When learning is personal, teachers have the tools to inspire and students have the drive to succeed.

In personalized learning settings, teachers assess students’ strengths and needs to create learning plans that are aligned with each student’s interests, while maintaining strong academic standards. This collaboration allows students to take greater ownership of their learning while enabling teachers to work with them to discover their passions and interests.

Personalized learning is accomplished using a mix of approaches that employs the best of what we know already works – from traditional teacher-led lessons and one-on-one time with a teacher, to discussions with peers and lessons students can interact with at home.

This approach is helping students from every background develop skills beyond academics – like problem solving, collaboration, flexibility and initiative – that prepare them for success in college and careers.

Personalized learning embodies three core characteristics, which help accelerate and deepen learning for all students:

STUDENT-TEACHER BOND IS THE HEART OF LEARNING

Teachers and students collaborate to create learning paths that are fueled by student ownership and teachers’ insights about high-quality learning, and based on students’ individual needs, skills and personal interests.

Lindsay Unified is a school district in California’s Central Valley where all the students qualify for free and reduced lunch, and 52 percent are English language learners. Here the school system practices a “performance-based system,” which enables custom learning paths for every student. Instead of advancing at the same rate, when students master specific content, regardless of their age or the time of year, they move to the next level. More transparency about individual learning goals enables teachers to tailor instruction, and students to own their learning. One Lindsay student put it best, “…now I can be the best at something if I want. It’s a nice feeling – to be capable of anything.”

LEARNING HAPPENS ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

During the school day, learning happens in various spaces and time periods with teachers, peers, community members, remote experts and digital content – all depending on what works best for students.

Indianapolis’ Warren Central High School is a large traditional public school where 63 percent of students come from low-income families, and more than 50 percent are students of color. Warren’s teachers and students work together to create flexible and functional learning spaces. The shining example is the Warrior MediaPlex, the school’s former library. Redesigned, it now includes two computer labs called “SI-COM Labs,” which provide students with dual-monitor stations that mirror contemporary work environments and where students can view teachers’ screens as they’re following instructions for their work. The MediaPlex also has dry-erase walls for creative problem solving and group project work and a digital theater space for distance learning opportunities with authors and experts.

ALL STUDENTS ARE READY FOR COLLEGE AND CAREER

Teachers align curriculum with college- and career-ready standards and students’ individual goals to ensure that learning is relevant to the future where students will live and lead.

At Summit Charter Schools, a network of Northern California secondary schools, educators use a dashboard called the Summit Personalized Learning Plan (PLP), which students, families and teachers are able to access at all times. Students use this platform to set learning and personal growth goals and track their progress in four categories: content knowledge, cognitive skills, habits of success and real-life experiences. For example, a typical day includes deeper learning projects such as a persuasive speech and collaborative group work on Common Core State Standards skills and dispositions including problem solving. Additionally, students develop habits like self-management through opportunities to contribute to the school community and they gain real-world experiences through career preparation and college readiness expeditions, supported by partnerships with Bay Area organizations.
Everyone has a role in personalized learning: teachers and students, schools and systems, and technology all contribute to its success.

TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

With personalized learning, teachers and students collaborate to design the best learning approaches for students, depending on the task and subject. Teachers lead effective and optimally paced instruction and activate and advise students, in ways that accelerate learning and reduce gaps. Students advance through material only after they have demonstrated true mastery of a concept, ensuring they are neither bored nor lost. This approach also creates opportunities for students to learn skills and habits of success, such as self-motivation and persistence.

Teachers also play an integral role by working intensively with one another. For example, in Delaware, teacher leaders created their own blueprint for personalized learning. To present this resource of lessons learned to their colleagues across the state, they organized a day-long workshop, created by teachers for teachers. Educators shared tools and implementation strategies with one another, and had discussions about their shared definitions of personalized learning. One educator described the importance of this teacher-driven approach, "The adoption of personalized learning across the state will only be possible if it comes as much from the ground up as from top down."5

SCHOOL AND SYSTEM LEADERS

School and system-level leaders are operating to introduce more flexibility and adaptability to the learning that happens in classrooms.

School leaders are creating innovation-driven cultures where teachers can collaborate and discover what works best for their students. For example, at Leadership Public Schools (LPS) in Oakland, CA, "At any one time, there are multiple innovations, individual strategies, and products in varying stages of development across the LPS network. A team of teachers designs, adopts, and adapts each idea. It is then prototyped in one or two classrooms with pioneering teachers, iterated by a larger group of teachers through collaborative innovation, and then built into the networkwide practices and expectations."6

At the same time, administrators are continuously evaluating the effectiveness of specific innovations and readjusting their approaches as necessary to be responsive. They are also effectively managing change and engaging with parents and community members to help them better understand unfamiliar concepts, such as greater student ownership and competency-based approaches.

System leaders are working to create school autonomy, support and accountability to make innovative learning environments possible. This includes attracting, developing and retaining innovative teachers and leaders, and being persistent about tracking data and outcomes for personalized learning. They are also driving the marketplace to create tools, whether technological or curriculum-based, to meet real-life learning needs.

TECHNOLOGY

The student-teacher bond is strengthened by the smart use of technology in personalized learning settings.

Digital tools assist with student performance assessments, real-time student feedback, lesson delivery, and enable students to work with peers and teachers in and out of the classroom. This approach encourages students to do the most relevant, challenging work they can while giving teachers more time to help students make breakthroughs when they get stuck.