Voices from the Field:

National Perspectives on Equity and Personalized Learning

September 2018

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, Bureau of Indian Education, 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.

Voices from the Field: National Perspectives on Equity and Personalized Learning

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COUNCIL OF CHIEF STATE SCHOOL OFFICERS
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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 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.

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The Innovation Lab Network (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.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

Students of color, students from low-income families, students with disabilities, English learners (ELs), and other historically underserved student populations tend to have the least access to innovations in teaching and learning that could better suit their needs. New Profit's America Forward Coalition and the Innovation Lab Network (ILN) of the Council of Chief State Schools Officers (CCSSO) collaborated to explore the relationship between personalized learning and educational equity. This project highlights promising personalized learning practices as well as considerations for policymakers, practitioners, and education leaders pursuing educational equity. In addition to this report, CCSSO and New Profit also completed a literature review on this topic, which can be found at www.ccsso.org.

DATA SOURCES

Equity and Personalized Learning: A Research Review revealed opportunity to highlight the ways in which personalized learning benefits historically underserved students[1]. To date, research on the benefits of personalized learning has mostly focused on assessing gains across all student groups. Accordingly, many reports conclude with the call for further research, particularly as it relates to the impact of personalized learning on different student populations. To gain a broader perspective and a better understanding of personalized learning's potential for equity, the ILN interviewed 20 stakeholders at the national, state, and local levels. Interviewees included teachers, students, school and district administrators, policymakers, and experts in the field. Interview questions included the following:

1. What does personalized learning look like in the classroom?

2. How might personalized learning be better equipped, compared to more traditional models of instruction, to serve students of color, students from low-income families, students with disabilities, and ELs?

3. What does educational equity mean to you?

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1   Ray, R., Sacks, L., & Twyman, J. (2017). *Equity and Personalized Learning: A Research Review.* Washington, DC: Council of Chief State School Officers.

FINDINGS

Three major themes emerged from the interviews:

1. **Personalized learning has the potential to advance educational equity.** There is an opportunity to correct historical inequities in the design of new learning environments that center on the needs of students and engage communities, parents, and students in the learning process.

2. **Personalized learning offers flexibility for students and helps teachers be responsive to the needs of historically underserved students**. Personalized learning allows students to learn complex content and standards at their own pace and enables them to demonstrate their learning in new ways. Educators employing personalized learning often have more opportunities to recognize students' unique contributions in school and changes the way students are perceived, acknowledged, and celebrated by their teachers and peers.

3. **Personalizing learning, like most educational initiatives, requires thoughtful implementation, support for educators, and a coherent vision among leaders**. To be successful, personalized learning initiatives designed around historically underserved students will require coordinated effort from school leaders, educators, and communities.

THEME 1: PERSONALIZED LEARNING HAS THE POTENTIAL TO ADVANCE EDUCATIONAL EQUITY.

Nearly every interviewee began the conversation by framing personalized learning as an opportunity to "right historical wrongs" in public education. Dr. Christina Jean, director of research and professional learning at The HadaNõu Collective, stated that too often, teachers' and administrators' views of "successful students" were synonymous with those who most accurately reflected white, middle-class standards and norms. At the same time, Dr. Jean acknowledged that many teachers and administrators are doing the difficult work of creating inclusive school systems by facilitating conversations about power and privilege. Similarly, Ace Parsi, personalized learning partnership manager at the National Center for Learning Disabilities, suggested a proactive rather than a reactive approach:

"Whenever we create new models of education, they tend to be designed for traditional students . . . . [And when they don't serve all kids] . . . we create subcommittees and taskforces and eventually retrofit those students into the model. This happens both at the federal and the state level in education. Instead, we need to start with those students . . . . We can't just wait for a kid to fail and try to support them. It needs to come much sooner."

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Parsi also shared that he unfortunately spent some of his formative years internalizing negative stereotypes some adults placed on him because of his status as an English learner. This and other experiences gave him the desire to affirm that "every child is endowed with certain gifts," and society can achieve educational equity if we provide "the right level of rigor, resources, and social capital for each student."

Several other interviewees agreed with this sentiment and discussed how instructional design can support historically underserved students. Jane Feinberg, a senior advisor and regional partnerships lead from New Profit's Reimagine Learning Initiative, emphasized that traditional learning environments miss the opportunity to develop the key "soft" or transferable skills that all students need to be successful in school, work, and civic life. She said that personalized, student-centered environments, when created effectively, are more likely to embrace the culture and diversity of a student body because there is greater intentionality around creating a safe learning space for both the student and the teacher. Cultural bias was another concern for many interviewees because a pattern of negative student-teacher interactions can discourage students from engaging in otherwise enriching academic experiences. Dr. Arlando Smith, superintendent of the New Haven Unified School District in California, commented:

"Personalization cannot be separate from equity; we have to surface the unconscious bias [in the classroom] . . . . If I'm a teacher and I'm afraid that my kids are going to run over me, it doesn't matter how much personalization you bring in."

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Dr. Smith said that the best way to begin the process of overcoming cultural bias is by "preparing leaders to have tough conversations . . . ones that don't spark defensiveness [but open-mindedness]." Once you have teachers and staff believing that all students can achieve, they can work together to design innovative ways to meet student needs.

One great example of this is occurring in the Springdale School District in Springdale, Arkansas. Since the early 1980s, Superintendent Jim Rollins has led the district in the adoption of a "teach them all" mindset for personalized, student-centered learning. In this area, 70 percent of the students are eligible to receive free and reduced-price lunch and many students have obligations outside of school, such as working to support their families. Therefore, the district collaborated with teachers to create an online community of lessons, videos, and other materials so that students could learn "anytime, anywhere." The district also worked with local business leaders to explore which college and career pathways would provide the greatest economic opportunity for students. This approach not only led to more students gaining real-world experience through internships, but also allowed students to take college-level courses while still in high school, consequently getting a jumpstart on their postsecondary education. When asked how important funding was in the execution of this work, Dr. Rollins remarked:

"It doesn't always take money to do something innovative. What it takes is time, effort, and passion. It is harder that way, but it's possible. [But it's worth it] when you see students accomplishing things they never thought they could have before."

When implemented thoughtfully, personalized learning is a tool for educational equity because the model provides educators with the opportunity to better acknowledge, assess, and support individual student needs.

THEME 2: PERSONALIZED LEARNING OFFERS FLEXIBILITY FOR STUDENTS AND HELPS TEACHERS BE RESPONSIVE TO THE NEEDS OF HISTORICALLY UNDERSERVED STUDENTS.

One reason students fall behind in more traditional classroom settings is that those settings rarely allow teachers to meet kids "where they are."[2] In other words, there is little opportunity for teachers to differentiate support so that every student receives content best suited for his or her current skillset. Personalized learning offers a variety of academic engagement aligned by the same set of standards. For example, the Middletown School District in New York created professional development opportunities to show teachers how to embed a station rotation model into their classroom. Using this model, students may work directly with the teacher on an assignment, conduct independent work that could include the use of technology, or work on collaborative projects with peers. The station rotation model is not new to education, but many schools and districts are using it to restructure their learning environments, create the space for student agency and choice, and even personalize the support educators receive. This mode of personalization, "allows teachers to teach on-grade learners, above-grade learners, and below-grade learners all at the same time," said Principal Amy Creeden.

One might wonder: with all this flexibility and personalization, how can we ensure that students are receiving access to educational experiences that are equitable in rigor and quality of implementation? Several interviewees brought up similar topics around assessment and accountability. However, they weren't concerned. Jane Feinberg noted that there are standards-based measures and evaluation processes for learning experiences in personalized learning environments.[3] Some local practitioners have taken on the challenge of measuring

2   iNACOL. "Moving from Seat-Time to Competency-Based Credits in State Policy: Ensuring All Student Develop Mastery." (2016). Retrieved from https://www.inacol.org/news/moving-from-seat-time-to-competency-based-credits-in-state-policy-ensuring-all-students-develop-mastery/.

3   Rodel Foundation of Delaware. *Standards and Assessments to Support Personalized Learning*. (N.D.). Retrieved from http://www.rodelfoundationde.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/RodelBrief-standards-and-assessments.pdf; Bozeman Public Schools. "Standards-Based Grading for Personalized Learning." (2018). Retrieved from https://www.bsd7.org/students_parents/standards-_based_grading_for_personalized_learning; CompetencyWorks. "The Case for Performance Assessments in a Standards-Based Grading System." (2014). Retrieved from https://www.competencyworks.org/reflections/the-case-for-performance-assessments-in-a-standards-based-grading-system/.

student outcomes across academic, behavioral, and social-emotional variables, although the field of evaluation in this domain is still in its infancy. Several organizations are building diverse, research-based methods to assess what students have learned through personalized learning. To that end, some interviewees noted that accountability systems, particularly in the age of ESSA, are beginning to recognize multiple ways of demonstrating student learning and school quality. Historically, accountability mandates were sometimes seen as getting in the way of effective personalized learning. As such, many interviewees noted the continued need for leadership in evolving state accountability systems as a means of incentivizing effective student-centered models.

THEME 3: PERSONALIZING LEARNING, LIKE MOST EDUCATIONAL INITIATIVES, REQUIRES THOUGHTFUL IMPLEMENTATION, SUPPORT FOR EDUCATORS, AND A COHERENT VISION AMONG LEADERS.

Although personalized learning is an education system that is designed to be student-centered, interested schools and districts should know that it can only be as effective as the teachers who have been tasked with facilitating it. The Middleton School District in New York is using "blended learning" (a specific style of personalized learning) to engage its students, 78 percent of whom are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch and nearly 75 percent of whom identify as either black or Latino. In an interview, Principal Amy Creeden stated, *"Personalized learning won't be successful if teachers don't understand the pedagogy."* Her comments where undergirded by the notion that personalized learning practices such as blended learning cannot completely transform classrooms and student outcomes by themselves. To successfully make the transition to a personalized environment, district and school leadership must share a common vision and commit to invest in the professional development of staff. This ensures that teachers can better support the individual and collective needs of a diverse group of learners, both in terms of cultural responsiveness and curricular instruction.

Interviewees agreed that the best way to introduce a school or district to personalized learning is to give it options. Rafael Gallardo, personalized learning director at Puget Sound Educational Service District in Seattle, Washington, said:

"I never give a district just one or two tools to choose from. I offer a suite . . . of recommendations by convening a national group of experts, finding the most advanced or promising tools, and [evaluating] them before presenting them to teachers."

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Interviewees listed several national organizations as exceptional in promoting educational equity and personalized learning (*see appendix*). One, *UnidosUS*, formerly National Council of La Raza, advocates on behalf of Latinos on issues of civic

engagement, civil rights and immigration, education, workforce and the economy, health, and housing. According to Maria Moser, senior director of teaching and learning at UnidosUS, "teachers are generally not well equipped to support EL students in the language acquisition process, which is problematic as EL students [are becoming] a bigger percentage of the national population." There are many promising opportunities for personalized instruction to support EL students in both acquiring important language skills and engaging in complex thinking and skill development. One lesson for school leaders to take away is the need for high-quality professional learning that is culturally responsive and supportive of the teachers doing the work.

CONCLUSION

This report, along with the equity and personalized learning research review, suggests that personalized learning has the potential to address educational inequities when implemented effectively. Under the right conditions, personalized learning gives educators the flexibility to differentiate instruction to students, assess student growth and performance in a variety of ways, and value the unique skills, strengths, and talents each student brings to the table. If we are to leverage personalized learning to address the needs of an increasingly diverse student population, federal and state policymakers should consider these needs proactively rather than reactively. In addition, stakeholders at every level of education must do the difficult work of questioning our own biases about students, educators, and communities. Finally, state and district leaders should consider offering a suite of resources so that educators and building leaders can exercise autonomy in making sound, local decisions in the best interests of their students.

The importance of thoughtful policy and consistent support from state education agencies (SEAs), school leadership, and educators cannot be overstated. Personalized learning is by no means a "magic elixir" for education reform. Rather, effective and equitable personalized learning practice is the result of a confluence of factors. As such, CCSSO believes that SEAs interested in personalized learning should consider these factors carefully as they explore and expand personalized learning opportunities for students of color, students from low-income families, students with disabilities, ELs, and other historically underserved student groups.

APPENDIX

Table A: Organizations that Promote Educational Equity and Personalized Learning

Organization	Description	For More Information
Big Picture Learning	Big Picture Learning works to support student-centered learning designs where students are actively invested in their learning and are challenged to pursue their interests by a supportive community of educators, professionals, and family members.	www.bigpicture.org
Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL)	CASEL's mission is to help make evidence-based social and emotional learning an integral part of education from preschool through high school.	www.casel.org
CAST	CAST is a nonprofit education research and development organization that works to expand learning opportunities for all individuals through Universal Design for Learning.	www.cast.org
CEEDAR Center	The CEEDAR Center helps states and institutes of higher education reform their teacher and leader preparation programs, revise licensure standards to align with reforms, refine personnel evaluation systems, and realign policy structures and professional learning systems.	ceedar.education.ufl.edu
City Connects	City Connects takes a systematic, high-impact, cost-effective approach to addressing the out-of-school factors that limit learning.	www.bc.edu/schools/lsoe/cityconnects.html
City Year	City Year partners with public schools in urban, high-poverty communities to provide high-impact student, classroom, and school-wide support regarding college and career readiness.	www.cityyear.org
Competency Works	CompetencyWorks is an online resource dedicated to providing information and knowledge about competency education in the K-12 education system.	www.competencyworks.org
The Future Project	The Future Project works to turn schools across the country into places that unlock the passion and purpose of everyone inside them.	www.thefutureproject.org
Getting Smart	Getting Smart is a blog that features posts about innovations in education and learning.	www.gettingsmart.com
Harlem Children's Zone	The Harlem Children's Zone works to give kids the individualized support they need to get to and through college and become productive, self-sustaining adults.	www.hcz.org

Jobs for the Future, Students at the Center Hub	The Students at the Center Hub is a resource for educators, families, students, and communities that want to learn more about research, best practices, supportive policies, and how to talk about student-centered approaches to learning.	www.studentsatthecenterhub.org
KnowledgeWorks	KnowledgeWorks is a national organization committed to providing every learner with meaningful personalized learning experiences that ensure success in college, career, and civic life.	www.knowledgeworks.org
National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD)	NCLD's mission is to improve the lives of the 1 in 5 children and adults nationwide with learning and attention issues by empowering parents and young adults, transforming schools, and advocating for equal rights and opportunities.	www.unidosus.org
The New School	The New School prepares students to understand, contribute to, and succeed in a rapidly changing society, thus making the world a better and more just place.	www.newschool.edu
The PEAR Institute (Harvard Medical School)	The PEAR Institute's mission is to create and foster school and after-school settings in which all young people can be successful.	www.thepearinstitute.org
PolicyLink	PolicyLink connects the work of people on the ground to the creation of sustainable communities of opportunity that allow everyone to participate and prosper.	www.policylink.org
Promise Neighborhoods Institute	Promise Neighborhoods Institute assists neighborhoods in building a seamlessly linked cradle-to-career pipeline of education, health, and social supports to create communities of opportunity for children and their families; providing technical assistance; facilitating peer-to-peer learning; advancing and supporting equitable policy strategies; and serving as a link to public and private investors.	www.promiseneighborhoodsinstitute.org
School Retool	School Retool is a professional development fellowship that helps school leaders redesign their school culture using small, scrappy experiments.	www.schoolretool.org
STRIVE	STRIVE works to help people acquire the life-changing skills and attitudes needed to overcome challenging circumstances, find sustained employment, and become valuable contributors to their families, their employers, and their communities.	www.striveinternational.org
Teachers Guild	The Teachers Guild is a professional community that activates teachers' creativity to solve the biggest challenges in education today.	www.teachersguild.org

Transcend	Transcend is a national nonprofit organization dedicated to accelerating innovation in the core design of school.	www.transcendeducation.org
Turnaround for Children	Turnaround for Children translates neuroscientific research into tools and strategies for schools with high concentrations of students impacted by adversity in order to accelerate healthy development and academic achievement.	www.turnaroundusa.org
UnidosUS (formerly National Council of La Raza)	UnidosUS—the largest national Hispanic civil rights and advocacy organization in the United States—works to build a stronger America by creating opportunities for Latinos.	www.unidosus.org