmuda).

### Summary and Conclusions

John Dewey (1902) shared his vision of a transformed educational system over one-hundred years ago. Dewey impressed the importance of balancing social and intellectual learning within schools and encouraged educators to regularly collaborate and reflect on how they were preparing their students for the world beyond school. Over 100 years later, educators are still struggling with societal pressures to standardize instruction and conform to traditional structures that do not meet the needs of the modern learner. Personalized learning offers educators an opportunity to transform education, address equity concerns, and ensure learning for every student (Harrison & Bishop, 2021). Teachers must possess a strong sense of efficacy in instructional strategies, classroom management, and student engagement to shift from traditional teaching practices to a progressively student-driven model of learning (Kallick & Zmuda, 2017; Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk-Hoy, 2001).

The core attributes of personalized learning encourage students to collaborate with teachers in their learning in order to improve their communication skills, self-management, and persistence (Jacobs, 2017; Kallick & Zmuda, 2017). The design elements of personalized learning allow teachers to act as mentors and facilitators of learning, shifting the focus from teaching to learning (Jacobs; Olofson et al., 2018). Supporting teacher efficacy through personalized professional development and collaborative professional learning environments will strengthen the collective capacity of schools who are shifting to cultures of personalized learning. School leaders are encouraged to abandon traditional professional development practices and create a spirit of innovation through collaborative and personalized professional learning.

Now is the time for change and our local, state, and national leaders have a tremendous opportunity to consider who they are as a leader and how they want to lead (Schwahn & Spady, 2018). Leaders can choose to use the same traditional practices and expect lackluster results, or they can choose to be different and reimagine what learning can feel like in their

schools. The urgency to remain relevant in our ever-changing world is essential for the future of public education, and personalized learning starts with a courageous vision for change, stimulates persistence and hope for a re-imagined educational system, and promises a better future for our students by focusing on the whole child and promoting equity. A common phrase in education is there is magic in the middle – middle school is an opportune place to start this needed cultural shift through the synergistic and collaborative energy of students, teachers, administrators, support staff, and families, and has the potential to create positive waves of change throughout the district.

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