

# CONNECT: Making Learning Personal

An Issue Brief from the League of Innovators

## Why the Personal Competencies Matter

by  
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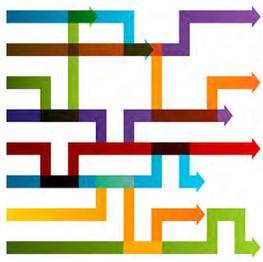
Over breakfast the morning of November 8, 1987, I snapped open a *Chicago Tribune* and stared at a bold headline: “Education Chief: City Schools Worst.” U. S. Secretary of Education William Bennett had declared Chicago the worst school district in the country. Two days earlier, the superintendent of one of Chicago’s intra-district regions had invited me to visit a school with him, not because he was proud of it but because he considered it the “worst damn school in Chicago.” Putting the *Trib* aside to sip my coffee, I realized I had walked the halls of the worst school in the worst district in the country.

Since the mid-1980s, Chicago has undergone waves of reform, and no one would call it the worst district in the country now. Maybe it wasn’t the worst in 1987. My purpose isn’t to degrade the largest district in my state. If we would locate today the former students of the school I visited, we would find among them some success stories. We would identify students who made it through high school and college and are now successful in their careers. These might be a small minority of the students who once attended the worst school in the country, but they would be there to be found. Here is my point: Even in the worst schools in the country, some students succeed. Conversely, even in the best schools in the country, some students fail.

In those days, working with dozens of Chicago schools, I found myself advising parents to pitch in with the school reform efforts as they were able, but not to count on the schools being fixed before it was too late for their kids. Take care of your kids today, I advised; much of what they need to succeed, you can provide. It is the “something other,” the intangible mix of general knowledge, stick-to-itiveness, self-respect, and disciplined study that we too little understand. If we understood these qualities better, we might be able to see that more students acquire them and, in doing so, accelerate their school learning and improve their chances once out of school.

This field report is the fourth in a series produced by the Center on Innovations in Learning’s League of Innovators. The series describes, discusses, and analyzes policies and practices that enable personalization in education. Issues of the series will present either issue briefs or, like this one, field reports on lessons learned by practitioners recounting the successes and obstacles to success encountered in implementing personalized learning.

Neither the issue briefs nor the field reports attempt to present in-depth reviews of the research; for those resources readers are encouraged to access the Center on Innovations in Learning’s resource database. Topics should be of particular interest to state education agencies and district and school personnel.



Benjamin Bloom once wrote that what any one person can learn, 95% of other people can learn given enough time. That's encouraging. Recently, Carol Dweck has made a similar point—the growth mindset is not fixed. (How could it be if growth is involved?) Learning comes with effort, smart strategy, the conditions that support them, and, as Bloom said, with time.

A student's personal competencies—cognitive, metacognitive, motivational, and social/emotional—propel learning and other forms of goal attainment. They are, yes, personal to the individual in their shape and size and effect. But they are enhanced by families and teachers and youth groups and other venues that intentionally build them. For schools, the challenge is how to reach each student to ensure that he or she continues constructing this underlying architecture of personal competencies so that school learning is facilitated.

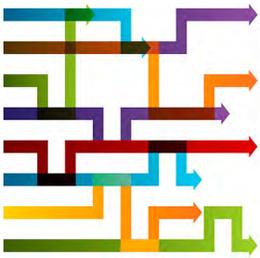
The four personal competencies actually coalesce into a productive mix of learning habits that are engaged when the student assumes a learning challenge. Each competency is itself significant to the learning enterprise, but together they become a force for achievement. A quick definition of the four personal competencies follows:

- **Cognitive Competency**—prior learning that facilitates new learning
- **Metacognitive Competency**—self-regulation of learning and use of learning strategies
- **Motivational Competency**—engagement and persistence in pursuit of learning goals
- **Social/Emotional Competency**—sense of self-worth, regard for others, and emotional understanding and management to set positive goals and make responsible decisions

The connection between the personal competencies and the mechanics of learning may be described as the enactment of learning habits, the thinking and the activity, that results in mastery of school learning that, in turn, reinforces the competencies themselves. Teachers and families intentionally enhance students' competency within the context of the school community (families, students, school personnel), the school (curriculum, programs, school culture), and the classroom (instruction and classroom culture).

For instance, consider our hypothetical student, Jack, who is faced with an assignment from his teacher. Does his motivational trigger spring forth to launch him into the work? Does he persist even when the going gets tough? As much as motivation, Jack is benefited by knowing something—bits of information and nuggets of understanding cluster around the assignment to lubricate his learning. But that isn't enough. He needs learning skills and strategies—metacognitive overview of how he is doing and ways to master, memorize, understand, and complete. Then there is the added touch of self-worth that encourages Jack to buck up and do his best, to engage others in the learning process—asking questions, probing.

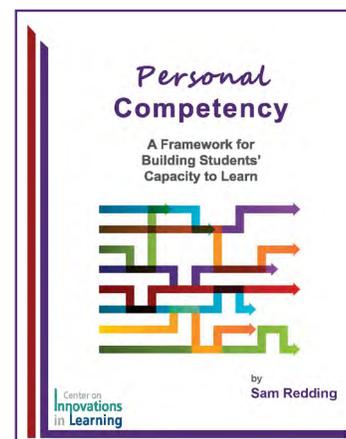
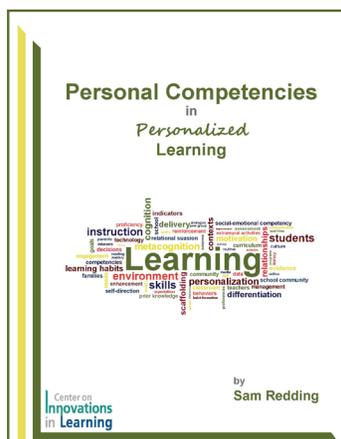
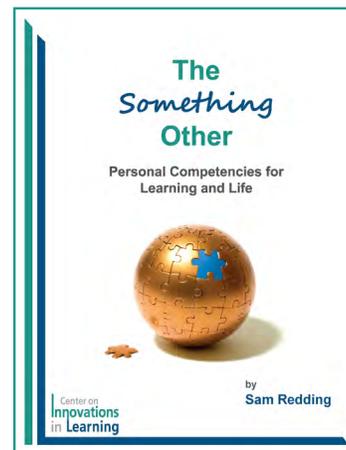
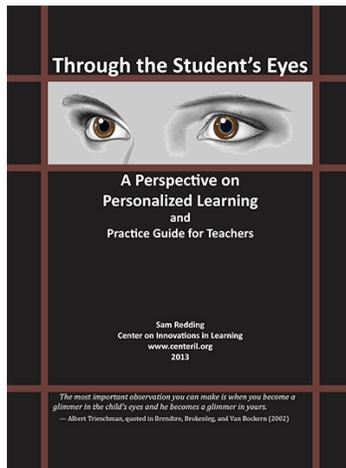
Ideally, every school and every classroom would be perfectly suited for every student. But in the real world, it is good practice for families and teachers to bolster their children and students with sufficient doses of personal competency to carry them through difficult waters. In fact, students are then able to bridge the troubled waters, to find safe harbors, and to navigate placid streams.

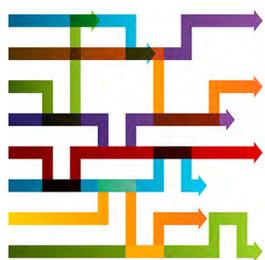


It all sounds a bit magical—turning on the bright light inside each student. It takes work and effort, too. Operating with three personal competencies, or two, or one, is to be hobbled. Some motivation without cognitive content, or metacognitive strategies without social/emotional engagement, would be incomplete. When all four personal competencies are engaged, everything clicks. Even in the worst school in the world, the happy student will find a way to learn. And because most students go to very good schools, equipping them with personal competency enables them to succeed anywhere.

There are many ways personal competencies may be enhanced. For more on personal competencies, download the four practice guides published by the Center on Innovations in Learning from its webpage, [www.centeril.org/research](http://www.centeril.org/research), or simply click on the image:

- Through the Student’s Eyes (PDF)
- The Something Other (PDF)
- Personal Competencies in Personalized Learning (PDF)
- Personal Competency: A Framework (PDF)





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