



Journeys to Personalized Learning

CASE STUDY:

HENRY COUNTY SCHOOLS



About FSG

FSG is a mission-driven consulting firm supporting leaders in creating large-scale, lasting social change. Through strategy, evaluation, and research we help many types of actors—individually and collectively—make progress against the world’s toughest problems.

Our teams work across all sectors by partnering with leading foundations, businesses, nonprofits, and governments in every region of the globe. We seek to reimagine social change by identifying ways to maximize the impact of existing resources, amplifying the work of others to help advance knowledge and practice, and inspiring change agents around the world to achieve greater impact. As part of our nonprofit mission, FSG also directly supports learning communities, such as the Collective Impact Forum, the Shared Value Initiative, and the Impact Hiring Initiative, to provide the tools and relationships that change agents need to be successful.

FSG has worked extensively on issues related to personalized learning, including work with schools, nonprofits, foundations, and government entities. We are particularly focused on accelerating the pace of learning and improvement within the personalized learning sector, on connecting the experiences of practitioners with those who hold power, and on understanding the conditions and supports needed for personalized learning to succeed and spread.

FSG wishes to thank the teachers, students, and administrators of Henry County Schools for their transparency, willingness to be the subject of this case study, and good humor and flexibility throughout the writing process. Specifically, FSG thanks Karen Perry and Aaryn Schmuhl, who graciously told their stories, responded to requests, checked facts, and welcomed the FSG team to multiple site visits. FSG also wishes to thank the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, whose generous support and thought partnership made this series of case studies possible.

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ABOUT THE SERIES: *JOURNEYS TO PERSONALIZED LEARNING*

In late 2016, FSG, with support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, began to explore how a series of case studies could support the adoption of quality personalized learning in schools and districts nationwide.

After an extensive scan of existing resources and dozens of interviews about what new research would help strengthen the sector, one theme came through with particular clarity—in talking about personalized learning, we as a field tend to focus on the visible structures and practices that define a school model. On one hand this focus is practical and useful. But, like an iceberg, what happens beneath the surface often matters more to school success. The challenge is that things like leadership, culture, processes, norms, and values—and most importantly, how these fit together—are hard to observe and hard to write about for an outside audience. That’s why these case studies are intentionally detailed: they trace how multiple factors came together, over time, to support transformational change in three school systems through personalized learning.

By emphasizing the journey, we hope these case studies can complement other, existing resources that spotlight practices and models. We’ve linked to many of these excellent resources when possible. Ultimately, our desire in writing these case studies is that readers will learn from subjects’ successes, avoid obstacles, gain the belief that change is possible, and think critically about how to approach transformation through personalized learning in their own schools or districts.

Jeff Cohen

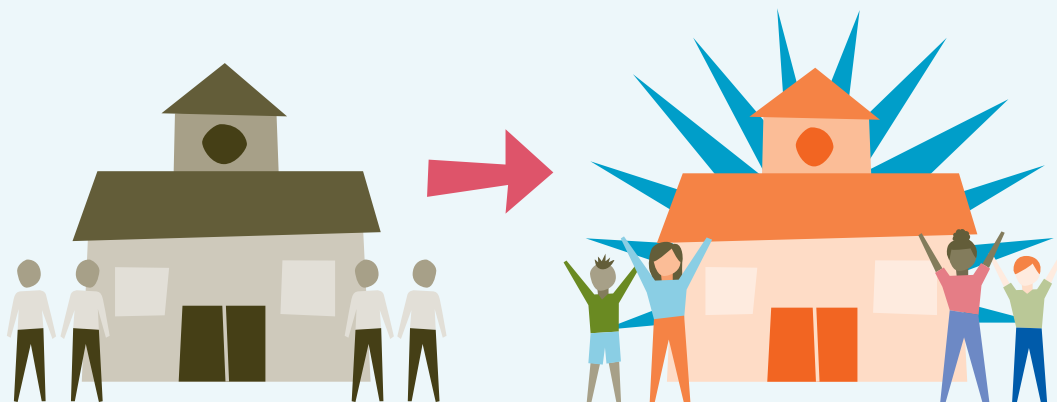
David Phillips

Florian Schalliol

Matt Wilka

The series highlights the journeys of two public school districts and one public charter school.

SUBJECT	PROFILE	KEY ELEMENTS OF THE JOURNEY
HENRY COUNTY SCHOOLS (HENRY COUNTY, GA)	<p>Large metro school district with urban/suburban/rural schools</p> <p>42,000 students</p> <p>54% Free/reduced lunch</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vision and plan for district-wide personalized learning • Phased rollout over many years, in support of core vision • Focused effort to win hearts and minds • Culture of continuous improvement and comfort making mistakes • Encouraging schools to adapt to their contexts (being “loose”) while adhering to key tenets (being “tight”)
MESA COUNTY VALLEY DISTRICT 51 (MESA COUNTY, CO)	<p>Suburban public school district</p> <p>22,105 students</p> <p>51% Free/reduced lunch</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adapted national expertise to local context • Buy-in across typically partisan divides • Multi-year foundation of culture and mindset change • Creating advocates and support across the district • Made progress despite limited funds
CICS WEST BELDEN (CHICAGO, IL)	<p>Urban public charter school</p> <p>530 students</p> <p>90% Free/reduced lunch</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trust and culture as a precondition for transformation • Distributed leadership and buy-in • Importance of collaborative planning time • Staging implementation of personalized learning • Partnering for expertise at key moments



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Henry County Schools: Key Statistics

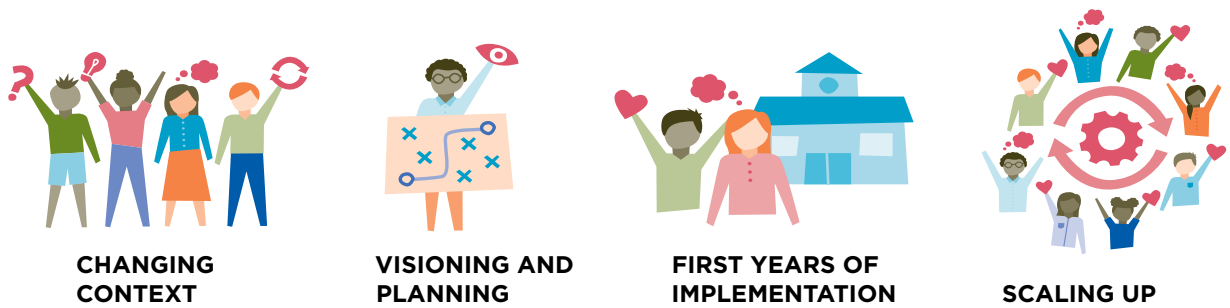


- LOCATION:** Henry County, Georgia
- NUMBER OF STUDENTS:** 42,000
- NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES:** 5,000
- STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS:** 2.4% ELL, 54% FRL, 14% IEP

Henry County Schools (HCS), a county-wide public school district located 30 minutes southeast of Atlanta, Georgia, is in many ways a typical American school district. It has become more racially diverse in recent years, it includes a growing number of low-income families, and its leaders work hard to respond to growing pressure to improve student outcomes. Until recently, HCS’s approach to instruction was largely traditional, and its student outcomes were deemed acceptable by many.

The school district, however, is currently in the midst of one of the most ambitious district-wide educational transformations in the country. Around 2010, a small number of teachers and principals, impatient with the status quo, began using personalized learning practices. By the end of 2017, approximately 80 percent of HCS schools had begun the transition toward a personalized learning model. Across the country, many school districts are considering whether to “personalize” learning, and how. To help other districts, funders, researchers, and others learn from HCS’s example, this case study presents Henry County Schools’ journey to personalized learning from 2000 to 2017, with a focus on the last five years. Because the distinguishing feature of Henry County Schools’ story is its district-wide vision and implementation plan, the case study describes the journey at the district level, and not at the classroom level.

Summary of HCS’s Personalized Learning Timeline



TIMELINE	2000 — 2012	2013 — 2014	2014 — 2016	2017 — Present
MAIN ACTIVITIES	Dramatic changes in the community (demographic, economic) and early innovations signal a shift toward student agency.	HCS formalizes its vision for personalized learning and creates a 3-part implementation plan.	HCS makes significant efforts to win hearts and minds, launches its first cohorts of redesigned schools, and re-tools some systems to support PL.	HCS prepares to launch remaining cohorts, continues essential efforts (e.g., hearts and minds), while fundamentally changing systems that allow personalized learning at scale.

Lessons from HCS' Journey

- 1 Spend considerable time “winning the hearts and minds” of stakeholders.** HCS's effort to win hearts and minds was thoughtful, intense, and authentic. It involved parents and community members, and it has a strong “ground game” through which district leaders visited and revisited every school community. Notably, the campaign to win hearts and minds was distinctive because of the humility, positivity, and sometimes levity that the HCS team used.
- 2 Communicate that the district is going “all in” from the beginning, instead of taking a “wait and see” approach.** According to one district leader, “What made our plan different is that we said we’re going to change the traditional school experience for every kid in every building.”
- 3 Implement a phased rollout over many years, encouraging early adopters while giving space to those who need more time.** However, schools are told that they eventually must transition to a personalized learning model.
- 4 Encourage schools to adapt personalized learning to their unique contexts while adhering to key tenets.** HCS's culture has always given schools significant autonomy. Consistent with that culture, HCS's personalized learning plan encourages schools to develop different personalized learning models, within certain bounds. HCS calls this a careful balance between being “loose” (i.e., areas where schools are encouraged to customize their PL model) and “tight” (i.e., tenets and practices that schools must adhere to).
- 5 Create space to be bold and make mistakes (i.e., cultivate a spirit for continuous improvement), while maintaining accountability.** Across the district, administrators, principals, and teachers constantly reinforce the idea that that it is ok (and even encouraged) to make mistakes. Just as teachers try to instill a growth mindset in their students, the district tries to do the same with adults.

This case study chronicles attempts to elucidate not only HCS's lessons learned, but also challenges, such as financial sustainability, rigor of instruction, expectations for student ownership of their learning, comfort with change, and staff continuity.

INTRODUCTION

In January 2015, Laura Whitaker Shortt moved from New Jersey to Henry County, Georgia, with her husband, her 8-year old daughter, Maya, and her 4-year old son, Micah. A business development director at a hospital, Shortt was hesitant to move south, especially since her children were thriving at their schools in New Jersey. What’s more, her daughter’s new school—Bethlehem Elementary—was in the midst of a transformation to a “personalized learning” model, and the outcome was uncertain.*

Jessalyn Askew, the school’s principal, hosted parent meetings to explain personalized learning and what Henry County Schools (HCS) had planned. As Shortt recalled: “Dr. Askew said, ‘We don’t have all the answers, and we won’t do everything perfectly from the beginning. But we want to do this with you.’”

In many school districts, Askew’s show of vulnerability might have raised a red flag for parents, signaling a lack of knowledge or poor planning. At Henry County Schools, however, her approach represented exactly what the district’s leaders wanted from their school leaders: a commitment to reimagining teaching and learning without the fear of making mistakes, to questioning old habits both personal and institutional, and to tapping into a deeper purpose of education far beyond test preparation.

Henry County Schools is currently in the midst of one of the most ambitious district-wide educational transformations in the country. With approximately 42,000 students and 4,000 teachers, HCS is among the largest districts to have made significant progress toward a personalized learning model that, eventually, will reach every classroom. What makes the district unique is not only its ambition, but also the thoughtful way in which its leaders have operationalized their vision: by prioritizing winning hearts and minds and by implementing a scaling strategy that encourages schools to create models that work for them, within certain parameters.

The strategy HCS used to implement personalized learning evolved over time, involving many late nights, difficult conversations, and setbacks. While HCS has benefitted from some philanthropic support, it still struggles with issues common to many districts: an aversion to change, parental worries about the role of technology in the classroom, and limited budgets. Transforming to a new educational approach is difficult, yet a growing number of administrators, board members, teachers, families, and community members in Henry County have come to believe that it is essential to give their children the best possible chance to succeed. In the following pages, we tell the story of **how** HCS got where it is today.

* We will occasionally abbreviate personalized learning to “PL” throughout this case study.

Henry County Schools¹

Though there is no one definition or model of personalized learning, the term generally refers to a broad range of educational approaches focused on “tailoring learning for each student’s strengths, needs, and interests—including enabling student voice and choice in what, how, when, and where they learn—to provide flexibility and supports to ensure mastery of the highest standards possible.”

At Henry County Schools, personalized learning rests on two core beliefs: that students should have agency in their learning; and that schools, supported by the district, should have autonomy in determining how each of the tenets is implemented.²

Student agency is the foundation of Henry County’s personalized learning commitment. Student agency refers to the responsibility students have to make important decisions in their own learning experiences. The district believes that schools should foster student ownership of learning, not accept passive participation in the learning experience. Students with high agency are aware of their strengths, needs, wants, and goals, are clear on learning expectations and how to meet them, and are resourceful learners who seek information and build skills they need to be successful in college, career, and life.

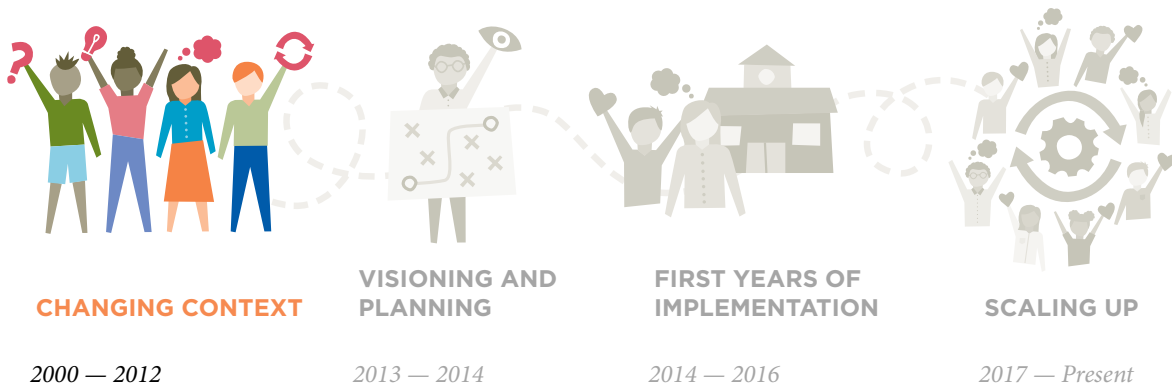
The student experience includes five essential elements:

- Learner Profiles
- Competency-Based Learning
- Authentic Learning Experiences
- 21st-Century Skills (Communication, Collaboration, Creativity, and Critical Thinking)
- Technology-Enabled

1 <https://schoolwires.henry.k12.ga.us/personalizedlearning>

2 *Mean What You Say: Defining and Integrating Personalized, Blended and Competency Education*, iNACOL (2013).

CHANGING CONTEXT (2000–2012)



HENRY COUNTY SCHOOLS: PROFILE

OPERATIONS



50 SCHOOLS

- 28 elementary, 11 middle, 11 high



2 DISTRICT PROGRAMS OF CHOICE

- Academy for Advanced Studies
- Impact Academy



42,000 STUDENTS

- 8th largest school district in Georgia



5,000 EMPLOYEES

- Henry County's largest employer



300 SCHOOL BUSES

- Over 25,000 daily riders



\$192 PER CHILD SPENT ON CENTRAL OFFICE

- Georgia average: \$463

STUDENTS

52% African American

32% Caucasian

9% Hispanic

4% Multiracial

3% Asian

54% Free and reduced price lunch

0.3% Alternative Education Program

14% IEP

2% English Language Learner Program

13% Gifted Education Program

63% Career/Technical Program

96% Daily Attendance Rate



A TRADITIONAL DISTRICT WITH “GOOD ENOUGH” OUTCOMES

Henry County Schools was a typical American school district.

Henry County Schools, a county-wide public school district located 30 minutes southeast of Atlanta, is a typical example of our nation’s public education system. It is increasingly racially diverse, includes a growing number of low-income families, and works hard to respond to growing pressure to improve student outcomes. (See table for Henry County’s current demographics.) Although Henry County is part of the sprawling Atlanta suburbs, many parts retain a rural feel. Driving on Interstate 75 from Stockbridge in the north of the county to Locust Grove in the south, you’ll see modern strip malls with big box retailers and chain supermarkets but also large swaths of pine tree forests with winding roads and scattered homes. In the county seat of McDonough (population 23,000), a quaint town square projects an idyllic southern charm.

As the county’s school system and largest employer, HCS plays a key role preparing students for the workforce and ensuring the county’s overall vitality. Until recently, the community trusted in traditional methods to achieve those goals. For many years, parents walking into an HCS school would see a model familiar from their own childhoods: teachers delivering lessons in front of large groups of students and students sitting in rows, dutifully completing tasks placed before them. In the 1990s and 2000s, the district matched state averages on state-administered tests but underperformed the state and nation on other key assessments like the SAT and ACT.

Like many other districts, HCS focused on meeting government requirements rather than aspiring to a more ambitious vision of teaching and learning.

Many of the district’s schools were adept at preparing students for the low-rigor state tests of the early 2000s, and most accepted the results as good enough. Although a discussion about moving from “good” to “great” was brewing, no clear and commonly understood definition emerged of what good or great teaching and learning should be. Expectations for students varied from school to school and classroom to classroom. Some school and district leaders took an “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it” approach.

However, a combination of demographic shifts, changing community expectations, and bold leadership throughout the district created a new opportunity for HCS to fundamentally reimagine its purpose and methods.

DRAMATIC DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGES IN HENRY COUNTY

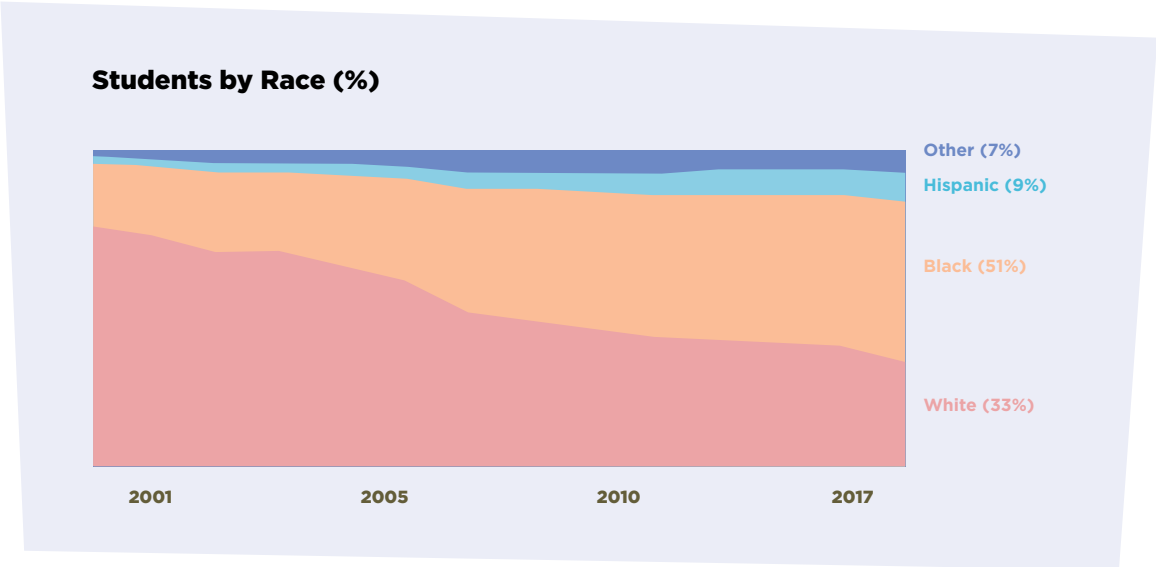
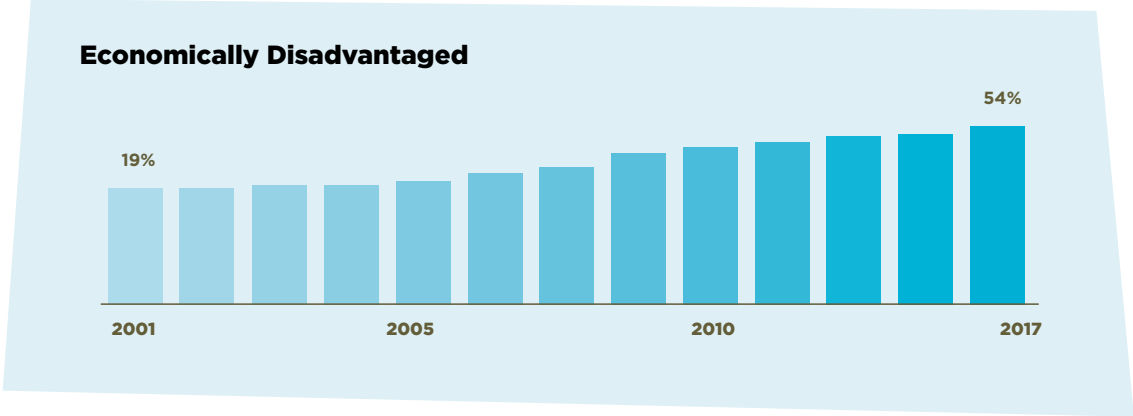
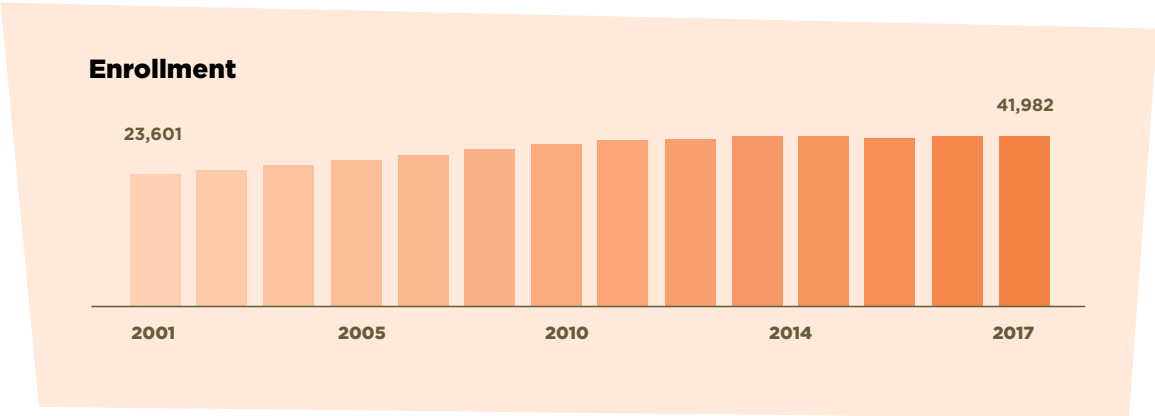
In the course of a decade, HCS’s student population doubled in size and became much more diverse.

Twenty years ago, Henry County was a predominantly rural area with three high schools. In the 2000s, however, it became one of Atlanta’s fastest-growing “bedroom communities.” From 2000 to 2013, the county’s population increased from 122,000 to 211,000 while HCS’s student enrollment nearly doubled to 41,000. As the district scrambled to build 25 new schools and recruit teachers over a ten-year period, considerations such as curriculum, innovative programming, stakeholder involvement, and technology all took a back seat.

In the same years, the percentage of economically disadvantaged students also doubled, and the district became more racially diverse. Natalie Gore, then a principal at Cotton Indian Elementary School, saw the change first-hand: “When I arrived in 2006 we were a majority white school with 25 percent of students eligible for free and reduced price lunch. When I left 8 years later, we were majority-minority with 70 percent free and reduced price lunch. That’s a tremendous change and it required that we change the ways we support kids.”



DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGES AT HENRY COUNTY SCHOOLS



SEEDS OF INNOVATION AT HENRY COUNTY SCHOOLS

In addition to the demographic shifts, four “seeds of innovation” at HCS laid the groundwork for personalized learning.



THE GREAT RECESSION AND HEIGHTENED COMMUNITY EXPECTATIONS

In 2008, the Great Recession shook Henry County to its core. As the county suffered one of the highest foreclosure rates in the nation, HCS’s annual budget fell by \$33 million from 2010 to 2011,³ and the rocketing student enrollment growth came to a halt. Out of necessity, the district cut or reallocated several central office staff positions. Despite district leaders’ best attempts to shield classrooms from cuts, teachers and students also felt the pinch, particularly through higher student/teacher ratios. Teachers and staff responded professionally, doing more with less; nevertheless, overall morale was affected.

As unemployment rose during the recession, many families of HCS students learned the hard way that the modern economy required new skills—especially critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity—that were far removed from what they remembered learning in school. The need for those skills was top of mind for families a few years later when the district sought their input on personalized learning.

Meanwhile, businesses struggled to find qualified workers. Local employers realized that HCS’s ability to prepare youth for the workforce would be critical to economic growth, especially as the county became increasingly integrated with the service and technology-based Atlanta metro economy. In response, the Henry County Chamber of Commerce created the E² (Economics & Education) Initiative to recommend policies and programs that would promote economic success, particularly by building 21st century skills. E² signaled widespread commitment to modernizing the education system. In 2016, Henry County businesses actively supported a sales tax increase that would fund some of the district’s personalized learning efforts.⁴



A CHANGE IN PHILOSOPHY FROM THE TOP

In 2010, long-time HCS educator Ethan Hildreth became superintendent. As a teacher and principal, Hildreth had observed the stark mismatch between the preparation students received in his school district and the business community’s workforce needs. More fundamentally, Hildreth believed that the purpose of education was not to ensure conformity, but rather to free students to grow in meaningful ways. As Hildreth reflected: “If you ask any parent—‘Do you want your child to be treated as an individual person who deserves respect and opportunity, and to develop their passions and interests?’—almost

³ In the 2010 fiscal year, the HCS budget was \$317 million. Due to state austerity reductions and a decline of 15% in the local tax digest, the 2011 budget was \$284 million.

⁴ The sales tax funded the district’s purchase of devices for all HCS students. The student learning device rollout began 5 years after HCS began to pursue personalized learning in earnest.

all would say ‘yes.’ In my experience, this is a near-universal sentiment among parents.” Hildreth felt strongly that HCS needed to transform toward supporting students as individuals and that adults would have to shift their mindsets toward believing that change was possible.

A first step toward realizing a new vision was to help teachers, principals, administrators, parents, and students believe in change. “How ironic when educators give lip service to being lifelong learners, yet calcify our beliefs and actions as adults,” Hildreth said. To spur a change mindset, he supported “bright spots” within the district and encouraged two alternative pathway schools that would support students’ personal passions and learning styles: a blended virtual online school (Impact Academy) and a college and career academy (Academy for Advanced Studies).



EARLY BRIGHT SPOTS AND AN EMERGING GROUNDSWELL OF IMPATIENT EDUCATORS

While Hildreth enabled the creation of Impact Academy and Academy for Advanced studies, teachers at several schools, who likewise were impatient with the status quo, began experimenting with different ways to individualize instruction. These “bright spots” helped educators around the district to believe that a new way was possible, and they eventually informed HCS’s personalized learning vision.

INNOVATION

LESSONS LEARNED THAT INFORMED HCS’S PERSONALIZED LEARNING STRATEGY

IMPACT ACADEMY (A BLENDED VIRTUAL MIDDLE AND HIGH SCHOOL)

- Established operating norms for the scheduling and advising of students who were not at a brick-and-mortar school full-time.
- Provided examples of rigorous online instruction and informed the selection of a learning management system and digital content provider.

ACADEMY FOR ADVANCED STUDIES (A CENTRALIZED COLLEGE AND CAREER ACADEMY)

- Tested occupationally-focused learning labs and dual enrollment courses with local universities.
- Showed the benefits of project-based learning and tight coordination with higher education institutions and business leaders.

LOCUST GROVE MIDDLE SCHOOL (STATION/ROTATION BLENDED LEARNING IMPLEMENTATION)

- Showed HCS educators what a blended learning model could look like through a local example.
- Showed early evidence that a blended model improved both school culture and student learning outcomes.

LUELLA MIDDLE SCHOOL (PROJECT AND SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING IMPLEMENTATION)

- Demonstrated that project-based learning could increase connections to real-world applications.
- Blended and flipped classroom strategies.
- Surveyed students daily on their learning, marking a shift toward student-centered learning.

Together, these early innovations created a new image of what education could look like in Henry County: more student-centered, more self-directed, and more focused on 21st-Century skills. Recalling the Impact Academy example, founding Principal Steve Thompson said: “People started to believe that kids could empower themselves to craft their own experiences. It’s something people can look at and say ‘ok, I can see what you’re talking about.’”

In a district of more than 40,000 students, however, these innovations only touched a fraction of the population. Thompson and others had aspirations to expand the lessons from Impact Academy, but sweeping changes were made difficult. As Thompson explained: “Dr. Hildreth was supportive, but we were working in a pretty bureaucratic structure that wasn’t accepting of innovation.” Fundamentally reimagining district-wide structures would have to begin with a key personnel decision.

For more detail on Locust Grove Middle School, as well as additional perspective on key elements of HCS’s rollout of personalized learning, see [The Learning Accelerator’s profile](#).



THE RIGHT PERSON TO OPERATIONALIZE THE VISION

In 2011, Hildreth appointed a kindred spirit, Luella Middle School Principal Aaryn Schmuhl, to be assistant superintendent for Learning and Leadership. In Schmuhl, Hildreth saw someone who would push boundaries and challenge the status quo. As Hildreth recalled: “To change, you empower people who are change agents in positive ways: people who are able to take risks, be comfortable with it, go out on a limb, and be willing to have stones thrown at them from time to time.”

Schmuhl came with a relentless drive to push boundaries, and he encouraged his team to experiment without fear of failure. Through his experiences as a wrestling coach, social studies teacher, assistant principal, and principal, he had developed the confidence that comes from knowing the school system inside and out—including where rules needed to be followed, where they could bend, and where they could change.

Schmuhl’s philosophy closely matched what the field has come to know as *personalized learning*. “My belief at the time was that school was constraining kids. We needed not only to empower students to be active drivers of their own learning, but also to give them the skills to know that they could conquer anything we put in front of them,” he recalled. “I was really influenced by Ken Robinson’s thinking on creativity and Theodore Sizer’s *Horace’s Compromise*, which describes how educators often compromise their beliefs in order to ‘succeed’ in an antiquated system.”

As Luella Middle School’s principal, Schmuhl had innovated in a number of ways: integrating project-based and blended learning into his classrooms, making student-led conferences standard practice, and surveying students at the end of each class period on what they had learned. “I believed that a principal’s job is to start fires, not put them out,” he explained. “For example, in those days, computer technology was starting to give kids the chance to move at their own pace. We didn’t have any courseware, so we made it ourselves in Blackboard. We weren’t very good at content development, but we were excited about creating a new vision.”

Schmuhl’s first-hand experience with certain aspects of personalized learning gave him credibility among his peers, and as an assistant superintendent, he now had a chance to spread a new vision throughout the district. As Tony Pickett, assistant to the superintendent for Strategic Planning, recalled: “[Schmuhl] brought the language and broader vision of what personalized learning might look like.”

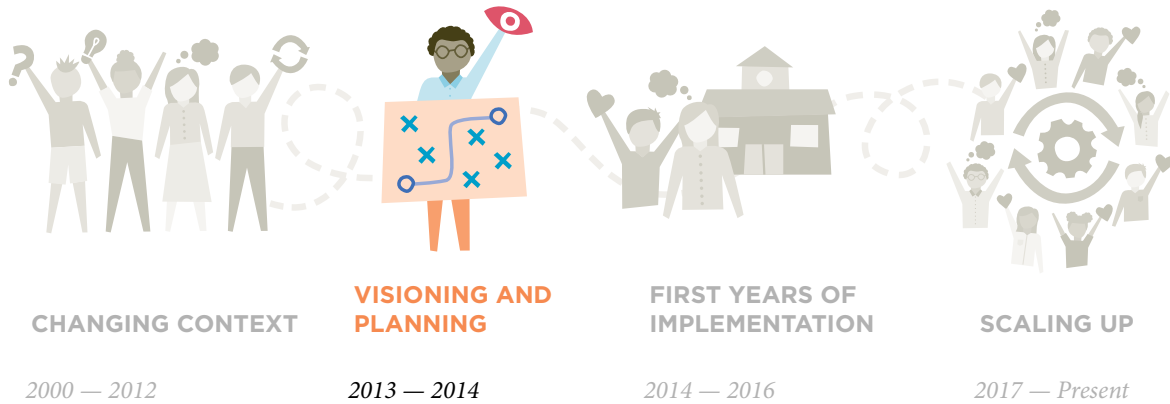
The Importance of Superintendent Support

Ethan Hildreth retired in 2014, and Rodney Bowler, another long-time HCS educator, became superintendent. From the early days of his tenure, Bowler routinely asked Schmuhl pointed questions about personalized learning. “There was some trepidation in our office because we weren’t sure he was on board with everything,” Schmuhl recalled. “But Mr. Bowler listened, engaged, and gave our team the discretion to take risks. That was a big deal, and he’s now a strong proponent of the work.” Clear and public support from Hildreth and Bowler was critical for Schmuhl to move decisively.

In his new role, Schmuhl signaled that shifting to a student-centered vision would require innovation and spent a year reorganizing central office departments. To avoid layoffs during the recession, HCS reassigned many central office staff to school-based roles. As a fortunate consequence of a smaller central office, Schmuhl gained direct oversight over a number of departments—including the supervision of principals, curriculum, and professional learning—and therefore could make changes swiftly.

During that time, Schmuhl applied for a Race to the Top (RTTT) grant for school districts to expand some of the practices from Impact Academy and the College and Career Academy. Although HCS did not win the RTTT grant, the district treated the loss as an opportunity to strengthen its vision of what mattered most for increasing student success. The RTTT application had focused heavily on technology’s role in the classroom. While computer technology was an important disrupting force in education, it did not provide the sole solution to redesigning learning for every student. Computer and Internet technology, HCS leaders realized, should not be an end in itself; rather, it should operate in service of a broader vision.

VISIONING AND PLANNING (2013–2014)



REFOCUSING HCS'S VISION ON STUDENT AGENCY

A grant opportunity accelerates a vision and plan for personalized learning.

Not being chosen to receive an RTTT grant turned out to be a blessing in disguise and forced the district's leaders to reflect on their ultimate goal. Steve Thompson, principal of Impact Academy and one of the application's co-authors, recalled: "After applying for the RTTT grant, we had to bounce back and ask ourselves what really mattered. We realized that while technology-based learning can provide a potential path to personalization, it doesn't get you all the way there. That is, kids can use technology but not have agency.⁵ The turning point came in 2013, when our conversations turned from blended learning to putting decisions in the hands of students."

"We're lucky—if we had won the RTTT grant, we might have started handing out devices, and that's where a lot of districts mess up," said Thompson.



⁵ HCS defines agency as a person's ability and willingness to formulate a plan and take initiative to achieve it.

HCS Strategic Planning Team



Schmuhl knew that developing a strategic plan would require a team of dynamic thinkers, connectors, and problem-solvers. To form that team, he called on Brian Blanton and Steve Thompson, two of the co-authors of the RTTT grant, plus one newcomer, Karen Perry. While the team members brought different individual strengths and came from varying backgrounds, they shared a lack of patience with the status quo school experience.

Continuity within the core planning team has been important to HCS's progress. Through several superintendent and board member transitions, principal turnover, and a shifting accountability landscape, this team has remained focused on the work of achieving personalized learning. All four strategic planning team members had been teachers and leaders in HCS schools, all are married to teachers in the system, and all have children who are enrolled in HCS schools. Driven by their institutional knowledge, deep personal roots in the community, and varied professional experiences, they willingly staked their individual and collective credibility on personalized learning.

BRIAN BLANTON, COORDINATOR OF INSTRUCTIONAL TECHNOLOGY.⁶ Blanton, longtime Henry County resident and educator, is a deep thinker and studious researcher. He gives thorough consideration to ideas and quietly seeks out academic and practical solutions to new challenges. Blanton frequently reminds the team to keep a sharp focus on student agency, which he calls the "North Star" of the work. His deep roots in the school system and his personal and professional credibility and approachability are important assets. Although his formal role has shifted to assistant superintendent of the newly-formed Technology division, and he is less involved in the day-to-day operations of the school redesign work, Blanton stays focused on his deeply held belief that computer technology serves the larger purpose of advancing student ownership of learning, and he works to instill that belief in the division's work.

⁶ Blanton's current role is assistant superintendent for Technology Services.

STEVE THOMPSON, PRINCIPAL AT IMPACT ACADEMY. Thompson is a bold and creative visionary. As a longtime resident and leader in HCS, he brought his experience as an art educator and perspective as father of four students in the Henry County School system, which served the team well during the strategic planning phase. When Thompson is at his most creative, he starts sketching ideas on white boards, scrap paper, napkins, or anything in reach. His impatience with the status quo drives his thinking to push the boundaries of what is possible. Thompson believes deeply that students should be able to learn and demonstrate mastery in various ways, on flexible timelines, and by fully harnessing the power of computer technology in their everyday experiences. Although his role has shifted to leading the district-wide blended learning program full time, Thompson continues to play an integral role in the implementation of personalized learning through Impact Academy.

KAREN PERRY, ASSESSMENT SPECIALIST.⁷ Perry's experience as a teacher, parent, and graduation coach working with at-risk students drove her conviction to redesign the school experience. Perry was an addition to the original RTTT team, but she works as a connector and a relater, translating strategy and vision into action. Perry recognizes potential external partners who can help HCS's work and builds capacity internally. Perry's tenacity and passion are evident, and they drive her commitment to personalized learning and her desire for change. She is quick-witted and organized, and she is a realist who gets stuff done; these traits have earned her a reputation throughout the district as the go-to person for personalized learning. Perry is the engine of the operation, the implementer of the vision, and the driver of day-to-day work.

In July 2013, while district leaders were clarifying their vision, an HCS school board member learned of a different opportunity—the Next Generation Systems Initiative (NGSI) grant. NGSI was a competition funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation that supported school districts in designing, launching, and scaling personalized learning schools.

In August, HCS submitted an application to NGSI. In September, HCS was selected as one of 20 districts to receive a \$100,000 planning grant, including strategic planning assistance from McKinsey & Company, part of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation support. The original award came with an incentive: if HCS's strategic plan was good enough, it would receive a much larger implementation grant in January 2014.

From October 2013 through January 2014, a team that included Schmuhl, Perry, Instructional Technology Coordinator Brian Blanton, and Impact Academy Principal Steve Thompson met with McKinsey consultants for two days a week (see HCS Strategic Planning Team sidebar).

⁷ Perry's current role is coordinator of personalized learning.

The four core HCS team members were supported by an advisory team which contributed substantively to the strategy.⁸ Gradually, the HCS leaders turned their vision into a concrete strategy, as the NGSi grant required. The McKinsey team brought expertise in change management, which the HCS team believed would be critical to transforming the entire district.

That fall, the HCS team members learned everything they could to strengthen their plan. They read voraciously about personalized learning, competency-based learning, and other educational models and techniques. As Perry recalled: “We spent a ton of time reading everything we could get our hands on. There weren’t very many books on personalized learning at the time, so we scoured Twitter and whatever else we could find.”

More important than reading, however, were the conversations they held with like-minded practitioners. The team spent about half of their \$100,000 NGSi planning grant to travel to San Diego, the Bay Area, and New England to visit schools that had successfully implemented personalized learning techniques. Those inspirational site visits provoked important questions, such as: “Is our vision to ‘personalize’ learning or something else?,” “How can we balance our limited resources with our ambitions?,” “How much should we borrow from what others have done and how much should we forge our own path?,” and “How can we sustain this?” According to Perry, “We traveled all around and got people asking ‘How can we get schools in Henry County to look really different?’”

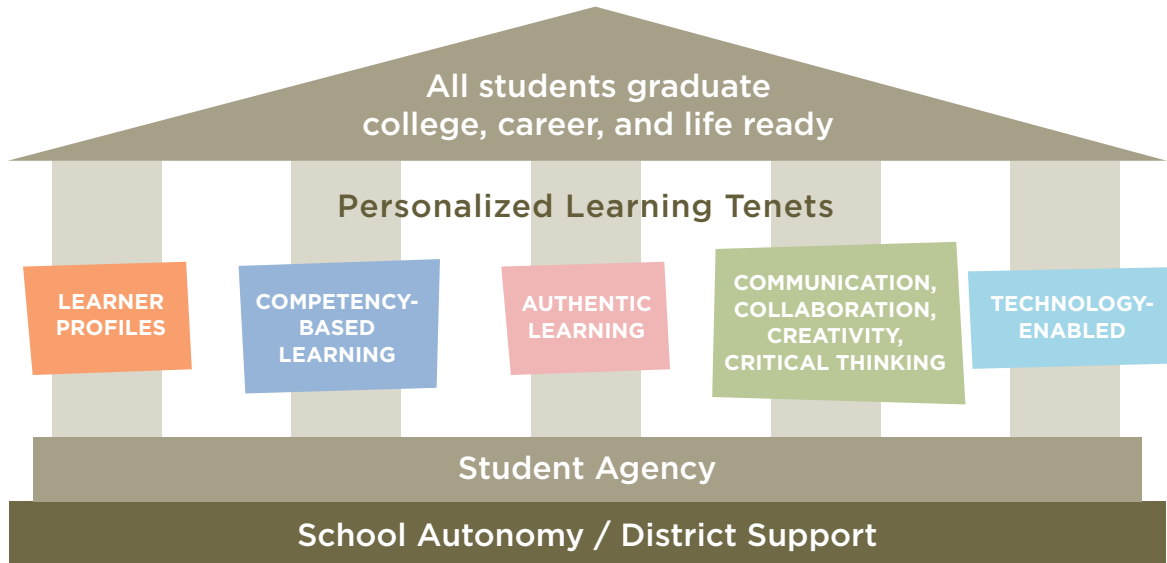
To write the follow-up NGSi application, the team members had to incorporate their work into their already busy jobs, but as Perry recalled, “we believed in what we were doing. We worked a lot of late nights.”

8 The advisory team included district-level staff members Ethan Hildreth (superintendent), Rodney Bowler (assistant superintendent, administrative services), Greg Benton (executive officer, central region), Raymond Bryant (executive officer, north region), Phillip Mellor (executive officer, south region), Shane Persaud (executive director, Communities In Schools), Tony Pickett (assistant to superintendent), Scott Pierce (director of technology services), Rosetta Riddle (coordinator of professional learning), Jessica Stormer (coordinator of administrative services), Valerie Suessmith (assistant superintendent, human resources), Donald Warren (director of learning and leadership) and Debi Keane (director of student support). It also included school-level staff members Carolyn Flemister-Bell (principal, Hampton Middle School), Cynthia McCray (principal, Dutchtown Middle School), Jerry Smith (principal, Luella High School), and Tony Townsend (principal, Locust Grove Middle School).

HCS'S PERSONALIZED LEARNING VISION AND PLAN

HCS's vision contains five pillars, while the implementation plan includes three components.

Those late nights led to the creation of HCS's personalized learning vision—what the district now refers to as the “Parthenon” (see graphic⁹).



LEARNER PROFILES
Learner Profiles reflect students' school performance, strengths, and interests. Students, with their families and HCS staff, chart their unique learning paths through goal setting and reflection.

COMPETENCY-BASED LEARNING
Clearly identified learning targets allow students to demonstrate mastery of competencies using multiple forms of evidence. Time and place are flexible, while learning is constant.

AUTHENTIC LEARNING
Students learn by solving problems through relevant, real-world projects and service learning inside and outside of the classroom, and they present evidence of their learning to authentic audiences such as parents, business leaders, and community members.

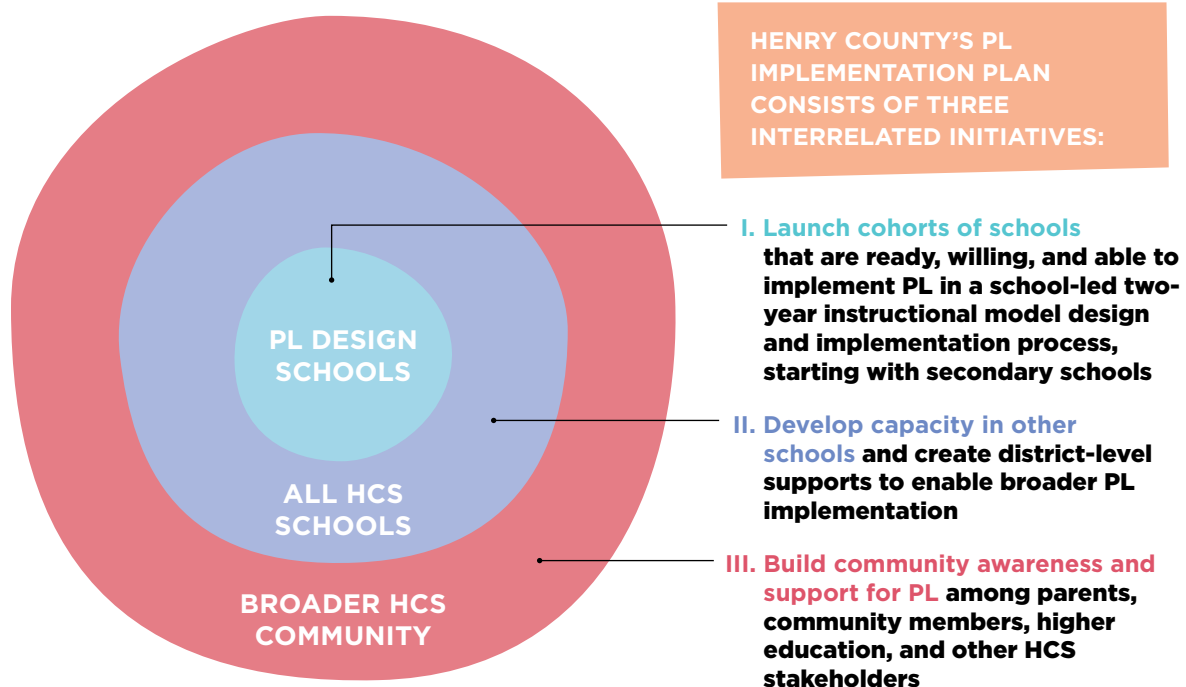
COMMUNICATION, COLLABORATION, CREATIVITY, CRITICAL THINKING
Learning experiences are designed to intentionally teach and hone key overarching skills and dispositions needed for college, career, and life success in the 21st century.

TECHNOLOGY-ENABLED
Students use technology to learn and demonstrate what they know. Technology enables, but does not drive, personalized learning experiences.

⁹ For clarity, we have included HCS's current Parthenon, which has evolved since its conception in 2014. The main change from the original Parthenon is that HCS added the words “student agency,” which reflected a deeply held belief among the HCS team members.

In addition to the Parthenon, HCS created a long-term implementation plan with three core components: 1. Launch cohorts of schools, 2. Develop capacity in other schools for eventual implementation, 3. Create district-level supports and build community awareness and support. (See graphic.) The layered implementation encouraged those that were ready to lead the way, while preparing others to follow.

HCS' PERSONALIZED LEARNING IMPLEMENTATION



After four months of intensive planning, HCS had developed a robust strategic plan for personalized learning. The team felt a strong sense of possibility, but also exhaustion. In January 2014, the team was supposed to fly from Atlanta to Houston for final round judging, but a snow storm in Atlanta stranded hundreds of people on the interstate. As Brian Blanton recalled: "We couldn't get to the airport and we were texting back and forth with our NGSI project manager, updating her on our status. [Perry, Thompson] and I slipped and slid our way to the airport taking back routes to avoid the interstate, and then at the airport we couldn't get a flight. We ended up flying to San Antonio and then driving to Houston." Their tenacity paid off, however, and demonstrated their commitment and teamwork. "When we walked into the judging room, we got an applause because of all we had been through," Blanton recalled.

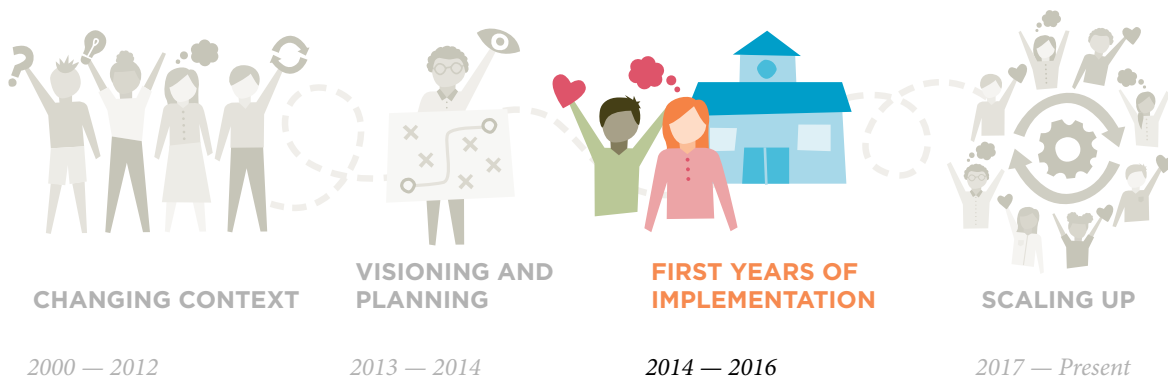
In February, Karen received an email from the Gates Foundation with good news: HCS had been awarded \$363,000 through May 2015 to take the following steps to implement personalizing learning across the district. (Note: the district would eventually receive an additional grant from NGSI of \$3.9 million to launch the first two cohorts of personalized learning schools. See the appendix for details on how HCS funded its personalized learning efforts.)

- Communicate to all school communities about the district’s vision and strategic plan
- Establish an application and selection process and solicit applicants for school redesign
- Establish a school redesign process
- Begin the shift to competency-based learning
- Begin to build the learner profile platform

“NGSI gave us a catalyst and a process that sped us along and connected us to like-minded practitioners,” recalled Perry. “But if we hadn’t received the funding, we would have still made it happen—just perhaps not as well and not as quickly.”



FIRST YEARS OF IMPLEMENTATION (2014–2016)



THE COMMUNICATIONS ROAD SHOW ACROSS ALL 50 SCHOOLS

Winning hearts and minds started with visiting each school.

Communicating HCS’s vision broadly and strategically was critical to winning the hearts and minds of school staff, parents, the board, and the community at large. But while the HCS team ultimately needed to persuade the entire district to adopt personalized learning, their most immediate challenge was to identify schools that would volunteer to be part of the first cohort.

To find those schools, Schmuhl and Perry went on a “road show” from spring 2014 to spring 2015 to visit the faculty and school councils of each of HCS’s 50 schools at least twice. During these visits, Schmuhl and Perry communicated the district’s personalized learning vision (as represented by the Parthenon) and used school-level data such as graduation rate and ACT scores to celebrate successes but also to point out areas for improvement. They posed soul-searching questions: “What is the student experience at your school like? Is there joy in the classroom? Are your students actually ready for today’s workforce? Are you open to a better way?” They then shared the district’s plan for each school to become a personalized learning school by 2020. “It required a tremendous amount of time, energy, and effort, but we knew that the message had to be widespread and consistent from school to school, at the Board of Education, with school councils, and with parents,” recalled Perry.

Given its time constraints and the size of the district, the HCS team had to be selective about whom they reached out to first. “We started with secondary principals because flexible pathway options were already established at Impact Academy and Academy for Advanced Studies [two postsecondary schools],” Perry reported. “Ultimately, secondary schools are more complex and would need more time to change the experience, so starting earlier made sense. We asked them what type of support they needed, and then our job was to match them with the resources we had.”

Importantly, Schmuhl and Perry delivered the critical message that HCS educators would need to adopt a growth mindset. District schools had traditionally had a great amount of autonomy, and the pair challenged principals and teachers to take advantage of that autonomy—to step into the unknown, to innovate, and to learn from their mistakes. (For more detail on how HCS encouraged its educators, see the case study on Stockbridge High School and Lessons Learned chapter.) Starting with the road show, Schmuhl and Perry communicated this message of growth mindset with consistency and vigor. They were also highly credible messengers: both had first-hand experience with certain aspects of personalized learning, and they had the backing of Superintendent Bowler. Lastly, they communicated with a congeniality that allowed principals and teachers to let their guards down and get out of their comfort zone. The PowerPoint slides from the Road Show (see below) reinforced the tenor and message of growth mindset.

Perspective:
This is a transparent, supported, long-term, continuous improvement planning process. Think marathon, not sprint.



Also, this dinosaur is not as big and scary as it might look ☺



**FIRST WHY
THEN THE
TRUST**



Where the magic happens

Your comfort zone

The Board of Education's Role

To date, Henry County Schools' five-person Board of Education has supported personalized learning. Because of the scale of change that HCS was proposing, questions from the community arose about the impact on traditional metrics of achievement and the shifting roles of teachers and students. The board, representing the community's voice, vetted the district's proposal.

According to Schmuhl, "the board helped us be better by asking tough questions. There also needs to be a willingness to be courageous, and the board allowed us to do that." Dr. Pam Nutt, board chair and a product of Henry County Schools herself, recalls that she and her brother had different learning styles as students, but were educated in the same way. "We all did the same thing: sit down, listen, regurgitate. Some kids do well with that, but other kids need to be challenged. So you wonder if there's a better way to teach. We need to change, and I like being the lead dog. Because if you're not, the skyline never changes."

SUMMER INSTITUTE

HCS leaders modeled the type of vulnerability and risk-taking they expected from teachers and principals.

To win hearts and minds, the district's leaders had to acknowledge the real challenges that they would encounter. One tactic for doing so was laughing together.

For example, Superintendent Bowler believed in stressing the point that personalized learning was about students, not technology. So he asked a drama teacher to write a play for senior staff to act out at HCS's Summer Institute, which 700 individuals from school leadership teams attended.¹⁰ Recalling the play with a mixture of embarrassment and pride, HCS staff members remembered that Bowler wore a Superman shirt under an overcoat ("He kind of looked like the guy from the Matrix") and that one student did an interpretive dance about how relationships at school can liberate a student to take risks and pursue their passions.

Doubling down on the potential for embarrassment, HCS leaders handed out light-up glasses to all attendees. As Schmuhl recalled: "We hunted high and low for glasses that had five bars on them, to represent the five tenets of the Parthenon and signal that we were moving forward. All 700 people in the audience were wearing these ridiculous blinking glasses!"

Although they were silly, the play and light-up glasses served an important purpose. "I thought the glasses were too silly and that it was going to be a huge fail, but they made everyone feel all-in," said Perry. "After Summer Institute, there was no doubt that everybody was doing this work, and we were going to be embarrassed doing it. And that was okay, because it showed transparency and risk-taking. These artifacts and seminal moments matter."

¹⁰ Watch a [video](#) of the play.

HCS's SCHOOL REDESIGN PROCESS

The Redesign Philosophy

HCS's school redesign process is rigorous yet decentralized and differentiated.



"A few folks advised us to go find the best model and replicate it, but that would never work—the process itself, not the model, is what's helpful," said SchmuHL.

"The most important process we created was the school redesign. There, the district didn't tell schools what to do, but supported them to do what they wanted to do."

Apart from the Parthenon's five tenets, HCS mandates remarkably few specific practices. District leaders call their approach a "loose-tight" strategy. What's more, HCS *wants* personalized learning to look different in each school, while still ensuring that models advance the conditions of deep learning. The following graphic provides some illustrative examples of the loose-tight approach.

The district also gave greater autonomy and exemptions from district policies to schools that had begun the design process. Those exemptions included:

- Permission not to create traditional Continuous School Improvement Plans (since personalized learning implementation plans served the same purpose).
- Increased staffing flexibility, including the ability to transfer staff who were unwilling or unable to implement personalized learning.
- Exemptions from seat-time requirements (made possible by a "strategic waiver" granted by the State of Georgia¹¹).
- Permission to adopt alternate bell schedules and/or school days.
- Permission to adopt alternate student progress reporting tools and processes (e.g., report cards).

¹¹ HCS has a contract with the State Board of Education whereby the district is granted flexibility from certain state regulations in exchange for accountability in meeting state performance targets. The "Strategic Waivers Contract" is similar in concept and function to a "Charter School Contract." The flexibility provisions of the contract allow for a waiver of certain state board of education rules and state education laws. The district elected to waive 19 such regulations in areas that affect funding, operations, and instruction.

	TIGHT	LOOSE
PLANNING AND ORGANIZATION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Systematic use of continuous improvement with semester action plans and monitoring activities aligned with appropriate needs assessment. • Systematic review of instructional programs (including EIP, SIEP, IF, MTSS) for effectiveness. • Student learning device implementation plan effectiveness. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Structure of feedback data collected, flexibility in evidence collected, goals set, PD provided. • Frequency of monitoring at the discretion of school administration and Executive Officer, no less than two times per year. • Structure of continued supports in-house, coaching days utilized, PD options, expectations for teacher and student use.
EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effective Distributed Leadership Structure in place, with appropriate additional Focus Teams. • Sustained focus on effective instructional practice for exceptional students. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Size of team, focus areas for additional Focus Teams, meeting schedules, agendas, etc. • Delivery models in the school, school based expectations on teacher practices.
EFFECTIVE TEACHERS AND LEADERS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effective planning and use of professional learning days with measures of implementation expectations embedded in CISP. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organization, leadership, and work of the faculty.
EFFECTIVE ASSESSMENT PRACTICE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NWEA MAP administration three times per year. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Administration timelines within windows, practices for utilizing data to drive instructional decisions.
POSITIVE CLIMATE AND COMMUNICATIONS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Systematic and regular use of website, social media, and external communication tools to inform parents and students about academic progress, school events, and emergency communications. • Engage families and communities in success of students through curriculum/conference nights, State of the School communication. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Content, parent communications tools, parent newsletter timing, social media presence. • Means of engagement, community partnerships expectations.
PERSONALIZED LEARNING SCHOOLS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of the Learner Profile for student goal setting and tracking. • Competency based learning training and PD. • Student agency as a predominant aspect of implementation (voice and choice), SRP and CISP alignment. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Model for implementation and monitoring, additional use of learner profile for student conferencing notes and electronic portfolio. • Timing, intensity, and expectations of implementation in classrooms. • Implementation timeline and metrics.

The Redesign Process

Every spring, each of the district's 50 schools is invited to apply to be part of an upcoming cohort (see graphic for a sample timeline). At the heart of each school's redesign process is a School Design Team (SDT) that includes 6 to 12 administrators, teachers, students, and other community members.

The SDT's role is initially to create a personalized learning vision and then to guide the 18-month redesign process. During the application phase, schools' SDTs complete a structured application document and in-person interview process to articulate their vision and commitment to personalized learning. District personnel read the applications, meet the applicant design teams, and select schools according to three selection criteria:

- Capacity to implement (30 percent weight)
- Enthusiasm/support for PL (40 percent weight)
- Plan quality (30 percent weight)



Given the excitement around personalized learning, applying rigorous criteria for acceptance into a cohort provides an important checkpoint (see the appendix for HCS's cohort application and scoring rubric). Not all schools are accepted into an upcoming cohort, but schools that aren't selected receive coaching.

During the design phase, schools receive approximately \$20,000 to support the planning process, including travel to see personalized learning models around the United States, books, consultants who provide professional development, collaborative planning time for design teams, and money for community outreach. Schools participate in a series of design workshops, conventions, and oral presentations of findings, in addition to completing a structured written document in which the schools articulate their vision and plan for personalized learning. District personnel read the documents and listen to presentations, providing many rounds of feedback as the schools iterate.

District personnel provide feedback on the pilot classrooms via walkthroughs and focus group interviews throughout the design phase. Ultimately, school design deliverables include a 30-minute oral presentation and a four-year strategic planning document called a School Readiness Criteria plan, which is evaluated and approved by a district team.

The district provides the following district-level supports, which are paired with school responsibilities.

DISTRICT SUPPORTS FOR THE DESIGN PROCESS	SCHOOL RESPONSIBILITIES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide one district-level project manager to support schools during redesign and implementation of personalized learning (the district has since expanded this to a 3-person team) • Bring school design teams together to learn from each other • Deliver PL-focused professional development • Create common definitions for core PL components (e.g., competency documents) • Provide technical systems to support PL (e.g., learning platforms, learner profile) • Evaluate PL programs and promote what works 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participate in district-coordinated (but school-led) design process to create a PL strategy and implementation plan • Involve the community in the design process • Allocate at least .25 full-time employee to serve as the School Design Team project manager • Ensure that all staff receive PL-related professional development • Collect data on indicators • Open doors to and share materials with other HCS schools

Additionally, school-level project managers and personalized learning coaches have been essential. At the start of the application and design process, each school designates a project manager who is charged with leading and coordinating the redesign work. That includes producing the deliverables to the district, marshaling the human and financial resources associated with redesign, communicating to the school community, and (along with the school principal) managing the change process. Personalized learning coaches are deployed at the end of the redesign process specifically to support teachers in the shift of instructional practice. Because the informal influence of the project manager and coach positions was so important, both were staffed with highly respected teachers who could help shift their peers' hearts and minds.¹²

For the implementation phase, in addition to the PL project manager and coach, schools receive approximately \$175,000 for the launch of personalized learning, including professional development and collaboration time for teachers, professional development, flexible furniture, instructional materials, and travel. Through the redesign process, schools determine their own rollout approach. While some schools begin intensively with particular grade levels or content areas and expand in later years, other schools opt to implement several PL practices school-wide and add more practices each year of the rollout.

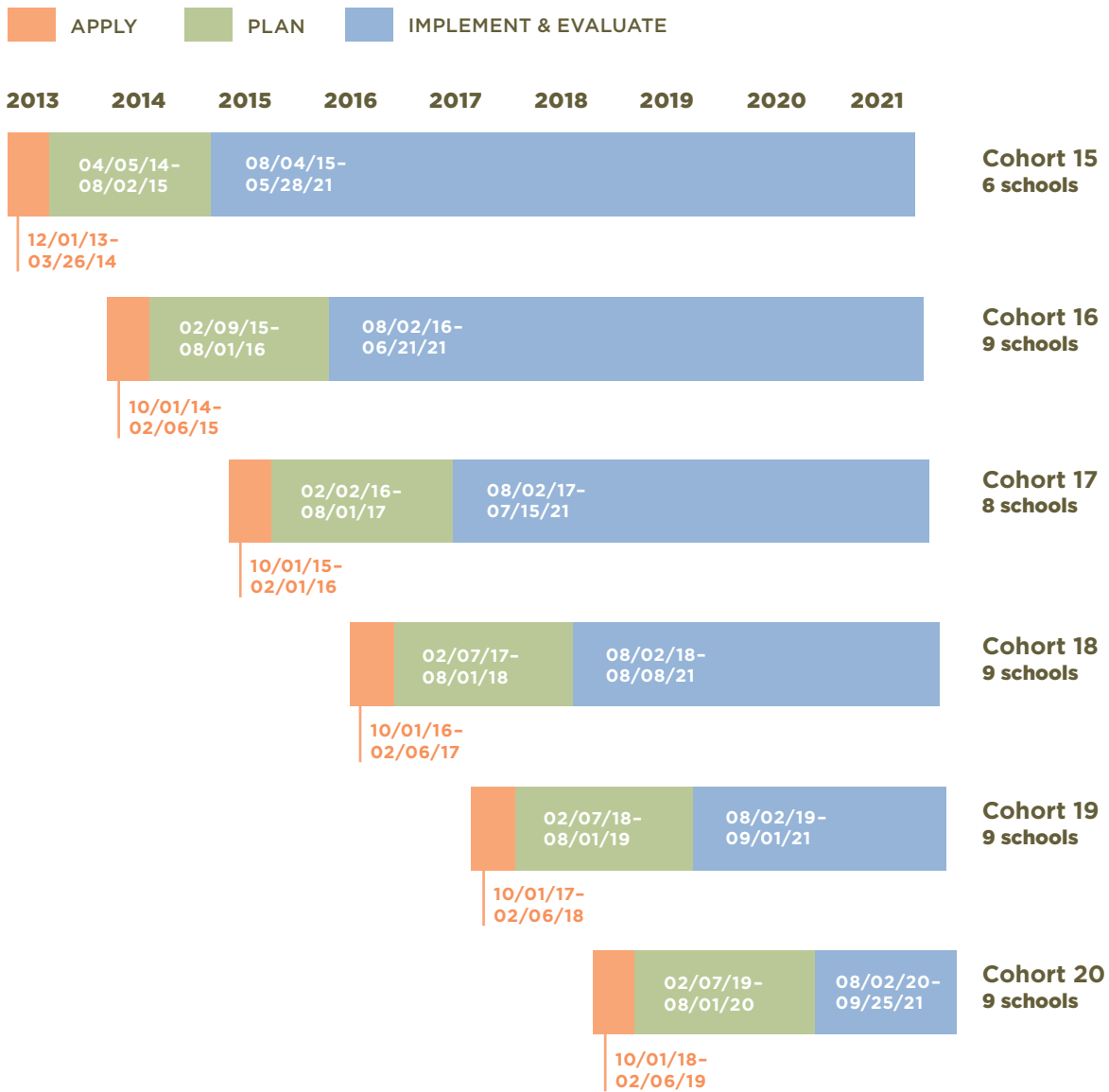
¹² After the NGSI grant expired in 2017, school-based coach positions were phased out and the service model is now a team of district coaches who are assigned to a school for a period of time, then rotate to the next cohort of implementing schools.

LAUNCHING THE FIRST COHORT OF SCHOOLS

The members of the first cohort were celebrated not for their success, but for their courage.

HCS's plan called for each of its 50 schools to undergo an 18-month planning process for school redesign, staged over six cohorts and eight years. (See the graphic of HCS's school redesign timeline.)

HENRY COUNTY SCHOOLS' TIMELINE FOR REDESIGN



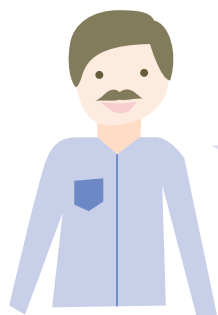
HCS leaders planned the implementation this way for two main reasons. First, as a critical mass of schools implemented personalized learning, the expenses related to the school design process would likely decrease. Second, a multi-year approach would allow early adopters to begin right away, while schools that were not as ready (due to hesitation among staff, a principal who was close to retirement, or a skeptical parent community, for example) would have years to prepare.

In March 2014, eight schools applied to be part of the first cohort (called “Cohort 15”), and six were chosen: two high schools and four middle schools. These schools were called Cohort 15 because they planned to launch elements of their PL work in August of 2015. The first cohort took a leap of faith that the district would provide resources, remove barriers, and offer political cover. During this time, the HCS team modeled and promoted a growth mindset: that going beyond one’s comfort zone is encouraged, and that mistakes are acceptable as long as school leaders and teachers learn along the way.

For example, how the district celebrated the first cohort signaled its preference for bravery over perfection. As Schmuhl recalled: “We stressed that the early adopters were our first, not necessarily our best. We certainly didn’t diminish any of the work that they did, but we also didn’t hold the first cohort up as a model that everyone had to follow. Rather, we highlighted the courageous actions that they took.”

“The hardest thing we can ask a professional to do is something that we don’t have the answer for,” recalled Bowler. “For our teachers to trust the process, we have to treat them as experts in their craft. We trusted our teachers to figure out how to personalize learning, so I thanked every faculty member for being early adopters and told them that they had my support.”

The members of the first cohort received a great deal of support, but they also knew they would encounter false starts, mistakes, and unforeseen challenges. Nonetheless, the train was moving toward HCS’s district-wide personalized learning vision.



“FOR OUR TEACHERS TO TRUST THE PROCESS, WE HAVE TO TREAT THEM AS EXPERTS IN THEIR CRAFT. WE TRUSTED OUR TEACHERS TO FIGURE OUT HOW TO PERSONALIZE LEARNING, SO I THANKED EVERY FACULTY MEMBER FOR BEING EARLY ADOPTERS AND TOLD THEM THAT THEY HAD MY SUPPORT,” SAID BOWLER.

Stockbridge High School's Story

The following story illustrates one school's path through the 18-month school redesign process.

Stockbridge High School (SHS) is a large comprehensive school in Stockbridge, a town of 25,637 people. Ten minutes off of Highway 75, the school has large hallways and a new, polished gym, and expansive athletic fields surround the large campus. Ten years ago, the school was one of the top academically performing schools in Henry County. Since then, academic performance had declined and the school community recognized the need for change.

Because the school struggled with low student engagement, Principal Eric Watson was intrigued by the prospect of student "voice and choice" in personalized learning.

Watson has the demeanor of an athletic coach, which he once was: strong, encouraging, and not one to make excuses. He also developed a reputation for experimenting in the classroom and had recently launched a STEM program.

In spite of that reputation, Watson didn't volunteer to be part of the first cohort. "I'm not usually the first one to jump, so I didn't raise my hand to be part of the first cohort," he explained. "But I started doing research on personalized learning and became very interested in how students are motivated when they direct their own learning."

Watson also knew that many staff members were skeptical of personalized learning. To be part of a PL cohort, Watson would first have to form a School Design Team to create a plan for SHS and eventually demonstrate clear commitment from the entire faculty. One SHS science teacher noted: "A lot of teachers were confused at first. They thought this was just another thing we'd need to do on top of everything else. A lot of times the district will push an initiative, and not stick with it."

Despite those reservations, Watson felt strongly that personalized learning was the right thing to do. He discovered that 96 percent of his faculty members wanted to go forward with the plan, so SHS decided to apply to be part of the second cohort. The school's initial 20-person School Design Committee (SDC) included a few too many naysayers, so Watson trimmed the group to ten faculty members whom he counted on to be critical, constructive, and thoughtful. The team had only the month of December 2015 to create the application.

One of the first challenges was convincing faculty members at SHS that change really was possible. "We had never done this before," said Watson. "We were not used to the district office saying 'do what you want to do,' especially when teachers tend to expect to be told what to do. We all read *Our Iceberg is Melting*, which helped us understand that change brings challenges and that people naturally want to stick with the traditional way of doing things. We knew people would complain about too much change."

The principles of personalized learning affected all aspects of the application process. "Aaryn Schmuhl wanted us to think innovatively and not traditionally, and to dream big," Watson recalled. "That was a turning point, and made us think it might be ok. [Schmuhl] said that it's our school and that we should personalize it for us, so that's what we did." Leslie Sheffield, a 9th grade English teacher at SHS,

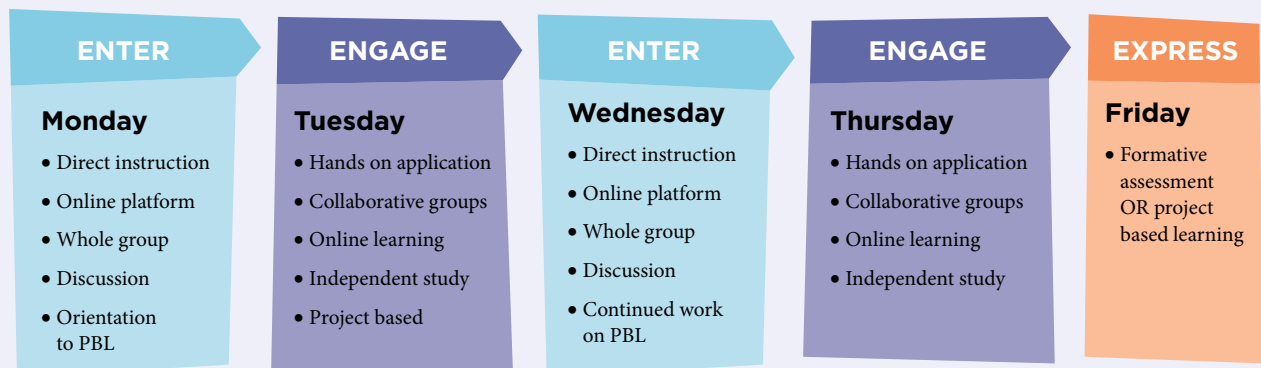
recalled: “Instead of being told what to do, we’ve had chances to try things. I’ve been in education for 10 years and I’ve never had that kind of support and the freedom to make mistakes.”

Setting the student engagement as the top priority, the team identified four options for SHS’s personalized learning model. Watson did his best to keep the group happy by providing lunch and paying for substitutes, but they put in long nights and the work was grueling. “We really worked our butts off to get better,” said Watson.

District leaders held SHS’s application to a very high standard. “The application was daunting, and it took us a while to figure out what we wanted to do,” recalled Watson. “This was the most scrutinized process I’ve gone through in my 29 years in education. But the amount of rigor felt good. We were essentially creating a business model, which is appropriate for such a big change.” Eventually, the work paid off. “The first time we presented to Karen Perry, it went poorly and we received some tough, but positive, feedback. The next time we presented, it went much better. The third time went really well, and after the last time they asked us to present to others and be an example.” In January 2016, SHS received approval to be part of Cohort 16. For the remainder of the 2015–16 school year, the SDC worked through the specifics of how to accomplish its PL vision.

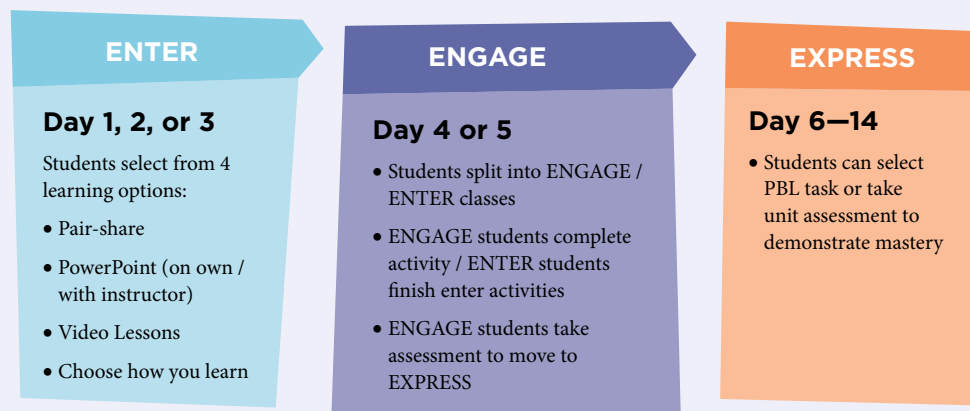
SHS Long Term Model

One Teacher Model



Two Teacher Model

Students are allowed to move through the process at their own pace.



Ultimately, SHS created its own “3E” model called Enter, Engage, Express, which brought together a number of best practices. The **Enter** phase represented the upfront knowledge that students needed to engage in a lesson. Teachers would present that information in a traditional manner, but only for the first 10 to 20 minutes of a lesson. The next phase would allow students to **Engage** in more hands-on lessons, working on projects in small groups or using computer technology. After students gained a deeper understanding of the material by engaging with it more closely, they could **Express** their mastery of the concepts in many ways. The motivation for this approach was simple. As Watson put it: “I didn’t know until I was an adult that I am better at presenting and speaking. So we wanted to give students who don’t take tests well an opportunity to express how they learn material.”

SHS planned to implement these changes in 9th and 10th grades during the first year, and then spread them to 11th and 12th grade the following year. Jeff Tsang, founder of Building Blocks Education, who had worked with district schools since the first cohort, helped SHS to implement changes.

Planning and implementation at SHS has brought challenges. Three obstacles stood out in particular: limited planning time during the summer before SHS’s pilot year; limited WiFi bandwidth and lack of personal devices, which meant students had to share their devices with classmates; and the difficulty of helping students to think on their own. According to Meagan Parks, SHS’s PL project manager, “one of the biggest challenges was getting the students to take the ownership that we needed within the pilot. It was very difficult implementing flexible pacing because the students were so used to having deadlines. Also, giving them the confidence to work through assignments with other students was difficult because they only trusted the teacher for the correct answers.”

On the positive side, SHS faculty cited a number of success factors, including the strategic planning assistance from Jeff Tsang and Karen Perry, the willingness of the Design Committee and pilot teachers to step into the unknown (and spend extra time on PL), tweaks made during the school year (“we’re tweaking all the time”), resources provided by HCS (specifically the PL Coach and Project Manager), and collaboration among teachers.

For example, SHS made tweaks to accommodate flexible pacing. “Once we realized students were not progressing with the flexible pacing, we added in hard and soft deadlines for the students in order for them to be on track with their assignments,” said Parks. “We also implemented self-assessment within the course to encourage investment in the content and self-reflection. Students were able to see where they went wrong in their lesson activities.”

Although SHS is still learning and adjusting, early signs are positive. According to Parks, “students were more engaged in truly learning and mastering course material. Students also had more of a voice in their learning, which led to more collaboration between the teachers and the students. Parents were also more involved in the process of their child’s learning due to the blended learning platform we were using.”



RE-TOOLING DISTRICT-LEVEL SYSTEMS TO SUPPORT PERSONALIZED LEARNING

Systems such as professional learning needed to change.

Like Stockbridge High School, the 15 schools in the first two cohorts benefitted from intensive support from Perry and Schmuhl, dedicated personalized learning coaches and project managers, and outside experts. Much of that support was made possible through the NGSF grant, which would end in 2017. Since district leaders aimed to have all fifty schools on their way to personalized learning by 2020, they needed to change internal processes to support PL in a financially sustainable way.

In many areas, district leaders sought to remove barriers. “Instead of pushing too hard and fast at the central office level, we tried to make sure district folks didn’t create unnecessary barriers,” said Schmuhl. “We didn’t know all the things we needed to do to support personalized learning, but we knew all the things we needed to *stop* doing that hindered it.” (See page 26 for examples.)

In addition to removing barriers, HCS re-tooled critical systems, such as financial services, leadership development, and professional learning. “Removing barriers is necessary but not sufficient for creating innovative practice,” Schmuhl said.

Beginning in the spring of 2014, the district began building out those systems, making them available not only to current cohorts, but to all schools. That strategy helped all schools become familiar with PL before formally entering the redesign process. The main systems, which the district continues to build out, include the following.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

- School redesign process
- Definition of “competencies” that define student mastery
 - Course-specific (e.g., learning objectives)
 - Overarching 21st century skills
- Learner Profile design
- Personal Learning Plan design
- Professional development and PL credentialing
- Curated digital PL resource repository

LEADERSHIP SUPPORTS

- Intensive teacher-leader development through project manager and PL coach
- Redesign of leadership development program to better support change leaders
- Specific focus on change management strategies and supports
- Refined continuous improvement process for schools to give and receive feedback on their PL work

TECHNOLOGY

- Network infrastructure (e.g., Internet access, Wi-Fi)
- Hardware (e.g., student computing devices)
- Software (e.g., Learning Management System, Student Information System, Student progress “dashboard”)
- Centralized technical support staff

The biggest shift across all of these systems was to establish the central office as a service provider, rather than a purely directive body. “We believed that the district’s job was not to tell schools what they should do, but to support them to do what they needed to do—that’s a huge change for districts,” Schmuhl said.

HCS continues to build out key systems, including the school redesign process, described earlier in this report. Other systems include the following.

- **Competency-Based Learning Infrastructure.**^{13,14} Beginning in 2014, HCS worked with Great Schools Partnership (GSP) to create an infrastructure that would allow students to demonstrate proficiency before moving on. The work has been challenging, and HCS is in the middle stages of aligning and mapping standards. “Competency-based learning is the glue of our personalized learning work,” said Perry. “Flexible learning pathways and multiple demonstrations of mastery are key elements of student agency. Identifying the four to six most essential and enduring aspects of each content area and establishing common scoring criteria that require equitably high learning expectations for students are integral to ensuring each student’s success in HCS. We are in the midst of that difficult but essential work now, and we expect significant shifts in the student experience when the process is completed.” The first two cohorts didn’t have the benefit of completed competency maps, but subsequent cohorts will, in part because of district-based content coordinators who are gaining experience coaching on competencies.
- **Learner Profiles.** Although learner profile systems can be purchased off the shelf, HCS elected to create its own system with a contractor, SRG Technologies. This has allowed HCS to customize the system to its needs, but it has also delayed the profiles’ rollout: the learner profile soft-launched in 2015–16 and rolled out to all 50 schools in 2016–17. At HCS, learner profiles include the student’s demographic data, academic considerations (e.g., interests, progress toward competencies, portfolio of work), and aspirational information (e.g., personal goals, career goals). The Learner Profile is a space for students to house and curate evidence of their goal setting, mastery of competencies, and actions like student-led conferencing. HCS designed it to be more than a space to articulate “about me,” but more specifically as a student-curated story of their learning over time.
- **Professional Learning.** Prior to 2013, HCS followed a traditional approach to teaching and learning. During the district’s period of rapid growth, the central office’s capacities were strained and professional learning had been deprioritized. Given this environment and the new focus on personalized learning, district leaders had to revise their approach to professional learning.¹⁵ First, HCS helps its school leaders manage change, partly through the school redesign process and partly through a focus on change leadership. Second, fostering teacher agency has been a key element for HCS. Professional learning in the district is evolving away from whole group, stand and deliver, face-to-face, one-time events, and toward an on-demand system of supports. To that end, the HCS Professional Learning team is building micro credentials, which, when paired with coaching models and professional learning communities of practice

13 For an analysis of HCS’s competency infrastructure, see this [blog](#) from CompetencyWorks (2016).

14 This [site](#) includes HCS’s graduation competencies, performance indicators, and scoring criteria.

15 HCS’s [leadership development model](#) (i.e., the GOLD Academy), including a profile of a high-performing principal from Henry County Schools.

Pay It Forward

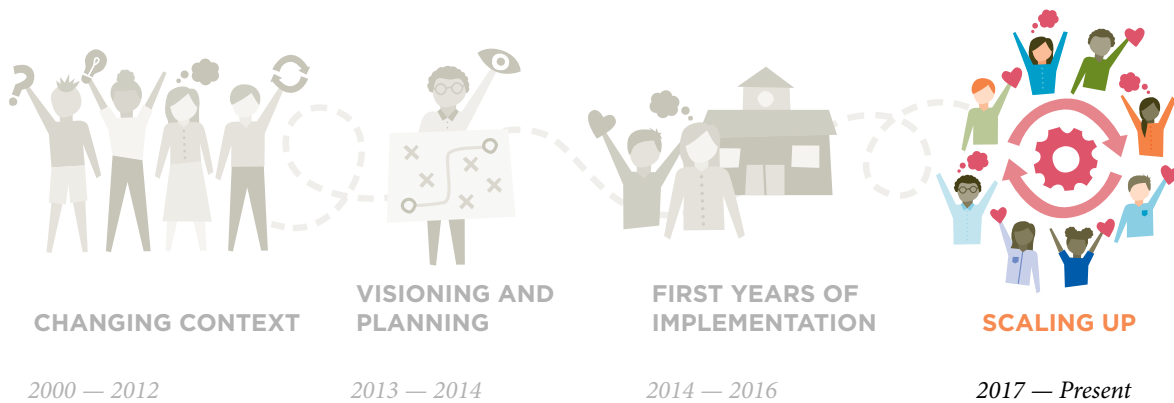
Despite reimagining its professional learning, the district did not have sufficient resources to simultaneously re-train every teacher in the district. HCS therefore relies heavily on peer learning. For example, each school that goes through the redesign process is required to open its doors to anyone in the district so that others can learn from successes and mistakes. HCS leaders also expect schools to welcome visitors from outside the district. Informally known as the “Pay It Forward” practice, this commitment to peer learning is critical to the district’s ability to overcome its limited capacity. This approach not only builds capacity among visitors, but also creates accountability, since each school has to tell its story effectively. As Perry noted: “We benefited greatly from other practitioners who shared their stories with us. As time went on, we realized we didn’t always have to fly to California and New York to see innovation; we had innovation happening in our backyard that we could learn from and share with others.”

models, give teachers the kind of agency that HCS wants to establish for students. Lastly, HCS’s teacher PD includes training on the philosophy and mindsets behind personalized learning (e.g., that students can be successful through having agency), in addition to instructional practices.

- **Continuous Improvement.** HCS has embedded a strong culture and process for continuous improvement. “Personalized learning is a long-term vision, and it requires cycles of iteration,” said Perry. “The district is constantly encouraging, measuring, providing feedback to schools, bringing thought leaders from outside, and celebrating big and small attempts at change.” Schmuhl noted: “Every district makes improvement plans. But we realized a few years ago that traditional improvement plans only included blunt measures that said we were doing well or poorly. They did not include the specific things that we had direct control over. Now, we measure things we actually control.” HCS actively tracks a range of student performance indicators as well as student, family, and staff perceptions. In a sign of the importance of meaningful data as part of continuous improvement, HCS engages third parties to assist with data tracking and analysis. (See the Outcomes and Conclusion section.)

SCALING UP (2017–PRESENT)

Going forward, HCS will continue to prioritize winning hearts and minds while tackling the entrenched systems that must be changed to support personalized learning.



During the 2017–2018 school year, the fourth cohort of nine schools will begin its planning process, and eight schools will implement personalized learning for the first time. In addition, 15 schools will have been implementing personalized learning for at least one year. The sense of momentum in the district is palpable. As Perry noted: “It’s really amazing. In the applications for upcoming cohorts, teachers and administrators were passionately saying ‘We know we can do more for kids. This is hard work, but it’s the right work.’ When we began, we had no idea we’d have this kind of momentum. It’s a testament to the real groundswell of support from the schools that are already doing it.”

Over the past few years, HCS leaders have learned a lot about what works to scale personalized learning across the district. As they prepare for the final two cohorts and beyond, they will continue to use strategies that have proven essential (e.g., winning hearts and minds) while building out systems that will support the work at scale. HCS’s current priorities include the following:

- **Reinforce messages when commitment wavers.** Even though personalized learning has taken root in many schools, some anxiety persists about the dramatic changes taking place. According to Perry, “Most people today don’t need to be convinced that personalized learning is right, but they need the courage to tackle it.”
- **Begin the remaining two cohorts.** As of December 2017, Cohort 19 had just begun the redesign process, and only nine schools had yet to get started. Their reasons for waiting are mixed: some have excellent standardized test scores and don’t feel the urgency to change, some principals are close to retirement and don’t want to initiate a plan they won’t see to completion, and some schools have decided to work on foundational instructional pieces before they make the transition to personalized learning. “We are committed to continuing the school redesign process for all 50 of our schools and the supports and experience will be just as good as, if not better than, the prior cohorts,” said Schmuhl.

Courageous Leadership To Embolden Teachers

In late 2016, the district invited Will Richardson, who speaks around the country about reimagining the school experience, to address district leaders.¹⁶ According to Perry: “It helps to have someone from the outside to encourage us and say ‘You guys are doing the right work—it’s challenging, and you need to be bold.’ We wanted Will to push our team—hard.”

After Richardson’s speech, some audience members expressed concerns about meeting test score benchmarks. In a watershed moment for many district leaders, Superintendent Bowler told the assembled leaders, “The only person who needs to worry about being fired for not meeting test score benchmarks is me.” In that moment, Bowler inspired the more than 100 district leaders to have the courage to push toward their vision. He further reiterated that personalized learning is the work of Henry County Schools and every leader in the district was expected to engage.

- **Continue to change systems that will redefine student success: competency, assessment, and reporting.** “We won’t fundamentally change students’ learning experiences until we fully build out and implement competencies and change our assessment and reporting practices,” Schmuhl reported. HCS has established a task force to provide recommendations for the next chapters of the competency work, including designing competency-based report cards and transcripts, establishing Habits of Work and 4 Cs criteria (critical thinking, communication, collaboration, creativity), grading practice guidelines, and shifting policy to enable promotion based on demonstrated mastery of competencies.” Perhaps the most difficult task will be assuring the community’s commitment to a vision of student achievement that extends beyond test scores. As Schmuhl noted: “We have to redefine school success in broader terms, but that’s a tough argument to take to the community. Even if parents and teachers believe that test scores are only one part of the equation, that’s the game that’s been set up for us in the last two decades.”
- **Implement a student learning device initiative (four years after beginning personalized learning).** In 2013, the district’s student-to-device ratio ranged between 3:1 and 4:1, and more than 50 percent of devices were overdue for replacement. Instead of pursuing a strategy that prioritized computer technology, HCS put its focus on the school redesign process and on providing coaches and project managers for each school. By 2016, the HCS team believed that teachers and students had gained sufficient understanding of personalized learning—and particularly that it did not mean looking to computer technology for easy answers to begin rolling out devices to all 42,000 students. In March 2016, local voters approved the continuation of a Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax for Education, which provided an important source of funds. The device rollout took place over two months in the fall of 2017. All students received devices: K–2 students received iPads, and 3–12 students received Chromebooks. In the years leading up to the device rollout, HCS worked to shore up the network infrastructure to ensure

¹⁶ See one of Will Richardson’s TED Talks, “[The Surprising Truth about Learning in Schools.](#)”

that it could handle the new load. Instructionally, schools had been building their vision for integrating technology not as a way for students to consume content, but rather to collaborate and connect their learning with others outside of the school walls, to create new content, and to demonstrate mastery of learning.

- **Keep the main thing the main thing.** The HCS team understands that they are in a critical moment when it comes to sustaining progress. First, not everyone in the district is fully committed to personalized learning, so district leaders cannot relax their focus on winning hearts and minds. Second, the NGSI grant has ended, so HCS must focus on essential supports. “We are still in the middle of this work, and there is much left to be done,” said Perry. “This is a critical juncture in any change process—it’s not new and shiny anymore, and yet we aren’t finished, either.” For Schmuhl, sustaining the work means keeping a tight focus on the most essential issues. “There are a lot of good things that we could be doing, but they detract from the core work,” he said. “If an idea doesn’t connect to our Parthenon, that doesn’t mean it’s not good. It just means that it doesn’t fit into what we’re doing. It’s hard to say no to things that are good for kids, but if we try to do everything, then we’re not focused on anything.”
- **Manage a superintendent transition.** In 2017, Rodney Bowler announced his retirement. In November 2017, HCS announced Dr. Mary Elizabeth Davis, formerly chief academic officer for neighboring Cobb County Public Schools, as the new superintendent. Since 2013, the district has viewed personalized learning as its main improvement strategy. As in any leadership transition, Davis and existing staff will need to align their priorities going forward. Davis is enthusiastic about joining the HCS team. As she said: “One of the key attractions for me to Henry County Schools was the bold work underway in transforming the district utilizing the personalized learning approach. There is a solid foundation of teachers, administrators, and community members in place to sustain this movement and further enhance this county’s reputation as a model district for this courageous work. In the end, it is all about positive student outcomes, and our students stand to benefit greatly when they are active participants in how they learn.”

Outcomes and Learning

To date, HCS's student outcomes are generally positive. For example, on the College and Career Ready Performance Index, a comprehensive accountability measure in the state of Georgia, schools in cohorts 15 and 16 improved from 2015 to 2017, while non-cohort schools' scores held steady during the same period.¹⁷ Additionally, personalized learning schools have reported higher levels of student engagement and fewer discipline incidents. However, outcomes are also mixed in some areas. For example, while elementary and middle schools generally show positive outcomes, high schools' state test scores vary from school to school.

It is likely too early to draw definitive conclusions from HCS's personalized learning work. To ensure that positive trends continue and that implementation takes place in all its schools, HCS invests significant time and resources into tracking not only test scores, but other indicators that signify progress toward HCS's mission to support success for each student. According to Perry, "traditional metrics of school success are necessary but not wholly sufficient to determine the effectiveness of PL efforts."

Making sense of the data is complex and time-consuming, and HCS has engaged Georgia State University to assist in this process. Please see the appendix for a list of data that HCS collects to refine its personalized learning practices.

¹⁷ The College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI) is a comprehensive school improvement, accountability, and communication platform for all educational stakeholders that will promote college and career readiness for all Georgia public school students. CCRPI is Georgia's accountability system that meets state and federal accountability requirements. CCRPI incorporates items such as student achievement, student progress, and achievement gap measures.

CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

CHALLENGES

HCS team members are remarkably open about their challenges—an illustration of their growth mindset, humility, and drive to improve. Below are a few of the district's main challenges in their personalized learning journey.

FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

HCS has been (and continues to be) a very lean organization. HCS became even leaner after the Great Recession. In 2013, HCS's central office spent only \$173 per student in administrative costs—far less than the state average of \$473.¹⁸ Further, in 2013 Georgia ranked 33rd in the nation in public school revenue per student, at \$10,748, and the district's per-pupil spending looked unlikely to increase, given a state cap on local millage rates. While the NGSI grants (a total of \$4.4 million over four years; see appendix for details on HCS's grant awards) provided an important catalyst, they ended in 2017. In a district with a total annual budget of \$380 million, these grant dollars were helpful but not game-changing.

Since the first cohort formed, HCS has evaluated the support it offers to determine what is critical and what is not. The most critical support comes from coaches and project managers at the school level; those positions will continue to be funded after 2017. To make room for coaching and other expenses, however, the district cut back in other areas. "These are hard discussions to have," Schmuhl said. For example, since 2013 the district has reduced spending on central office curriculum and instruction. District leaders also reduced textbook purchases; since the recession, it has only purchased textbooks for Advanced Placement classes. According to Schmuhl, "Not only is that a huge cost savings, but it also forced teachers to be more creative."

RIGOR OF INSTRUCTION

Although HCS has a history of solid academic performance, instructional expectations varied considerably from school to school and from classroom to classroom. Prior to the personalized learning work, data indicated a need to increase academic expectations for all students. The transparency inherent in the PL school redesign process shined a bright light on instructional practices and the need to examine how challenging students' work was, especially since HCS performed at or below national averages on the SAT and ACT tests as well as state assessments. The shift to competencies, with a specific focus on rigor, directly responded to this need. Schools undergoing a redesign generally focus on the backwards design of learning experiences, deep authentic learning, high quality assessment practices, feedback loops, and the use of data to drive instructional decision making.

INCONSISTENT EXPECTATIONS FOR STUDENT OWNERSHIP OF THEIR LEARNING

Related to rigor of instruction, perhaps HCS's biggest challenge has been adults' expectations for students. At the core of HCS's personalized learning strategy is a belief that students can make

¹⁸ HCS's central office currently spends \$193 per student in administrative costs.

decisions for themselves regarding what, how, and when they learn best, and that building such agency will prepare students for life after high school. Success with such a model, however, requires that teachers actually give more agency to students.

“We have amazing teachers in the district,” Perry said. “But we also have some teachers who think that the special education students are doing the best they can, or that because a student comes from a particular part of the county, our expectations should be tempered.” At HCS, challenging deeply held beliefs about student potential requires sustained effort over time. The district has dedicated significant resources to advancing educators’ understanding of the importance of developing students’ mindsets and the skills that undergird agency.

DOING SOMETHING THAT ADMINISTRATORS, PRINCIPALS, AND TEACHERS HAVE NEVER DONE BEFORE

Asking seasoned professionals to go beyond their comfort zones is difficult, especially in a profession like K–12 education, where so many systems are designed to encourage compliance. While adopting a mindset of improvement is difficult in struggling schools, it can be even more difficult to achieve in schools that, at least on the surface, post satisfactory results. “We’ve always done it this way” is a common refrain in these contexts.

STAFF CONTINUITY IN SCHOOLS

Traditionally, HCS schools have enjoyed tremendous autonomy. As such, school cultures have been driven in large part due to the principal’s leadership.

With schools’ nascent personalized learning practices, a lot depends on the knowledge and leadership of the principal, coach, and project manager. Turnover in any of these positions can cause a school to take a step backward. However, turnover is a reality in K–12 education and must be accounted for. One way that HCS does this is by deploying an inclusive school redesign process that involves school administrators, teachers, and families. In doing so, schools increase the number of people who have their fingerprints on the school’s plan and thereby lessen the impact of turnover at key positions. Additionally, HCS has specifically attended to building their internal talent pipeline, including administrators and teacher leaders. Leadership development through the district’s G.O.L.D. Academy, a specific focus on personalized learning in onboarding, and intensive recruitment of teachers are also mitigating strategies.

LESSONS LEARNED

HCS’s journey is primarily a story of thoughtful and effective change management. While not all of the lessons below will be appropriate for other districts, they are worth consideration.

SPEND CONSIDERABLE TIME “WINNING THE HEARTS AND MINDS” OF STAKEHOLDERS

HCS’s effort to win hearts and minds has been the most important part of the journey, and it continues to be the most challenging. The district’s efforts have been thoughtful, vigorous, and authentic. Schmuhl and Perry have actively involved parents and community members and have developed a strong “ground game,” visiting and revisiting every school. Importantly, their campaign for hearts and minds has been successful because of the distinctive humility, positivity, and sometimes levity the team used. Some of their tactics include the following.

Start with “why”

When addressing stakeholders, HCS leaders first explained why the district was adopting personalized learning. In addition, district leaders relied on students themselves to tell the “why” story. According to one teacher, “It helps when kids can articulate why they’re doing what they’re doing. Kids can go home and explain personalized learning to their parents, and then parents have fewer questions for the school.”

Do what you say you’ll do

School leaders and teachers appreciate the district’s commitment to follow through on promises and offer support. “Even though we have autonomy, we get a lot of support from the district,” said Jessalyn Askew, principal at Bethlehem Elementary School. “That support is huge, and it’s not just lip service. Administrators always asks us what else we need, and then they actually follow through.” As Brian Blanton affirmed, “Trust happens when you say something and you do it.”

Show vulnerability

Change can be stressful, and HCS leaders take every opportunity to acknowledge that everyone—from administrators to teachers to students—are on the journey together. Superintendent Bowler’s efforts to defuse growing anxiety among his staff by play-acting a personalized learning scenario showed his willingness to make himself vulnerable and create a sense of unity. As Perry recalled, “It was a non-threatening, funny, entertaining way to get the leadership teams engaged in the conversation.”

Communicate the vision to families

Tony Townsend, principal at Locust Grove Middle School, was an early adopter of personalized learning in the district. Helping to lead the way, he inevitably made mistakes that others would learn from. “We were the first ones to stick our neck out and made the mistake of not communicating our five-year plan to parents,” Townsend recalled. “Our school started with a blended model, so the parents began to associate personalized learning with computer technology. In other words, we had a branding problem from the outset, and that set us back.”

Carla Montgomery, principal at Luella Elementary School, was one of several leaders who learned from Townsend’s setbacks. “We learned that relationships with the community were very important when you are doing something new like personalized learning,” Montgomery said. “We focused on those relationships by educating parents and involving them in the development of our school’s plan.”

To ensure that parents remain involved, the HCS team coaches schools on ways to communicate with parents and requires schools’ PL design teams to include parents and students.

Don’t just talk about personalized learning; show how it works

“Showing” happens on multiple levels at HCS. First, the district used a good portion of its \$100,000 planning grant to fly teachers and principals to successful PL schools around the country. Seeing PL in action helped those leaders believe that high-quality PL was attainable for them as well.

Showing is also vital for parents. As Jessalyn Askew, principal at Bethlehem Elementary School, noted: “In our student-led conferences, students guide their parents through their goals and portfolios. It makes a huge difference when the parents are part of the conversation and can hear their child’s excitement.” In fact, some HCS principals have invited parents to participate in personalized learning experiences.

Lastly, showing happens at the Board of Education. According to Superintendent Bowler, “At every board study session, staff, students, and parents from one school explain what has changed as a result of personalized learning. It’s important for the board to witness those presentations, and they have been a huge part of our success. Recently, a student at the Academy for Advanced Studies explained that he used to earn Bs and Cs and didn’t feel as smart as his sister. But once he transferred to the Academy, he started knocking the socks off his work. That was a huge ‘a-ha’ moment for the Board.”

COMMUNICATE THAT THE DISTRICT IS GOING “ALL IN” FROM THE BEGINNING, INSTEAD OF TAKING A “WAIT AND SEE” APPROACH

Starting in 2013, when Schmuhl and Perry visited all 50 schools to share the district’s personalized learning plan, HCS leaders made personalized learning the defining feature of district-wide teaching and learning. According to Perry, “What made our plan different was that we said we were going to change the traditional school experience for every kid in every building.”

There are many good reasons to take a “wait and see” approach. The evidence base for personalized learning is promising but early stage. In addition, many families are skeptical (and even fearful) of computer technology in the classroom. Finally, creating a pilot program is simply easier and less risky than staking out a firm commitment to personalized learning.

So why did the HCS staff and the board go “all in” on personalized learning? Put simply, their years of experience convinced them that it was morally and strategically the right course of action. Just as important, they felt a real sense of urgency as they became convinced that traditional teaching and learning methods were not preparing students to succeed in the world.

At HCS, going “all in” means communicating the personalized learning vision broadly, consistently, and firmly. It means striving for across-the-board commitment to the philosophy, instead of specific practices. Lastly, it means embedding PL-supportive practices throughout the district (e.g., professional development, facilities).

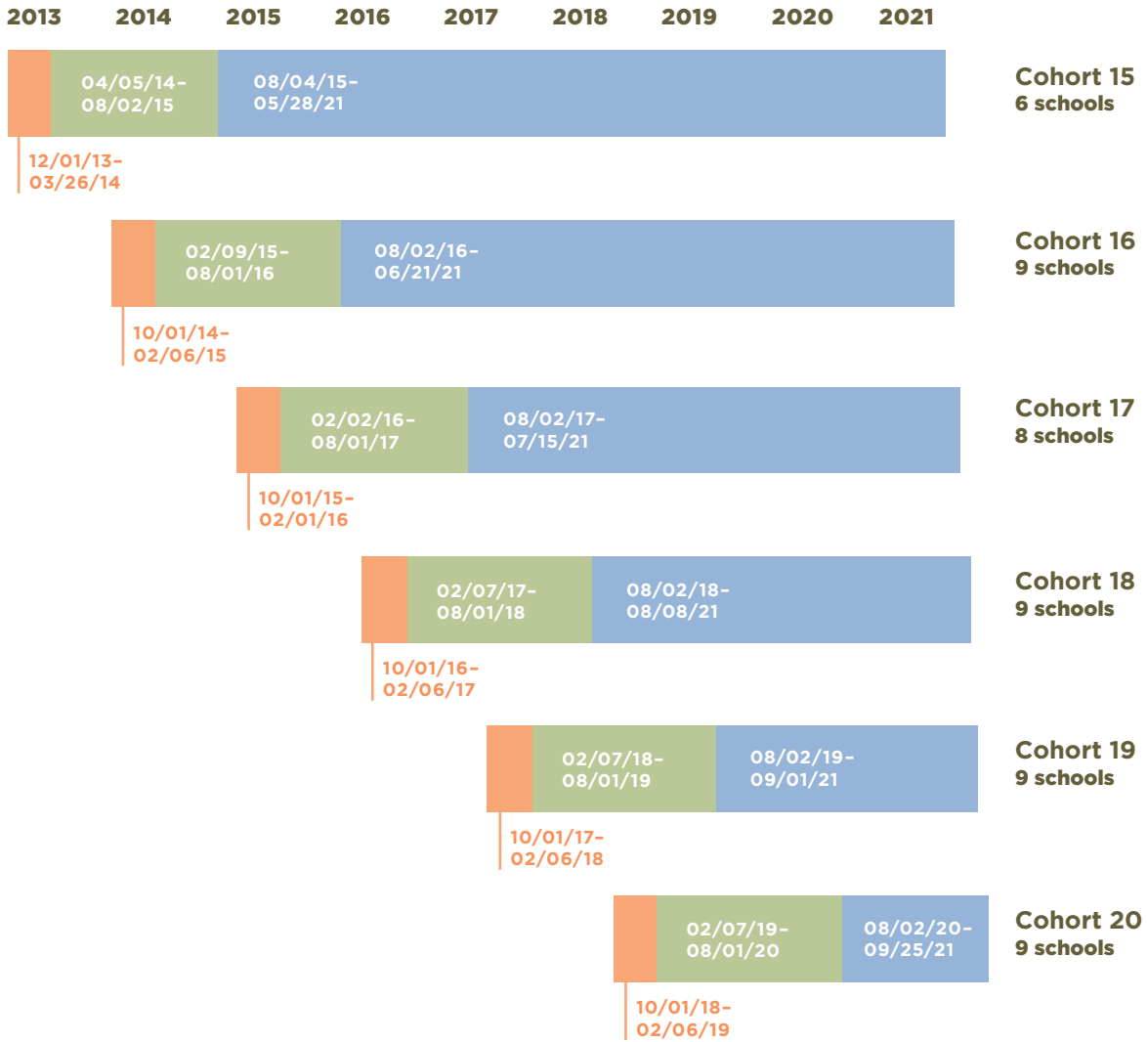
“This is working because personalized learning is the district vision and not something on the side,” said Perry.

IMPLEMENT A PHASED ROLLOUT OVER MANY YEARS, ENCOURAGING EARLY ADOPTERS WHILE GIVING SPACE TO THOSE WHO NEED MORE TIME

HCS’s implementation plan is unique because of its ambition (50 schools over eight years), its consistency (roughly the same number of schools in each cohort), and its rigor (each school undertakes the same design process). The most important lesson, however, is that the timeline provides options and flexibility. It allows for early adopters who want to be part of the first cohorts while making space for those who are more cautious or need time to prepare. Yet by setting a fixed date by which each school must initiate the process (2020), the plan sets clear expectations that all schools will eventually transition.

According to Perry: “Taking the time to let everyone opt in when they’re ready helps ensure commitment to the work. We don’t want people to just comply. We really need people to be committed, and that’s a big difference.” Schmuhl continued: “The cohort model has also created a sense of momentum because we have a new cohort and a growing sense of excitement every year.”

APPLY
 PLAN
 IMPLEMENT & EVALUATE



ENCOURAGE SCHOOLS TO ADAPT PERSONALIZED LEARNING TO THEIR UNIQUE CONTEXTS WHILE ADHERING TO KEY TENETS (I.E., BE “LOOSE” IN SOME AREAS WHILE “TIGHT” IN OTHERS)

As Perry noted, “We don’t have a model we want people to replicate; we have a philosophy we want schools to ascribe to.” At minimum, HCS requires that schools adhere to the Parthenon’s five tenets. At the same time, the district respects its longstanding tradition of school autonomy, so it mandates remarkably few other practices. District leaders call this a “loose-tight” strategy: they hold “tight” to a limited number of items (e.g., the five tenets), but are “loose” on how those tenets manifest in schools. What’s more, HCS leaders want PL to look different in each school, even as they ensure models that advance the conditions of deep learning.

CREATE SPACE TO BE BOLD AND MAKE MISTAKES (I.E., CULTIVATE A SPIRIT FOR CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT), WHILE MAINTAINING ACCOUNTABILITY

While some teachers, principals, and administrators are comfortable making mistakes, others are not. “Encouraging schools to be bold and stay bold is a big part of this effort,” Schmuhl said. “In the redesign process, schools typically come out with a bold vision, but keeping the spirit of innovation going is a real struggle.”

To encourage a growth mindset that encourages learning from mistakes, district leaders offer a consistent message. “To me, it’s as simple as repeating it over and over again,” Schmuhl said. “It requires leading that conversation in a way that is vulnerable, but also knowledgeable. We’re not just saying ‘I’d like you to be innovative, now go do it.’ Rather, we communicate that we’re not just innovating for innovation’s sake. We’re innovating in service of our mission to improve student achievement.”

Educators around the district confirm that HCS leaders deliver this message consistently, which has a trickle-down effect from district leadership to principals to teachers. Leela Varian, one of the nine coaches who support PL implementation, stated: “The most important thing I coach teachers on is their mindset. You have to go in with a flexible mentality because not everything works the same way for everyone. You have to be attuned to what’s going on in the environment and go from there.”



CONCLUSION

HCS has done many things remarkably well, such as winning hearts and minds and cultivating a spirit of innovation and continuous improvement. Other districts may well find lessons in HCS's strategy that would be applicable in their own contexts. However, HCS's journey is far from complete: although all district schools will have begun the redesign process by 2020, HCS leaders believe that it will take another five to ten years for personalized learning to be implemented at scale and with fidelity. Important challenges, such as inconsistency in expectations for students, remain.

In the meantime, HCS is continuing to investigate what works, to adjust its strategy accordingly, and to communicate transparently about its experience. This case study documents the first part of HCS's journey; we hope that it inspires and informs others who are starting out, or who are well on their way.



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DATA AND PROCESSES HCS USES TO REFINE PERSONALIZED LEARNING PRACTICE

HCS disaggregates the following data by subgroups, when available. HCS uses the data to inform the school redesign process, establishment of professional learning communities, creation of protocols to examine student work for equitable expectations, align teacher and leader professional development, align hiring processes, and inform funding priorities.

DATA CATEGORY	ILLUSTRATIVE INDICATORS
ACADEMIC/STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Progress on content and cross-curricular competencies • NWEA MAP • State tests • District benchmarks • SAT & ACT scores • Graduation rate • Promotion and retention rates
CLIMATE/CULTURE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student attendance • Student discipline • Perception and climate survey data from students, teachers, and parents • Walkthrough and school visit data from external teams
PRODUCTS RELATED TO STUDENT AGENCY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public exhibitions of student work • Unit and student work plan design documents aligned to competencies, depth of knowledge (DOK), and student agency • Evidence of completed student-determined goals, completed capstones, student-led conferences, student portfolios of work, and completed habits and dispositions inventories

HCS'S PARTNERS

HCS sought out, and benefited from, a host of partnerships. These partnerships began with HCS staff's travels to schools around the country and continued with more formal partnerships. Many partners have worked with HCS since 2013, including the following:

PARTNER	ROLE	DESCRIPTION
JEFF TSANG FROM BUILDING BLOCKS EDUCATION	School redesign	Tsang co-created and co-manages the school redesign process with the district. His work includes: providing a prototype design framework, building district capacity to support the piloting of prototypes, helping school design teams develop innovative instructional models, creating metrics of success that balance achievement and agency, and supporting school-level change management. Tsang also visits schools during implementation to provide support and feedback reports to schools and district staff on the state of implementation and student agency.
MARY HASTINGS FROM GREAT SCHOOLS PARTNERSHIP	Onsite competency-based learning coaching to build capacity at the school and district level	<p>Hastings has provided long-term onsite support since January 2015 to build capacity of district and school staff for sustainability purposes. Hastings's contributions include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitating the process of defining district-level competencies and scoring criteria • Working intensively with HCS's Instructional Services staff (particularly curriculum leaders) to develop an action plan related to the rollout of competency-based learning • Facilitating a professional learning community to provide support to early adopter principals • Coordinating the district-level task force work currently underway for assessment, policy recommendations, reporting, and stakeholder engagement work. <p>Lastly, Great Schools Partnership's iWalkthrough tool was initially helpful in capturing consistent classroom data, but HCS has since created its own walkthrough aligned to the district vision for PL.</p>
DIANA LAUFENBERG AND KRISTIN HOKANSON FROM INQUIRY SCHOOLS	School-based consulting	Inquiry Schools has been helpful at the school level by consulting during early implementation stages regarding systems and structures to support PL, specifically with regard to integrating authentic learning, master scheduling, unit design, and professional development.
SRG TECHNOLOGY	Custom build of the Learner Profile platform	HCS partnered with SRG Technologies to custom-build the district's Learner Profile platform, specifically to support and capture data related to student agency, including goal-setting, portfolios tagged to HCS competencies, a feedback loop, habits and dispositions inventories, student-led conference notes, college and career readiness information, etc.

GEORGIA STATE UNIVERSITY	External program evaluation	Georgia State created student and teacher surveys about student engagement, student agency, access to resources, and teacher support of student needs within and outside of content considerations. Georgia State also conducted focus group interviews with school stakeholders and provided analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data collected.
ANN WARE	Implementation accountability	Ann Ware is a retired HCS employee who is familiar with district context. Ware visits classrooms, meets with school design teams, conducts teacher and student focus groups several times each year, and asks “critical friend” questions about implementation, successes, and needed supports. She then advises the district based on those observations.
STEVE MCMAHON, INTERVENTION SUPPORT SERVICE	Culture and climate	McMahon is a former HCS employee who is familiar with district context. He focuses specifically on providing support related to culture and climate with schools. McMahon also facilitates discussions between administration teams and teachers, observes classrooms and common spaces, and makes recommendations to schools about culture and climate shifts to support student agency as well as effective communication, collaboration, and change management.

HOW HCS FUNDS PERSONALIZED LEARNING

HCS used NGSI grant funds for the following actions:

PHASE	DATES	FUNDING	MAJOR ACTIONS
I	September 2013– January 2014	\$100,000 plus strategic planning technical assistance from McKinsey & Company	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create district vision for personalized learning and strategic plan for implementation • Travel for district staff and all secondary principals to see innovative school models
II	February 2014– May 2015	\$363,000	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicate the district vision and plan to all school communities • Solicit applicants for school redesign; establish application and selection process • Establish school redesign process • Begin shift to competency-based learning • Begin build for learner profile platform
III	June 2015– June 2017	\$3.9 million	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Launch first two cohorts (15 schools) • Plan for subsequent two cohorts • Hire district personalized learning coaches • Align leadership development to PL

HCS spent little to no money on technology devices, furniture, or facilities changes because the district wanted to focus on building capacity to implement in order to scale and sustain the work. The district has allocated \$1.8 million annually to sustain redesign funds in the general fund budget. Additional staff, including 9 district coaches and 18 district-funded project managers, have been hired to support implementation. By making PL the district vision, all spending is aligned in the budget decision-making processes:

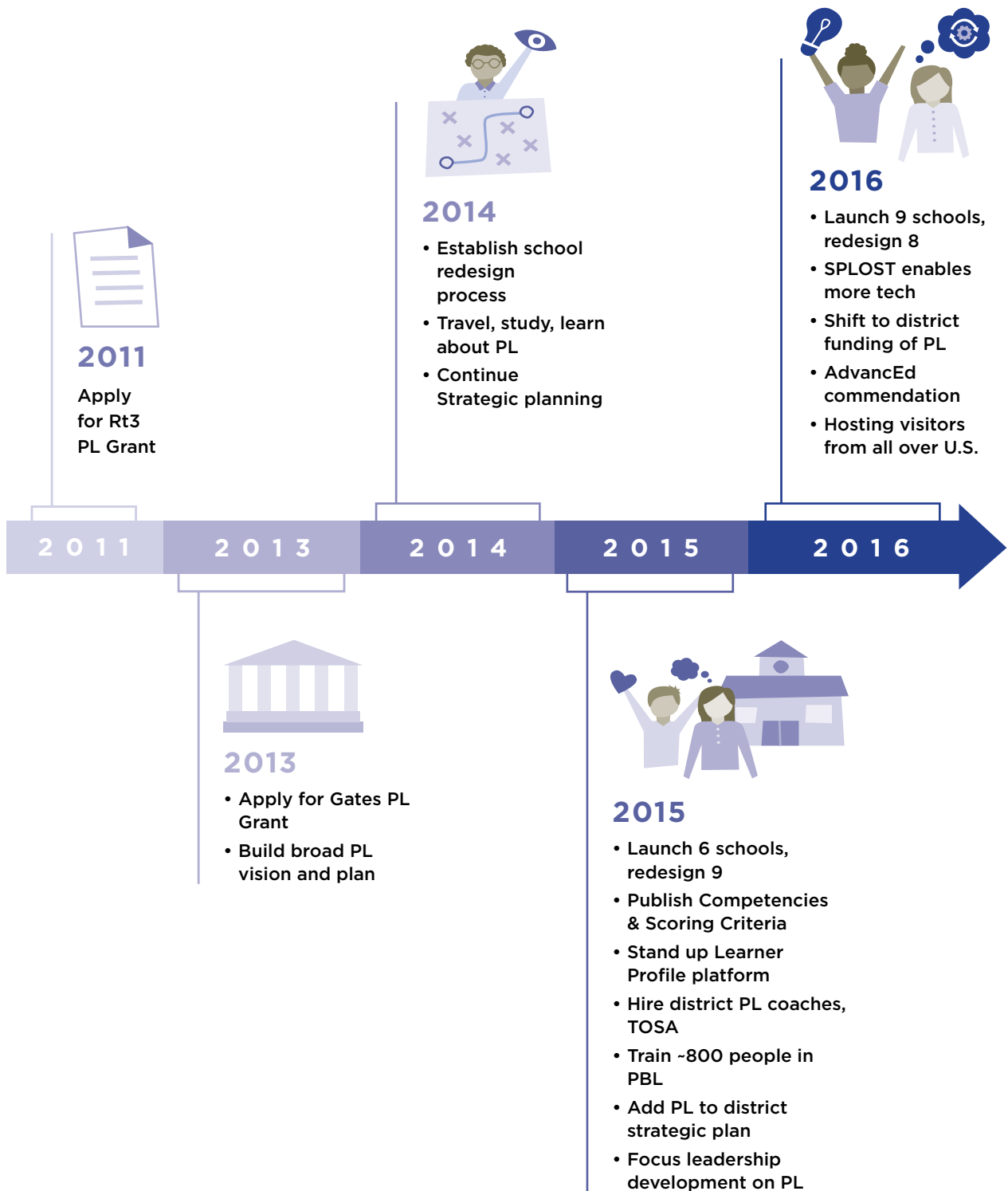
After the grant funds expired, the district assumed all ongoing costs listed above, with some important exceptions:

- The cost of competency-based technical assistance is declining as HCS builds local capacity in content coordinators and others.
- Initial start-up costs of the learner profile are decreasing as the platform moves into less new functionality and focuses on refining user experience.
- Travel costs have decreased because HCS now has local examples of PL schools in the district, lessening the need to travel to distant locations.
- HCS trained local coaches to provide much of the professional development to teachers rather than bringing in external technical assistance indefinitely.
- School-based coach positions have been phased out and the service model is now a team of district coaches who are assigned to a school for a period of time, then rotate to the next cohort of implementing schools.

The district has assumed the following additional costs:

- Adding additional district staff dedicated to project management.
- Assuming all costs related to 1:1 rollout, starting in fall 2017, including infrastructure, devices, and all related professional development.
- Purchase of furniture and facilities changes to allow for flexible seating, maker spaces, and new learning classroom models.

MAJOR PERSONALIZED LEARNING MILESTONES IN HENRY COUNTY



COHORT 2019 SELECTION APPLICATION

We are using a competitive selection process to identify **seven to nine** visionary, high-capacity “School Design Teams” that are committed to redesigning personalized learning schools in Fall 2019.

Personalized Learning: Learning experiences for all students are tailored to their individual developmental needs, skills, and interests. Personalized learning in HCS will include the following tenets.

- **Learner Profiles including Personalized Learning Plans:** Captures individual skills, gaps, strengths, weaknesses, interests, and aspirations of each student. Each student has learning goals and objectives. Learning experiences are diverse and matched to the individual needs of students.
- **Competency-Based Learning:** Multiple instructional delivery approaches that continuously optimize available resources in support of student learning. Continually assesses student progress against clearly defined standards and goals. Students advance based on demonstrated mastery of defined competencies.
- **Authentic Learning:** Inspiring a culture of creators and achievers who synthesize information from many sources while engaging in real-world problem-solving.
- **Focus on 21st-Century Skills (specifically communication, collaboration, creativity, and critical thinking/problem-solving):** Fostering and measuring student growth with regard to these behaviors in order to better prepare students for college and career post-secondary endeavors.
- **Technology-Enabled:** Students will receive a mix of face-to-face and digitally-enabled instruction.

This is not an initiative for schools with a passing interest in PL. We are seeking visionary, high-capacity applicants that wish to engage in an intense, multi-year effort. A commitment of substantial time and resources is required, including but not limited to: designating a project manager and a working team and ensuring high levels of engagement from key leaders and stakeholders. Most importantly, we intend to work only with high-functioning teams that have the capacity to facilitate bold innovation at the school level.

Our intent is to select School Design Teams that are committed to developing and implementing a multi-year strategy to support PL in their buildings. Therefore, we are asking that each of the applicants commit to meeting the following goals.

1. School Design Teams will engage in an intense strategic planning process from January 2018 to July 2019. This planning process will require a substantial commitment from the school community.
2. During this time, we will require that each team designate a qualified project manager who is able to devote time during the school day (preferably 1/2) to this project. To support your efforts, we will devote district resources to guide your planning process.
3. Successful completion of the planning process will culminate in application for implementation funding, if approved.

VISION AND PLAN (40 POINTS POSSIBLE)

This set of questions will ask schools to articulate the vision and plan related to personalized learning. Alignment to cluster school is preferred.

1. **Rationale/Philosophy:** Explain why your school wants to redesign around personalized learning.
2. **Clarity of vision:** Describe the vision for personalized learning with regard to the district Personalized Learning tenets. What is the “end game” for what students will know and be able to do once they leave your school? Your answer should include, but not be limited to, the district five tenets of PL. Speak to what student agency, student-centered learning, student voice/choice mean at your school.
3. **Identify design team members:** Identify a working team and an advisory team for this work. List each person by name and title.
4. **Identify project manager:** Identify a project manager from your existing staff. Project management requires ½ time to do this work. What specific actions will the school take to ensure that the project manager has this dedicated time? Be specific in explaining how you will delegate the PM’s current duties so adequate time can be allotted for this work. What qualities does the project manager possess that makes this person suitable for this work?
5. **Change Management:** How will your team change the way that teachers view their practice and build student agency, particularly in the early years where everyone (teachers and students) will be transitioning from the traditional model of school to the personalized model of school?
6. **Professional Development (PD) of faculty/staff:** What is your plan related to training faculty/staff in PL tenets? Does your PD encourage innovation, collaboration, risk-taking? How is effective teaching rewarded? How does the administration cultivate leadership at all levels? How does the school use feedback to improve practice?
7. **Flexibility of staffing model:** How does your vision for PL guide your allocation of staff? What staffing model(s) do you plan to implement? Is your staffing model creative, flexible?
8. **Flexibility of scheduling model:** Describe your plan for allowing students to advance through courses upon mastery of content. What additional flexibilities will be reflected in your master schedule?
9. **Describe rollout of PL or whole-school approach:** Will your school start with one grade level and then expand? Whole-school? What are your initial thoughts on a pilot you would like to start?
10. **Identify barriers and plans to mitigate:** What potential barriers do you anticipate in implementing PL? How do you plan to address those barriers?

CAPACITY TO IMPLEMENT (30 POINTS POSSIBLE)

These questions pertain to the overall stability of staff and leadership at your school and the capacity to implement personalized learning.

1. Staff stability/morale: What percentage of teachers returned for the 2016–17 school year from the previous three school years? If a significant number of teachers left the school, please explain why. How do you describe faculty morale at your school, based on school climate survey results or other data?
2. Leadership stability: Is the principal committed to staying at the school for at least three years?
3. Demonstrated track record of success: Describe a particular challenge faced by your school that you have successfully addressed. Support your narrative with data.
4. Articulated school mission aligned with PL vision: What is your school's mission and how does that mission align with your vision of personalized learning? BRIEFLY articulate your school's CIP goals. What drives your goal-setting? How are school goals communicated with the larger community?
5. Culture: What aspects of the current culture of your school indicate support of this work? How are you building a culture of innovations with systems, practices, and mindsets within your building?

ENTHUSIASM AND SUPPORT FOR PL (30 POINTS POSSIBLE)

These questions ask the school to demonstrate enthusiasm and support for PL from key stakeholders.

1. MOU for faculty/staff: Write a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) outlining expectations for faculty and staff. What will be required of faculty and staff that may differ from current expectations?
2. Evidence of leadership team support/buy-in: Explain the process by which the leadership team has participated in envisioning and planning for PL. Submit a letter of support (or other evidence) signed by the school leadership team members.
3. Evidence of teacher support/buy-in: Explain the process by which teachers have been involved in the envisioning and planning for PL. Submit a letter of support (or other evidence) for PL signed by teachers and/or survey results indicating teacher support of PL.
4. Evidence of parent involvement and support/buy-in: Explain the process by which parents have been involved in the envisioning and planning for PL. Submit a letter of support (or other evidence) for PL signed by parents and/or survey results indicating parent support of PL, evidence of parent meetings with evidence of attendance, etc.
5. Alignment with cluster feeder school: Articulate how your plan aligns with your cluster school. How will the schools work together to ensure that students' progress at each school will be honored at the next level of schooling? How will the schools work together to identify students who will likely need additional support?

COHORT 2019 SELECTION RUBRIC

OVERALL RUBRIC

CATEGORY	KEY QUESTIONS	POSSIBLE	SCORED
CAPACITY TO IMPLEMENT	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Staff stability/morale 2. Leadership stability 3. Demonstrated track record of success 4. Articulated school mission aligned with PL vision 5. Culture will support innovation 	30	
VISION AND PLAN	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Rationale/Philosophy: Clear rationale for the school wants to redesign 2. Clarity of vision, addresses: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Student Agency b. Flexible/Competency-based c. Tech-enabled/Blended d. PLPs/Pathways e. PBL/Real-world application f. 21st Century Skills 3. Identifies design team members 4. Identifies project manager, assures adequate time for the work 5. Change Management 6. PD of faculty/staff 7. Flexibility of staffing model 8. Flexibility of scheduling model 9. Describes rollout of PL or whole school approach 10. Identifies barriers and plans to mitigate 	40	
ENTHUSIASM/SUPPORT FOR PL	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. MOU for faculty/staff 2. Evidence of leadership team support/buy-in 3. Evidence of teacher support/buy-in 4. Evidence of parent involvement and support/buy-in 5. Alignment with cluster feeder school 	30	
TOTAL	Total Points	100	

CAPACITY TO IMPLEMENT

KEY QUESTIONS	IDEAL (FULL POINTS GRANTED)	POINTS POSSIBLE
1. STAFF STABILITY	Turnover is low, morale is high as evidenced by number of teachers who returned from previous years and school climate survey results.	5
2. LEADERSHIP STABILITY	Principal committed to staying for at least three years .	5
3. DEMONSTRATED TRACK RECORD OF SUCCESS	Narrative of evidence-based example(s) of school addressing a particular issue with quantifiable results.	5
4. ARTICULATED SCHOOL MISSION AND CIP ALIGNED WITH PL VISION	School mission is articulated and PL vision is closely aligned. CIP is ambitious but achievable, and is focused on a relatively limited number of targeted, high-priority goals each year. CIP is driven by multiple measures—not just standardized assessment results—including process goals, student-level data, and community demographics. School goals are clearly communicated to the school community.	5
5. CULTURE OF INNOVATION	The application articulates what elements of the school's current culture supports this transformation, which may (or may not) include examples of current or previous innovative practice. Whether or not innovation is currently underway, the team describes how they are building a culture that will support and sustain these changes in their school with regard to systems, practices, and mindsets.	10
TOTAL		30

VISION AND PLAN

KEY QUESTIONS	IDEAL (FULL POINTS GRANTED)	POSSIBLE
<p>1. IDENTIFIES DESIGN TEAM MEMBERS</p> <p>2. IDENTIFIES PROJECT MANAGER</p> <p>3. CLARITY OF VISION</p>	<p>Team members identified. Project manager identified and time is allocated for the work. In collaboration with staff, students, parents, community members, and local policy makers, the school has created a bold, student-centered, long-term vision for personalized learning. The vision promotes common high expectations and cultivates student aspirations and ambitions of every student. The language of the vision and mission is clear, understandable, and powerful, and it exemplifies the shared principles and ideals of PL. Plan addresses student agency and the basic tenets of the HCS vision for PL:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flexible/Competency-based • Tech-enabled/Blended • Learner Profile/PLPs/Pathways • Authentic learning/Real-world application • 21st-Century Skills 	5
<p>4. TECHNICAL READINESS</p>	<p>Plan addresses technical needs of the school and plans to mitigate technology barriers, teacher training on course-management software, a common student information system, and other digital tools to facilitate planning, organization, and communication within and across courses.</p>	5
<p>5. CHANGE MANAGEMENT</p>	<p>Plan articulates a specific plan for transitioning teachers and students to a personalized learning model wherein teachers are empowering students to drive their own learning experiences.</p>	5
<p>6. PD OF FACULTY/STAFF</p>	<p>PL plan encourages innovation, risk-taking, and professionalism in the classroom, and effective teaching is recognized and rewarded. The principal and administrative team are committed to providing high-quality professional development to all teachers, and efforts are made to cultivate leadership skills, increase professional knowledge, and use feedback from teachers and students to improve practices and leadership strategies.</p>	5
<p>7. FLEXIBILITY OF STAFFING MODEL</p>	<p>PL plan guides staffing decisions, including flexible staffing models that creatively utilize and maximize human resources.</p>	5
<p>8. FLEXIBILITY OF SCHEDULING MODEL</p>	<p>PL plan presents vision for flexible schedule, allowing for students to finish courses upon demonstrated mastery of coursework and advance to the next course when complete.</p>	5
<p>9. DESCRIBES ROLLOUT OF PL OR WHOLE SCHOOL APPROACH</p>	<p>Plan articulates plan for how the PL model will grow within the school (e.g., students self-select, full grade level, whole school, etc.).</p>	5
<p>10. IDENTIFIES BARRIERS AND PLANS TO MITIGATE</p>	<p>Plan identifies barriers to implementing PL and articulates plans to address those barriers.</p>	5
TOTAL		40

ENTHUSIASM / SUPPORT FOR PL

KEY QUESTIONS	IDEAL (FULL POINTS GRANTED)	POSSIBLE
1. MOU FOR FACULTY/STAFF	MOU clearly outlines expectations for faculty and staff related to PL.	5
2. EVIDENCE OF LEADERSHIP TEAM SUPPORT/BUY-IN	Leadership team has conducted multiple meetings related to PL, all leadership team members have demonstrated support for the PL planning process.	5
3. EVIDENCE OF TEACHER SUPPORT/BUY-IN	School has conducted multiple faculty meetings related to PL, teachers have demonstrated support for PL, survey results show all teachers support the PL planning process.	10
4. EVIDENCE OF PARENT INVOLVEMENT AND SUPPORT/BUY-IN	School has conducted PL informational/interest meetings for parents, with evidence of attendance, includes proof of support from parents, survey results indicate a majority of parents support PL.	5
5. ALIGNMENT WITH CLUSTER FEEDER SCHOOL	Plan is submitted in conjunction with feeder school and clearly reflects vertical planning between the schools. Students' progress will be honored by the receiving school.	5
TOTAL		30

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES ABOUT HCS

HCS Materials

- [Personalized Learning home page](#), with resources and profiles of schools
- [HCS core content and cross-curricular competencies](#)
- [GOLD Academy](#), with structure and resources for new leadership development program
- [PL Overview video](#) (2016), showcasing district approach

Media Coverage & Case Studies

- [Voice, Choice, and Mastery with Rodney Bowler](#) (2017, Modern Learners)
- [Henry County Schools: A Conversation with Karen Perry](#) (2017, Education Reimagined)
- [This county has a new way for students to learn, and parents say it's working](#) (2017, WSBTV Atlanta)
- [Henry County Schools – 2020 Vision for Personalized Learning](#) (2017, SREB)
- [An Introduction to Henry County Schools, Georgia: A Path to Personalized Learning](#) (2017, Belcher)
- [Breaking with Tradition](#) (2017, Brian Stack)
- [What Is Personalized Learning According To Henry County's Career Academy?](#) (2017, Georgia Public Broadcasting)
- [Setting a Strong Personalized Learning Vision in Henry County](#) (2017, NGLC)
- [Students Pinpoint their Academic Needs in Georgia District](#) (2016, EdWeek)
- 5-part case study (2016, CompetencyWorks)
 - [Four Big Takeaways](#)
 - [Ensuring Success for Each Student](#)
 - [Scaling Strategic for Mid-Size Districts](#)
 - [What All of This Means for Schools](#)
 - [Impact Academy](#)

- [Not Your Grandpa's Voc Ed: Rigorous Career and Technical Education in Henry County, GA](#) (2016, NESSC)
- [A New Approach to Learning](#) (2016, NYLC)
- [Make Learning Personal](#) (2015, Bray & McClaskey)
- [EdTech and the accessibility paradox](#) (2015, Christensen Institute)
- [Inspiring Creators](#) (2015, Hildreth)
- [Henry County Schools granted more funds for personalized learning](#) (2015, Henry Herald)
- [Dismantling Personalized Learning Myths](#) (2015, Jill Thompson, Charlotte-Mecklenberg Schools)
- [Leadership Institute & School Design Workshops \[report on NGSI engagement\]](#) (2015, AAF)
- [Innovator Awards & Student Plenary Panel](#) (2015, iNACOL)
- [Blended](#) (2014, Horn & Staker)
- [So You Think You Want to Innovate?](#) (2014, 2Revs & TLA)
- [Personalized Learning at Scale: Case Studies of Leading Cities](#) (2014, Ed Cities & NGLC)
- [Personalized Learning: A guidebook for city leaders](#) (2014, Ed Cities)

INFORMATION ON VISITING HCS

All implementing HCS PL schools host visitors, including for classroom visits, student focus groups, and Q & A with PL staff and administrators. Anyone wanting to visit Henry County should email karen.mcclain@henry.k12.ga.us to be directed to the schools that would best meet their desired learning outcomes.

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