CCSSO

*Council of Chief State School Officers*

# Policy Brief: Advancing Equity through Personalized Learning

December 2017

THE COUNCIL OF CHIEF STATE SCHOOL OFFICERS

The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) is a nonpartisan, nationwide nonprofit organization of public officials who head departments of elementary and secondary education in the states, the District of Columbia, the Department of Defense Education Activity, and five U.S. extra-state jurisdictions. CCSSO provides leadership, advocacy, and technical assistance on major educational issues. The Council seeks member consensus on major educational issues and expresses their views to civic and professional organizations, federal agencies, Congress, and the public.

Cover Photo credit: Courtesy of Allison Shelley/The Verbatim Agency for American Education: Images of Teachers and Students in Action.

## EQUITY AND PERSONALIZED LEARNING: WHY DO THEY MATTER FOR STATES AND DISTRICTS?

In a recent paper,[1] *Leading for Equity: Opportunities for State Chiefs*, the Council of Chief State Schools Officers (CCSSO) stated, "Educational equity means that every student has access to the educational resources and rigor they need at the right moment in their education across race, gender, ethnicity, language, disability, sexual orientation, family background, and/or family income." The paper details 10 commitments state chiefs can explore to ensure equity is at the center of their work, and the Innovation Lab Network (ILN), an initiative within CCSSO, set out over the course of the past 18 months to detail how personalized, student-centered approaches to learning can support state chiefs' visions of equity.

This document is intended for state agencies to use as they adopt and refine policies and practices to ensure access to personalized learning for students who are historically underserved — English Learners, students with disabilities, students of color, students living in poverty, and students impacted by trauma. The goal of this policy brief is to offer actionable suggestions from research, input from practitioners, and case studies of promising practices at the intersection of equity and personalized learning.

Every student deserves access to educational opportunities and experiences that support them in reaching their full potential, and state and local education agencies have an important role to play in driving toward equity. In many places across the country, educators and leaders have begun engaging in the challenging work of reviewing and shifting policy and practice in alignment with the goal of educational equity.

Implementing personalized learning is one of the ways in which practitioners and leaders in the field have tried to address issues of educational equity. Personalized learning environments are designed to give students greater ownership of their learning and aim to tailor instruction according to individual learner readiness, strengths, needs, and interests. Components of personalized learning environments may include learner-driven content and pace of instruction, project-based learning, individualized learning plans, competency-based progression, blended learning, performance-based assessments, and student portfolios of work, to name a few examples. This approach to teaching and learning has a great deal of potential to address inequities in students' experiences, opportunities, and outcomes, while also ensuring that students graduate with the college and career readiness knowledge, skills, and dispositions that they need to thrive in life beyond high school.

Personalized learning meets individual students where they are in their learning, and ensures that each one graduates ready for college, career, and community. By putting the emphasis on individual learner needs and assets, personalized learning has tremendous potential as a lever

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1    The Aspen Education & Society Program and the Council of Chief State School Officers. (2017). *Leading for equity: Opportunities for state education chiefs*. Washington, DC: Authors.

to achieve equity. However, even with all of the promise that personalized learning presents to level the playing field for all students, it's critically important to ensure all students are still held to high and rigorous standards, have robust and applied learning and assessment opportunities, and graduate ready for college, career, and life after high school in a timely manner.

For all of the potential personalized learning has to address and ameliorate persistent educational inequities, educators and leaders must work to ensure that personalized learning doesn't exacerbate gaps in outcome and opportunity for vulnerable or marginalized students. To take an example from competency-based learning as one possible component of personalized learning, it's possible in a system where all students are held to the same high and rigorous standards, and have a customized approach for learning content and skills that some students may take longer to master some things. Moving on when ready, instead of when a clock or calendar says it's time hopefully ensures that more students have deep and meaningful learning upon which they can continue to build toward postsecondary readiness. The danger, however, is that some students may be allowed to languish without the necessary scaffolding or support to access continuously more challenging content or skills. As with any systemic change that has great potential to disrupt inequities, it's important to keep the possible negative impacts in mind throughout the process of creating and implementing policies and practices at the cutting edge of teaching in order to proactively address any possible negative outcomes.

## EQUITY AND PERSONALIZED LEARNING: PROMISING PRACTICES IN THE FIELD

In the process of developing this brief, CCSSO and New Profit felt it was important to learn from individuals and organizations who are engaged in personalized learning with a specific focus on equity and access for students. For the purpose of this document, we drilled down to several examples of promising practice in the field, but we'd be remiss if we didn't note that this is a very small sample; other organizations have done a tremendous job of diving deeply into various other aspects of personalized learning. Please refer to the appendix at the end of the document to find more information about additional individuals, schools systems, and organizations engaged in the work of equitable personalized learning.

Personalized learning is a relatively nascent approach to education, and therefore we're on the pioneering edge of practice. No one is doing this work perfectly, but in a series of associated case studies we profile four organizations that are engaging in reflective and iterative improvement to refine their practice. We believe that other practitioners, leaders, and policymakers can learn from the examples in this policy brief and the associated case studies to bolster and advance equity through personalized learning in their specific and unique context(s). Below are the four school systems we profile:

- ***EL Education***

Formerly known as Expeditionary Learning, EL Education has taken on the important work of developing rigorous and challenging curricular resources embedded in a model of instruction that allows students to drive their own learning. By providing their curriculum at no cost to schools and districts, this organization has enabled systems to reallocate funds to support educators in implementing a more personalized learning experience for all students.

- ***Taylor County, Kentucky***

The Taylor County School District in Taylor County, Kentucky, has taken on personalized learning at a systems level. They pioneered the development and use of a policy that enables "districts of innovation" to seek waivers from state policy and rules that hinder them from meeting the needs of each student. For the last eight years they haven't had a single student drop out, due in large part to every learner being given the opportunity to chart his or her learning path to achieving a high school diploma. In addition to creating multiple and flexible pathways through learning in K-12, the Taylor County School District has developed a program for community members without a high school diploma to receive support from the schools to take courses and receive internships leading to employment.

- ***Boston Day and Evening Academy***

Boston Day and Evening Academy (BDEA) has employed the use of a competency-based approach to learning in service of students. The school takes each individual student's assets and needs into account to co-create learning experiences that allow them to succeed in school and beyond. As a public charter school, BDEA leverages autonomy over their budget, curriculum, calendar, programming, and staffing to make decisions in the best interest of the students they serve. BDEA has also placed a premium on ensuring students engage in social and emotional learning. This focus on the whole child and supporting student agency and choice has led to tremendous success for students at BDEA over the last 20 years.

- ***New Village Girls Academy***

As a Big Picture Learning school[2] located in the Rampart area of Los Angeles, New Village Girls Academy primarily serves young women who are pregnant or parenting and who face similar challenges. Implementing a robust advisory program where students and adults work together toward goals, requiring learners to engage in internships outside of school to build and practice professional skills in areas of interest, and providing wraparound services like healthcare for the young women and their children are all ways in which the school supports students in developing their capacity as individuals and as learners. Additionally, New Village Girls Academy has placed a premium on ensuring that students graduate ready and eligible for any postsecondary opportunity they want to pursue by providing flexible and timely learning opportunities tailored to the needs of individuals.

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2    http://www.bigpicture.org/

## IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

The recommendations detailed below were distilled from several interviews with practitioners, policymakers, and leaders in the field of personalized learning. They do not represent an exhaustive list of recommendations, but can be seen as supplementary to the foundational work done by others in this field. For additional research and readings for policy and practice recommendations, we suggest reading the research review that accompanies this document, the amazing work done the National Center for Learning Disabilities and UnidosUs (formerly the National Council of La Raza), and the recent RAND study on personalized learning commissioned by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

These recommendations take the form of proposals for fostering policy that provide permission and incentives for practitioners and leaders to personalize learning toward the end of more equitable outcomes for students, as well as a section on barriers that currently exist in rule or statute that inhibit the development or implementation of personalized learning efforts. Lastly, we'd like to note that practice at the policy level has as much an impact on supporting or hindering equity and personalized learning as the policies and rules themselves, and therefore we have recommendations for how state education agencies (SEAs) and local education agencies (LEAs) can execute their functions from a stance of enabling schools and districts to comply with policy and statute in such a way as to allow as much flexibility as possible.

## ENABLING POLICY AND PRACTICE

### SUGGESTIONS FOR STATE EDUCATION AGENCIES:

- SEA Function
  - o Support policies that allow for flexibility and autonomy for districts and schools to innovate. Kentucky and Colorado, among other states, have statute that allows districts to innovate with the permission of waivers, which give them special license to waive some rules and policies as long as the applicant has a rationale and a replacement plan that meets the intent of the law or rule.
  - o Designate a person or district support team at the state agency whose role is to act as a liaison for districts hoping to innovate for more equitable and personalized learning to deeply delve into rules and policies that could have an impact on implementation, and to support colleagues at the agency to think creatively about how to stay within the constraints of policy and rule without making anything unnecessarily onerous for districts or schools.
  - o School finance policy and practice could allow for the use of "equivalencies" for counting student contact hours when students are engaged in internships or other place-based learning opportunities.

- o Consider designing licensure and recertification requirements to ensure that educators and leaders have a deep understanding of personalized learning and of equity in theory and practice. This could be done through state-offered professional learning, micro-credentials, and other learning focused on personalized learning.

- • Technology and Data Systems

  - o For states that have the authority and budget to invest in statewide learning management systems (LMS) or student information systems (SIS), the SEA should consider

    - ◊ Including multiple stakeholders in the development of design parameters to ensure that practitioners, leaders, students, and families have maximum utility of the product.

    - ◊ Insisting that LMS and SIS providers conform to interoperability standards that allow for free pushing and pulling of information across platforms.

    - ◊ Consider offering a "digital backpack" where student assessments and other instructional data can follow a student throughout and across systems. This would allow students to create something like a Personalized Learning Plan digitally, and allow them to store artifacts, presentations, or other collateral in a format that's accessible to them and their families.

  - o SEAs could provide guidance and technical assistance to districts about the best way to leverage technology in support of personalized learning, including how to utilize technology and real-time data to ensure equitable implementation of personalized learning.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR LOCAL EDUCATION AGENCIES:

- • Planning for Personalized Learning

  - o Create a strategic district plan for personalized learning using Universal Design for Learning[3] and English language learners as the starting place, instead of trying to retrofit a system to meet the needs of diverse learners. In other words, focus district work on personalized learning to explicitly meet the needs of historically underserved students from the start.

  - o Take full advantage of flexibility under the law to innovate and engage in continuous improvement practices. This might require advocating with your SEA to differentiate between organizational practices and rule or statute.

  - o Use Personalized Learning Plans that follow students from year-to-year so that their learning and needs can be tracked across and throughout their learning experiences. These could be co-created with students, families, and educators.

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3    http://www.udlcenter.org/aboutudl/whatisudl

- Technology and Data Systems

    o Support educators to implement technology tools that enable personalized learning and provide guidance around best practices and resources for how to best leverage technology in support of learners with diverse needs.

- Wraparound Services and Supports

    o Work with partners in the community and nationally to leverage supports for students. For example, providing access to dental check-ups and cleanings for students and families at the school building, or working with a foundation to implement trauma-informed instructional practices.

    o Provide opportunities for parents, communities, and teachers to provide feedback on how to provide wraparound services that meet community and individual student needs.

- Teacher and Leader Training and Support

    o Implement standards for educator effectiveness that support the use of personalized approaches to learning. Jobs for the Future and the Council of Chief State School Officers have released Educator Competencies for Personalized, Learner-Centered Teaching[4] identifying the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that educators need to create and thrive in effective personalized, learner-centered environments.

    o Engage with your state agency, local colleges, and universities to redesign teacher and leader preparation programs to be personalized and learner centered, building a pipeline for your district and others throughout the state.

    o Open clinical preparation programs in schools implementing personalized learning, and reach out to schools serving a diverse population of learners equitably to provide training experiences for teachers and leaders so they can learn in environments that reflect promising practices at the intersection of equity and personalized learning.

    o Work with colleges and universities to provide more engaging and effective leadership preparation programs that have a specific focus on leading to meet the needs of historically underserved students, families, and communities.

    o Create on-demand professional development opportunities for educators and leaders so that they can identify what they need to know and do to meet the needs of learners in their schools, and have the ability to learn and practice those skills in a timely and responsive manner.

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4    http://www.ccsso.org/Resources/Publications/Educator_Competencies_for_Personalized_Learner-Centered_Teaching.html

## SUGGESTIONS FOR STATE EDUCATION AGENCIES:

- Assessment and Accountability

    o Build on the great momentum of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) to refine state accountability systems that prioritize learning, and include multiple measures of school quality and student performance. Researchers and practitioners at Stanford and the Center for Innovation in Education[5] crafted a report outlining what the future of accountability could look like, which outlines a comprehensive and equitable approach to assessment and reporting.

    o Rather than so heavily weighting state standardized assessments, SEAs could

        ◊ Include more input factors, such as school quality reviews, and student and parent perception survey data;

        ◊ Consider student academic growth as well as proficiency;

        ◊ Implement an accountability system that relies on multiple measures of student learning to determine student proficiency; and

        ◊ Expand state assessment systems to included balanced measures of student learning, including curriculum-embedded performance tasks and other peer-reviewed assessment practices. New Hampshire's Performance Assessment of Competency Education (PACE)[6] pilot of teacher-created performance assessments administered and scored by educators as part of the regular instructional cycle shows great promise, and could prove instructive to policymakers and SEAs interested in exploring alternative accountability and assessment models.

    o Invest in educator's assessment literacy practices so that educators have the capability to assess student learning accurately, and utilize that information to inform instructional decision making.

    o Engage broader community stakeholders in determining local needs and values related to accountability and assessment. This could include providing resources and training to support assessment and data literacy for community members, and creating data dashboards that would communicate about school quality using multiple measures.

    o Ensure that the academic progress of ELLs, students with disabilities, students of color, students living in poverty, and students impacted by trauma continues to take center-stage in conversations about school and district performance. This could include supporting the development and adoption of curricular resources, and ensuring that students from the abovementioned subgroups have equitable access to engaging and rigorous learning opportunities.

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5    https://edpolicy.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/publications/accountability-college-and-career-readiness-developing-new-paradigm.pdf

6    https://www.education.nh.gov/assessment-systems/pace.htm

- o Support the development of research-practice partnerships between state agencies and researchers to understand SEL metrics for improvement, rather than accountability, purposes.

- Seat Time Requirements

  - o Provide students with credit for performance and quality projects and apprenticeships, rather than for the amount of time students have spent in a course. This may require that SEAs advocate with their state legislatures to remove seat time requirements from statute.

- Standards and Graduation Requirements

  - o Develop, in concert with practitioners, graduate profiles inclusive of social emotional learning and development to ensure students graduate ready to succeed in postsecondary life academically, equipped with inter- and intrapersonal skills.

  - o Allocate financial resources to districts to meet students' social and emotional learning needs.

  - o As noted above, a balanced system of assessments holds promise in better capturing a broader range of measures of student learning, allowing students to demonstrate their learning in ways that are relevant, timely, and meaningful.

  - o Removing seat time requirements for graduation could help shift systems to become more competency-based,[7] meaning students move forward in their educational progressions not because they were in a course for a certain amount of time, but rather because they successfully demonstrated mastery of academic standards. Competency-based systems have many natural connections to personalized learning, as they allow students to demonstrate mastery in a variety of ways. This shift suggests that states, schools, and districts reconsider the use of Carnegie Units to determine student learning opportunities.

  - o States could partner with local Institutes of Higher Education (IHE) regarding entrance requirements so that they are aligned to students' demonstration of proficiency at a college and career ready standard utilizing performance assessments, successful completions of competency, portfolios and capstone projects, work-based learning or Career and Technical Education certifications, or any combination of the above.

- Funding

  - o State education agencies can allow and support the flexible use of Title I and Title II funding to provide more equitable learning experiences for students, and support educators and leaders in developing personalized practices that support all learners. States could consider offering training or guidance on the current flexibility possible under the law to integrate and utilize funding streams aimed at student learning.

  - o Work with districts to identify and correct inequitable funding practices, which might include closer examination of property taxes and bonds or mill levy overrides that advantage some schools and communities over others.

7    https://www.competencyworks.org/about/competency-education/

## SUGGESTIONS FOR LOCAL EDUCATION AGENCIES:

- Curriculum

  - By providing schools flexibility with curriculum, with clear safeguards in place to ensure appropriate levels of rigor and alignment to standards, districts can create space for schools to engage educators, students, and families in constructing more personalized learning experiences, including those that could provide more opportunities to reflect the cultures and backgrounds of the community served by the school.

  - Should a school or district decide to utilize Open Educational Resources (OER) for their curriculum, it's advisable to consider how to reallocate money that had previously gone toward purchasing curricular materials. With more money available, district leaders might invest in professional learning that prioritizes equitable, personalized instructional practices.

- Provision of services for students with learning disabilities and for English language learners (ELLs)

  - Provide guidance to educators to focus on the assets of learners with disabilities and ELLs, as opposed to taking a deficit-based approach to crafting Individualized Education Plans (IEP) or Individualized Literacy Plans (ILP).

  - Make the creation of Personalized Learning Plans (PLP) standard practice for all students. Ideally students and families would have a hand in co-creating these plans, and they would evolve and grow as learners progress through their K-12 education. Additionally, these could have added value if they had portability between and among learning environments.

  - Within the limits of federal law, craft service delivery plans so that they are based on attaining outcomes, rather than simply on provision of minutes of service to students.

While these policy recommendations are not exhaustive, they can be a great source for state and district leaders to consider when designing interventions and policies that meet the diverse learning needs of historically underserved students.

## OVERVIEW OF THE PROJECT AND PARTNERS

### *America Forward*

The America Forward Coalition is a network of more than 70 innovative, impact-oriented organizations that foster innovation, identify more efficient and effective solutions, reward results, and catalyze cross-sector partnerships in education, early childhood, workforce development, youth development, and poverty alleviation. Our Coalition members are achieving measurable outcomes in more than 14,500 communities across the country every day, touching

the lives of nearly 8 million Americans each year. We believe that innovative policy approaches can transform these local results into national change and propel all of America forward.

### *New Profit's Reimagine Learning Fund*

Reimagine Learning exists to put the diverse needs of our most vulnerable K-12 students at the center of the national dialogue about the future of learning in the U.S. We support communities and schools to create teaching and learning environments that unleash creativity and potential in all students – including and especially those who have been systematically underserved – enabling them to realize academic and life success. Reimagine Learning is a five-year, $35M fund launched in 2013 by New Profit and a set of funder and practitioner partners focused on spreading practices that support the success of the most vulnerable students. Reimagine Learning has grown into a cross-sector network of over 500 education leaders focused on transforming the understanding of learners that drives the design of schools and school systems.

### *The Council of Chief State School Officers*

The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) is a nonpartisan, nationwide nonprofit organization of public officials who head departments of elementary and secondary education in the states, the District of Columbia, the Department of Defense Education Activity, and five U.S. extra-state jurisdictions. CCSSO provides leadership, advocacy, and technical assistance on major educational issues. The Innovation Lab Network, an initiative within CCSSO, is a group of states taking action to identify, test, and implement student-centered approaches to learning that will transform public education system by scaling locally-led innovation to widespread implementation within and across states. Schools and districts within these states have been given the opportunity to act as pressure-testers of new and innovative ways to address the needs of their students, with backing and support from their state.

### *The Innovation Lab Network*

The ILN is a group of states taking action to identify, test, and implement student-centered approaches to learning that will transform public education system by scaling locally-led innovation to widespread implementation within and across states. Schools and districts within these states have been given the opportunity to act as pressure-testers of new and innovative ways to address the needs of their students, with backing and support from their state departments of education. Current states in the ILN include Arkansas, California, Colorado, Iowa, Kentucky, New Hampshire, Ohio, Virginia, Vermont, West Virginia, and Wisconsin.

### *Equity and Personalized Learning Working Group*

Driven by a shared commitment to identifying both promising practices and systemic barriers that impact personalized learning efforts across the nation, CCSSO, New Profit, and America Forward co-convened a personalized learning equity work group in 2016 and 2017 inclusive of seven states

and a number of content experts. The working group originated as a way for the ILN and New Profit to engage states in the emerging field of Personalized Learning with a specific lens on how it could ameliorate persistent gaps in the experiences, opportunities, and outcomes for students that have been historically underserved by the educational system. In addition to building common understanding and sharing best practices, the working group had a charge to work proactively on the leading edge of personalized learning to ensure equity to establish equitable practice and to head off the potential for this method of teaching and learning to exacerbate existing opportunity and experience gaps.

To achieve these aims, CCSSO and New Profit, through the Equity Working, engaged in several activities. First, we conducted a literature review and research to support the development of a more robust understanding of this nascent field, and inform practitioners and leaders about the historical origins and research-based practices within the field. We also made it a priority to learn from and with the field about promising practices to share with a broader audience and to help inform state education agencies and other leaders about policy that supports and inhibits innovations "on the ground" related to equity and personalized learning. The partners are incredibly grateful for the time and energy committed by the working group and our national partners.

## APPENDIX

- Links to partner websites and other resources

    o New Profit: http://www.newprofit.org/
    o CCSSO Innovation Lab Network: http://www.ccsso.org/What_We_Do/Innovation_Lab_Network.html
    o National Center for Learning Disabilities: https://www.ncld.org/ and www.understood.org
    o UnidosUS (formerly the National Center for La Raza): https://www.unidosus.org/
    o EL Education (formerly Expeditionary Learning): https://eleducation.org/
    o Big Picture Learning: http://www.bigpicture.org/
    o Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation Personalized Learning Portfolio: http://k12education.gatesfoundation.org/college-readiness/personalized-learning/
    o Hewlett Foundation Deeper Learning Resources:  https://www.hewlett.org/strategy/deeper-learning/
    o Competency-Works: https://www.competencyworks.org/
    o iNACOL: http://www.inacol.org/
    o Center for Innovation in Education: https://www.leadingwithlearning.org/
    o Next Generation Learning Challenge: https://nextgenlearning.org/