

# PERSONALIZATION IN SCHOOLS

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### THE EDITORS, *STUDENTS AT THE CENTER* SERIES

Thoughtful educators personalize schools every day—greeting students by name, offering extra academic help, checking in about serious family problems. Some go further, such as setting up specialized clubs or internships with local businesses. Such acts undoubtedly benefit their students, helping them feel connected to school and helping teachers and other school staff respond to student needs and interests. These are key tenets of student-centered approaches to learning.

Despite the best of intentions, however, most efforts to personalize schools fall short of their potential to make a major difference in the lives of young people. To evaluate formal attempts to personalize U.S. secondary education, Susan Yonezawa, Larry McClure, and Makeba Jones assessed the research evidence on personalization in terms of teacher-student relationships and their impact on students. The authors examined school reforms that have incorporated personalization, with a special focus on programs affecting low-income and minority students. They conclude that increasing personalization must become the sustained goal of a widespread organizational effort in order to significantly improve student achievement and emotional well-being.

The authors demonstrate that:

- > Teacher-student relationships are central to personalization. They also lie at the heart of a variety of widespread reforms designed to support young people as students and as emerging adults.
- > Positive relationships between youth and adults improve a range of student outcomes, including academic, behavioral, physical, and emotional well-being, particularly for low-income and minority youth.
- > The evidence in support of personalization-oriented reforms is uneven. The most effective practices appear to be small schools, advisory programs, and like-minded reforms intent on improving youth-adult relationships.

- > Structural reforms may not be enough to increase personalization in schools unless they focus on teaching and learning, as well as the thoughtful incorporation of improved curricula and pedagogy.
- > Among the promising ways to increase personalization are multiple pathways approaches, programs involving careers as curriculum, work-linked learning, technology, mastery-based instruction, and community schools.
- > In an era of declining resources, it is not clear that even highly promising efforts can be sustained. It would be wise to research their full costs and benefits—including both short- and long-term outcomes.

## WHAT IS PERSONALIZATION?

Personalization is critical to creating and sustaining student-centered approaches to learning. Yonezawa, McClure, and Jones define it as the cultivation of a web of positive relationships—among adults and youth in classrooms, schools, and communities—to promote learning. The idea is that educators get to know their students well—not just their abilities and learning styles but also their interests and motivations—and they use this personal knowledge to design more effective individualized instruction and guidance and help students feel competent in and connected to the world. For the relationships to be useful, though, they must be reciprocal: Students must also come to know their teachers, to trust them and respect them.

The movement toward personalization is intended as an antidote to the widespread feelings of anonymity, irrelevance, and disengagement that adolescents report, especially in large, urban high schools. Personalization aims to stem the resulting academic, personal, and societal problems by engaging students in education, making schools more relevant to them, and feeding their need for support and connection.

## THE BENEFITS

A growing body of research suggests that positive teacher-student relationships can help buffer young people against a host of problems, from disengagement in a specific academic subject, to smoking, drinking, or engaging in risky social behaviors. Research shows such relationships improve a range of academic, behavioral, physical, social, and emotional outcomes, particularly for low-income and minority students.

What characterizes high-quality relationships between educators and youth? Those who study teacher-student relationships generally agree that they are warmer and have lower levels of conflict. Warmth is reflected in teacher interest, praise, high expectations for student achievement, and a willingness to listen, among other characteristics. Conflict is reflected in coercive disciplinary practices, unwillingness to incorporate individual choice, and low expectations for student achievement, among other features.

Secondary students prefer and expect to work harder for teachers who balance control with caring, high-expectation approaches. Research associates improved attachment between secondary school teachers and students with higher standardized test scores, increased academic motivation, and lower rates of referral to special education. Adolescents who feel teachers are fair and caring are less likely to smoke, drink alcohol, abuse drugs, engage in sexual intercourse, or be involved in weapon-related violence.

For low-income and minority youth, research suggests that supportive teacher-student relationships are particularly important because of the disproportionate number of these young people who become alienated, disengaged, and drop out of high school.

## LARGE-SCALE REFORMS

Many efforts to restructure secondary schools seek to enable teachers to know individual students better by spending more time with them over a longer period. Implementation has been sporadic, though, and the research evidence uneven. Nevertheless, advisory programs, alternative grade spans, and small school reforms all appear to hold promise.

### ADVISORY PROGRAMS

The most common approach to personalizing high schools is to create advisory programs, which now exist in thousands of secondary schools. Typically, advisories are single classrooms of students, loosely connected with one another, who receive a variety of one-on-one supports from the teacher during the advisory period.

Advisory teachers often serve as quasi-counselors, providing tutoring or advice on such matters as course schedules, college applications, and career plans. Ideally, the advisory is a place where students feel they have at least one advocate on the

school staff, an adult to whom they can turn whenever they need help. After the teens and the teachers get to know and trust each other, this advisory would also provide social and emotional support.

Research on advisories, as with much of the personalization field, is descriptive and lacks experimental peer-reviewed studies addressing effectiveness. The authors suggest that advisories are worth pursuing as an avenue to personalize schools because they are relatively inexpensive and are fairly well accepted in schools. However, maximizing their usefulness will remain challenging until research can offer guidance on how to design effective programs for specific populations.

### ALTERNATIVE GRADE SPANS

Reconfiguration of the middle grades-to-high school transition is a popular structural reform strategy for personalizing schools. More and more schools span grades kindergarten through eighth grade or the fifth through eight grades, rather than starting in the sixth grade. Students benefit from fewer transitions between schools over the K-12 years or from more years at a single school. Proponents argue that adults can better connect with youth in the schools when cohorts remain together for longer.

Research suggests that students, particularly low-income, urban youth, have increased difficulty with traditional K-12 transitions following the fifth and ninth grades. Research shows that students who changed schools less often and transitioned to middle school earlier had greater academic gains than those in traditional configurations. More research is needed to determine which reforms make a substantial difference for which groups.

### SMALL-SCHOOL REFORM

The purpose of small schools is to build up and enrich the connections of multiple adults to individual students. The small schools movement emerged from a body of solid research suggesting that smaller schools post better academic results, particularly for low-income students of color. Small schools can be brand new or they can be conversions formed by dividing large, comprehensive high schools into either small learning communities or multiple small high schools at the same physical site.

Small schools mark an important shift in thinking and practice regarding efforts to personalize high schools beyond individual student-teacher relationships. They operate from an institutional assumption that students need to be served in a multilayered environment, where many adults and students form connections to provide academic, social, and emotional support, and where cohorts of students are small enough for educators to provide individualized instruction.

An important aspect of effective small schools is the greater opportunity for teacher-to-teacher collaboration. Often, teachers engage together every day to analyze data, plan lessons, and discuss specific interventions to help struggling students.

Research shows that small schools appear particularly advantageous (compared to large, urban high schools) for low-income, minority youth. A large-scale, longitudinal study in New York City found that enrolling in a small school of one's choice significantly closes the achievement gap between low- and middle-income students, with the greatest benefits for low-income African-American males.

## **CLASSROOM AND SCHOOL PRACTICE**

Instructional change often gets lost in the myriad challenges of implementing structural change, and altering instruction has proven far more difficult than implementing new structures like advisory programs or even whole new schools. The field now faces a preponderance of evidence that structural changes in secondary education are important but insufficient to creating more personalized instruction.

It is crucial to refocus on how the activities of teaching and learning—and the thoughtful incorporation of improved curricula and pedagogy—remain central to building personal relationships between teachers and students. New instructional reforms are emerging to increase personalization. Though as yet unproven, efforts to reshape curricula and instruction with an eye toward personalization are garnering attention and resources that make them worthy of examination.

## **CAREER CURRICULA**

One aspect of interest in personalizing instruction is to connect curricula and pedagogy with students' career interests. While career academies have a long history and precede small-school reform, current career pathways reflect the growing interest in focusing on student choice and real-world applications that engage students and personalize learning. The rising costs of college going, the increasingly competitive nature of postsecondary admission, low postsecondary completion rates for low-income youth, and the economic recession have convinced many legislators, educators, students, and families that returning a career pathway option to high schools may help many students.

One example is the Career Academy Support Network at the University of California-Berkeley, which has been supporting efforts to reform high schools with a career focus for 40 years. The network reports that high school graduation rates are 10 percentage points higher for participants compared to statewide averages.

## **MULTIPLE PATHWAYS AND WORK-LINKED LEARNING**

The Pathways to Prosperity Project at the Harvard Graduate School of Education champions new concepts such as dual enrollment, college and career readiness, and work-linked learning. Such initiatives are helping revive career and technical education as a viable option for educators seeking to

individualize curricula for young people in ways that match their future occupational and economic interests.

These efforts are based on the belief that adolescents need not only a rigorous curriculum but also specific supports to aid the transition to adulthood. Workplace internships, career and college mentoring, and other programs within these initiatives help students start postsecondary certificate and credential programs while still in high school. Increasingly, they are seen as effective ways of personalizing education for many young people for whom a single-track, college preparatory system appear insufficient.

## **TECHNOLOGY**

There is significant potential for technology to alter the landscape of individualized instruction. Proponents of technology suggest it can provide teachers and students with tools to individualize curricula, pedagogy, and assessments and at the same time increase engagement and decrease costs.

Imagine classrooms where every student has an iPad and can download text, video, and graphic information on a given topic. Students could become more active creators of their learning environment, and be more engaged in it and more motivated to achieve. However, research so far contains mixed outcomes. It also bears important warnings, especially that of low access to technology in impoverished communities.

## **MASTERY-BASED INSTRUCTION**

Mastery-based instruction is part of discussions about how technology can lead to more personalization and individualized education plans for students. Rather than just delivering content, another role of the teacher in mastery-based instruction is to facilitate the learning of the students, each of whom could be working at a different level within a given content area. Ideally, schools could advance students according to mastery rather than seat time or lesson completion. Technology could provide the means for frequent individual assessments and encourage students to progress at their own pace. Ultimately, students could graduate and move into postsecondary education (traditional or trade) as soon as they are ready.

## **COMMUNITY SCHOOLS**

The "community schools movement"—sometimes called "wraparound reforms"—has gained strength, along with a growing understanding of poverty and its ill effects on the ability of the most at-risk students to succeed academically. Community schools build intensive support networks around impoverished youth and their communities in an effort to meet all of a student's needs that can affect learning. The idea is less about altering curricula or instruction and more about bolstering school partnerships with local social and health services agencies.

These efforts seek to strengthen adult-youth relationships across multiple domains of young people's lives, including home,

peer circles, work, church, and schools. Providing a range of social, health, academic, and economic supports and resources can increase the likelihood of academic success as reflected by earning a high school diploma followed by a postsecondary credential or certificate that leads to gainful employment.

## WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

While robust evidence that personalization as characterized by positive teacher-student relationships helps students in a variety of ways, additional research is needed to determine which personalization strategies may be most successful.

Another immediate concern is the resource-intensive nature of many personalization efforts, which affects the outlook for maintaining such investments. In these difficult economic times, it is unclear whether the most promising reforms can be sustained. However, it would be valuable to take a broader view of expenses and benefits—including outputs as well as inputs—to estimate true long-term costs to the nation.

Setting aside the economic realities of the present day, a larger challenge remains: developing a convincing, nuanced body of research and practice on efforts to personalize secondary education. This requires a close examination of educational environments—and in particular teaching and learning—both inside and outside traditional school and classroom contexts. Our charge is to better understand the ways in which educators and students interact to making classroom, school, and community settings in which youth learn and live engaging places.

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**Students at the Center** synthesizes existing research on key components of student-centered approaches to learning. The papers that launch this project renew attention to the importance of engaging each student in acquiring the skills, knowledge, and expertise needed for success in college and a career. *Students at the Center* is supported generously by funds from the Nellie Mae Education Foundation.

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