Journeys to Personalized Learning

INTRODUCTION

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.

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INTRODUCTION

Transforming a school or district from traditional instruction to personalized learning is an intimidating process.

But it is not the selection of IT systems, software, or even a school model that poses the hardest challenge. Taking personalized learning to scale in a school or district requires the difficult work of inspiring human beings to change the ways they do their work, and giving them the support (and sometimes the nudge) to do so. Navigating the complicated relationships between students, teachers, parents, administrators, the public, and local and state agencies is challenging enough on any given day, but aligning them all behind a new vision of how students can learn, and keeping them aligned long enough to implement that vision, is a challenge of an altogether different order. It is, however, a challenge that more and more schools and districts will be confronting, and must successfully overcome, if personalized learning is to take hold broadly in America's educational systems.

In an effort to provide some tools for schools and districts approaching the work of inspiring and managing change, FSG documented, in three extended case studies, the journeys of three different institutions implementing personalized learning. We attempted to capture their successes and challenges, their unexpected setbacks, and their sudden epiphanies. As you read the case studies, we hope you'll learn from their achievements, be better able to identify and avoid obstacles, refine your perspective on how to approach a similar transformation in your school or district, and be fortified in your belief that change is possible.
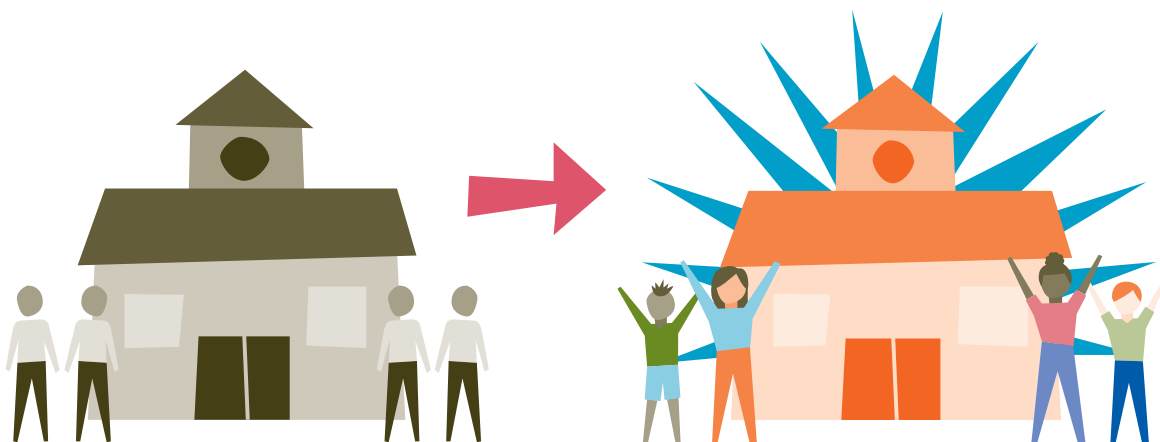
Choosing Case Study Subjects

As part of FSG's research, we asked dozens of individuals and organizations for their recommendations on schools, networks, or districts that would make good case study subjects. Our primary screen was for subjects who had been working toward personalized learning for at least a few years. In such a nascent field this narrowed our list considerably. We then tried to balance several variables: a track record of success but not universally known; a mix of charter and district case studies; a variety of geographies and sizes; and a diversity of populations served. Just as importantly, we looked for subjects who felt relatable—individuals who wanted their story told, who were willing to be real about challenges, and who had made change happen without an unusual amount of outside funds or assistance. After interviewing several potential case study subjects, we selected three:

- Henry County Schools, Henry County, GA

- Mesa County Valley District 51, Mesa County, CO

- CICS West Belden, Chicago, IL

By selecting these three schools and districts, we are not suggesting they are the "best" personalized learning exemplars. Rather, they are three interesting examples, from diverse contexts but with common threads of experience that we think others can learn from. The following pages summarize each case study and share several cross-cutting patterns that hold broader relevance for anyone embarking on a personalized learning journey.

WHY WRITE ABOUT THE JOURNEY?

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

To determine what new material would be most beneficial to the field, we interviewed over 40 experts in personalized learning, including teachers, school leaders, system leaders, researchers, funders, and service providers. We also dove into the vast ocean of existing personalized learning resources, reviewing over 130 case studies, research papers, blog series, key articles, and online hubs. We categorized these resources along multiple dimensions, such as topic, audience, purpose, and quality, and found that most focused on school design, early implementation, and instructional practice. Relatively few addressed systems change, showed evolution over time, or explored non-instructional dimensions of personalized learning such as leadership or sustainability.

It was clear from this immersion in the existing literature that we as a field tend to focus on the visible structures and practices that define personalized learning. While this focus is practical and useful, like an iceberg there is a great deal that happens beneath the surface that often matters more to school success. But writing about this part isn't easy. Intangible elements like leadership, culture, norms, and values—and most importantly, how these fit together—are hard to observe and difficult to communicate to an outside audience. That's why we have intentionally made these case studies quite detailed: They trace how multiple factors came together, over time, to support transformational change in three school systems through personalized learning.

WHAT WE HEARD WAS NEEDED

We found that leaders of school and educational systems who are working to make systemic changes to adopt personalized learning could benefit from written case studies that show the complexity of the shift and how change happens over time. We also wanted to help all readers understand what it takes to seed and grow innovative approaches to learning in complex environments.

Four themes in particular stood out from our research that informed the direction of these case studies:

- **Be honest about what it takes.** Many existing resources gloss over challenges or only show the final state without depicting all the hard work required to get there. Yet shifting to person-alized learning, for all its benefits, is often more difficult than practitioners expect, especially in the early stages. Being honest about obstacles can help others persevere through their own challenges. It's also authentic; many educators we interviewed said they often discount existing resources because they're too rosy and don't reflect the reality of their experience. As a result, we are deeply appreciative of our three case study subjects' willingness to be vulnerable and to share their setbacks, missteps, open questions, and partial answers so that the journey to personalized learning can be that much easier for others.

"Many case studies talk about how they started using a program and math scores doubled. But that's not helpful because scores could have doubled for five other reasons. It just generates eye rolls."

– Interviewee

- **Show how the pieces fit together.** Personalized learning differs from many other interven-tions because it touches nearly every part of a school system. We also know that, when seeking to change systems, it's often more important to attend to the relationships among parts than the individual pieces themselves. While there are good reasons for existing resources to main-ly focus on single topics like instruction or teacher development, there's a relative dearth of resources that explore multiple topics at once, along with their connections and interdependen-cies. We've started to address that need with these case studies.

"Just showing the ultimate solution can cause readers to close the case study. Instead, say 'Here's the first step, here's what the solution evolved to be, and here's [what] you'll need to think about to follow a similar path.'"

– Interviewee
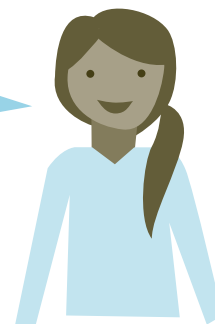
- **Trace the journey.** As a field, we tend to hold up notable schools and districts as immaculate, fully formed exemplars. While it's good to celebrate success, the more important lessons can go unnoticed—how these schools and districts made progress and how they've continued improving over time. In our research, we heard repeatedly that tracing the stages of a school or district's evolution, where they changed course, encountered obstacles, or made new breakthroughs, would be much more instructive than capturing a single point in time.

"Personalized learning isn't a one-off thing; it takes over your school. So how does it affect your academic team? Your coaching model? Operations? Seeing that would be helpful."

– Interviewee

In addition to showing evolution, focusing on the journey highlights the very different starting points and motivations that schools and districts bring to personalized learning. Some educators might start with a north star of self-directed learning; others are driven by real-world lessons for every student; still others might seek to prepare their graduates for a fast-changing economy. We hope that showing some very different starting points and contexts—along with the patterns held in common—will make these case studies feel relevant for a wider array of readers.

- **Go deep for insights.** In a time of shrinking, tweet-able content, it stood out to us how many interviewees, particularly those working in school systems, expressed a preference for depth. This aligns with the themes mentioned previously—delving into challenges, tracing the journey, and showing how the pieces of change fit together all require nuance and detail. We hope these case studies' depth will yield greater insights for leaders who are initiating or supporting personalized learning journeys.

HOW THIS COMPLEMENTS EXISTING FIELD RESOURCES

Since these case studies emphasize the journey, they correspondingly focus less on specific practices or the details of a school model. However, we've tried to link to complementary resources on these topics when possible. For instance, in several places we reference recent research from The Learning Accelerator, which offers a different lens than our analysis. We hope that resources like this can work in tandem: Resources that focus on discrete practices can spark interest in how those practices evolved over time, while resources dedicated to the journey can inspire readers to go deeper into classroom implementation.
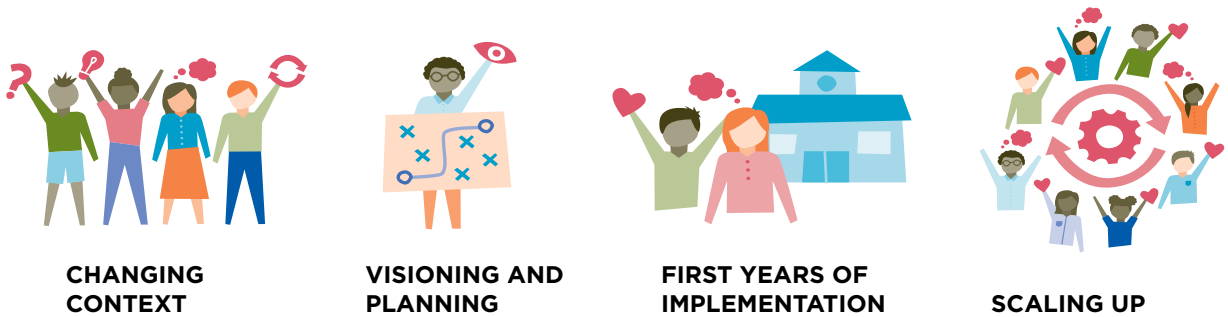
SUMMARY: HENRY COUNTY SCHOOLS

HENRY COUNTY SCHOOLS

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' 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% 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 do so. To help other districts, funders, researchers, and others learn from HCS' example, this case study presents Henry County Schools' chronological 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.

HCS's Personalized Learning Timeline

	CHANGING CONTEXT	**VISIONING AND PLANNING**	**FIRST YEARS OF IMPLEMENTATION**	**SCALING UP**
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.

SUMMARY: MESA COUNTY D51

LOCATION: Mesa County, Colorado

NUMBER OF STUDENTS: 22,105

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: 2,685

STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS: 3.7% ELL, 51% FRL, 14% IEP

This case study describes the "journey" taken by Mesa County Valley District 51 (D51), a public school district located in Grand Junction, Colorado, to shift to a more personalized model of education. The study first examines how personalized learning evolved at Mesa County, and later explains the specific models used at several schools in the district. By focusing on this district's journey, we show how a single district can move from a traditional instructional approach to a personalized one. While every context is unique, the lessons of D51 are likely applicable to other schools, districts, and charter management organizations that wish to adopt personalized learning approaches.

Mesa County D51's Personalized Learning Timeline
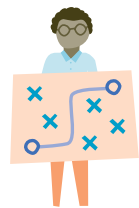
	BUILDING CONSENSUS	**PLANNING**	**DEMONSTRATION SCHOOLS**	**FULL DISTRICT IMPLEMENTATION**
TIMELINE	*Spring 2014 - Fall 2014*	*Spring 2015*	*Fall 2015 — Spring 2016*	*Fall 2016 — Present*
MAIN ACTIVITIES	After learning about personalized learning from other districts, D51's superintendent sent school leaders, board members, and community leaders to see personalized learning first-hand, thereby building consensus for a transformation at D51.	With strong enthusiasm for personalized learning, D51 made ambitious plans to implement it in the district the following academic year.	As a first step to implementing personalized learning, D51 worked with seven schools to begin laying the groundwork for personalized learning.	With high interest across the district, D51 moves forward with supporting all schools to shift to a personalized learning system.

Lessons from Mesa County D51's Journey

1   **Adapt national expertise to local context:** As an "early adopter," D51 benefited from the work of schools and districts that had gone before it through multiple site visits to other districts, the guidance of experienced partners and technical assistance providers, and the expertise of staff members who had worked in other districts. Though D51 gained valuable knowledge from those sources, the district still needed to adapt the models and practices to the specific context of Mesa County. Key elements of that adaptation included comprehensive community engagement and the latitude given to individual schools to adopt models and approaches that worked best for them.

2   **Build buy-in across typically partisan divides:** D51's school board changed in ways that reflected the shifts in the national political landscape, but the district's leadership was thoughtful about creating opportunities for board members across the political spectrum to find common ground. Holding an off-site retreat for the newly elected school board, as well as intentionally sending board members with differing political views on site visits together, helped to build relationships and create alignment even among those who might not ordinarily find much to agree on.

3   **Establish a multi-year foundation of culture and mindset change:** D51's approach to implementing personalized learning has focused on first putting in place the groundwork of necessary mindsets and practices and only then bringing in the technology that people usually associate with personalized learning. More than two years after the district first committed to personalized learning, many classrooms still do not have the "visible" aspects of personalized learning. While the most "visible" changes of personalized learning have been slow to arrive, substantial progress has been made on the "non-visible" components, increasing the likelihood that schools will successfully make the jump to personalized learning and that the changes will stick, since they are supported by durable shifts in mindsets and practices.

4   **Create advocates and support across the district:** D51's leadership inspired commitment to personalized learning at all levels of the district and the community through a carefully sequenced stakeholder engagement approach. Each step of D51's "cascading" approach built both momentum and support for what was required in the subsequent step. The careful cultivation of advocates and supporters facilitated change in a resource-constrained environment.

5   **Make progress despite limited funds:** Mesa County's school district received very little in the way of philanthropic funding. With a clear vision in place, the district was able to use the limited grants and opportunities that were available to build momentum and advance the work. The relative dearth of external funding meant that the implementation process was slower and more challenging in ways, but D51 staff was able to fund the shift to personalized learning almost exclusively by realigning existing resources.

SUMMARY: CICS WEST BELDEN

TYPE OF SCHOOL: Public charter school

LOCATION: Belmont Cragin neighborhood, Chicago, Illinois

NO. OF STUDENTS: 530

NO. OF TEACHERS: ~25

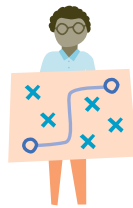**STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS:** 41% ELL, 90% FRL, 13% IEP

This case study provides a detailed account of how Chicago International Charter Schools (CICS) West Belden, a charter school in Chicago managed by Distinctive Schools, implemented personalized learning. The case study primarily describes the journey to personalized learning; more detail about CICS West Belden's specific model can be found in the Learning Accelerator's in-depth CICS West Belden profile.

By focusing closely on the journey, this case study shows how a single charter school transformed from a traditional, "no excuses" model to a more personalized approach. The details provided here can help other school, district, and school and charter management organization (SMO/CMO) leaders understand how to adopt personalized learning approaches at their schools.

CICS West Belden's Personalized Learning Timeline

	BUILDING THE FOUNDATION	**PLANNING**	**PILOT**	**REFINEMENT & FULL IMPLEMENTATION**
TIMELINE	*Summer — Fall 2013*	*Spring — Summer 2014*	*Fall 2014 — Spring 2015*	*Summer 2015 — Present*
MAIN ACTIVITIES	CICS West Belden created a culture of respect, innovation, and self-direction to lay the groundwork for personalized learning.	CICS West Belden spent nearly a full year planning the many details (e.g., scheduling, class structure, technology) that would be used in a few pilot classrooms. During this time, teachers were encouraged to test small changes (e.g., blended learning, Edmodo).	CICS West Belden launched personalized learning in two classrooms, using them as an opportunity to apply theory to practice, learn from successes and failures, and generate excitement for the rest of the school.	CICS West Belden expands and refines its approach to personalized learning, drawing from its experience in previous years.

Lessons from CICS West Belden's Journey

1 **Culture as a precondition:** CICS West Belden invested up front in building a culture that valued teachers and instilled trust among staff members. This work was hard, slow, and absolutely essential to the transformation that followed.

2 **Build it with them, not for them:** Network and school leaders, teachers, and students all played substantive roles in designing CICS West Belden's personalized learning approach. Teachers in particular were "co-pilots" for every step of the school's journey.

3 **It's all about time:** Extra planning time for teachers helped them shift to personalized learning while reducing their stress and workload.

4 **Just do it, but not all at once:** CICS West Belden's leadership planned carefully but was willing to take risks and try new things in the best interests of students. At the same time, CICS West Belden broke the personalized learning implementation process into stages, ensuring that each piece of the model was well-established before proceeding.

5 **Partner for expertise:** CICS West Belden drew from the experience and expertise of other personalized learning schools and partner organizations, adapting lessons to its own context.

COMMON PATTERNS

What did Henry County, Mesa D51, and CICS West Belden do in common as they worked toward personalized learning? While these sites are quite different and took distinct paths, certain commonalities do stand out from their respective journeys. We hope these inspire reflection for other school and systems leaders.

1. CULTURE BUILDING AS A FOUNDATION

Each of our three case study subjects focused extensively on building culture as a precondition for personalized learning.

- For CICS West Belden, this meant several years of shifting the school away from a no-excuses model, replacing a philosophy of control with one of trust. Fostering trust, as staff frequently reflected, made it possible to "take the leap" into the unknown of personalized learning.

- At Mesa D51, personalized learning stemmed from a culture-of-growth mindset. District leaders intentionally placed personalized learning as fourth along their five-step path to transformation; the first step, laying the foundation, focused on building a growth mindset in students, teachers, and leaders.

- Like CICS West Belden and Mesa D51, Henry County emphasized trust and growth mindset and focused on culture building not just with schools but among district staff. At one point in the journey, Henry's superintendent asked a drama teacher to write a play about personalized learning, which senior staff then performed for 700 district colleagues. It was funny, but the underlying messages of creativity, risk-taking, support, and vulnerability also stuck.

Reflecting on these three examples, we'd note that as researchers we entered this case study process with a healthy respect for culture, but were still surprised by how central culture proved to these personalized learning journeys. This revelation is not unique: Often those who support personalized learning—district leaders, funders, policymakers, researchers, etc.—will speak to the importance of culture, but underestimate the time and resources it takes to build it. As we observed at CICS West Belden, Mesa D51, and Henry County, culture is hard work, built in pieces over months and years, and takes continuous renewal—but it's also the lifeblood of sustaining and growing innovation.

2. STAGGERED ROLLOUT

In different ways, all three schools and systems staggered their implementation of personalized learning, mastering one piece at a time and building competence and confidence before moving on. At CICS West Belden, for instance, the school adopted a four-part definition of personalized learning. They tackled "flexible learning environments"

first, because it felt tangible and would result in visible wins, then over time layered in learner profiles, competency-based progression, and personalized learning paths. The school also staggered teacher implementation, starting with a pilot cohort of particularly enthusiastic teachers, while also preparing the broader faculty for whole-school implementation in the years that followed.

Henry County built a similar process for scale, but at a system level. After establishing a vision for district-wide personalized learning, Henry planned for each of its 50 schools to undergo an 18-month planning process for redesign, staged over six cohorts and eight years. Early adopters could start right away while schools that were hesitant or that faced more structural barriers (e.g., high schools) could take time to prepare. In turn, the district could stagger its own financial and human capital investments, preserving time to build the district-wide systems that would support such broad scale. Importantly, both Henry County and CICS West Belden emphasized that the first adopters were not necessarily the best adopters—they simply went first, and great ideas could come from anywhere in the system.
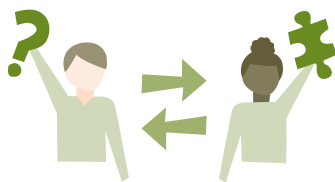
3. SECOND WAVE INNOVATION: PARTNERING FOR EXPERTISE

Henry County, Mesa D51, and CICS West Belden all began focusing on personalized learning around 2013–2014. In the early years of their journeys they each benefited tremendously from in-person visits to some of the prominent early innovators in the personalized learning space. Mesa D51's visit to Lindsay Unified, for instance, galvanized the school board and set the district on its path to personalized learning. CICS West Belden drew early inspiration from Summit Public Schools, among others, and also benefited from a close partnership with LEAP Innovations, which exposed the CICS leadership team to new ideas and resources.

Following in the footsteps of others, these three schools and systems (along with others nationwide) seem like a distinct "second wave" of personalized learning innovators. By studying the early trailblazers, the subjects of our case studies faced a somewhat different learning curve. Rather than building school models from scratch, they spent more time adopting models to their contexts. They also extended the work further, layering in elements like community and parent engagement less frequently emphasized in prior innovations. Mesa D51, for instance, led its process with extensive community outreach and work on mindsets before ever talking about technology. In addition, these second wave innovators benefited from a diffusion of expertise in the sector. This included an emerging ecosystem of service providers to draw on as well as key staff from the early innovators who left those systems and helped to seed personalized learning elsewhere. All together, these signs reflect a maturing personalized learning sector and reinforce the need to continue building connectivity and knowledge flow to strengthen the field in the future.

4. LEADERS "THREADED" VALUES OF PERSONALIZATION THROUGHOUT THE SYSTEM

In looking across different educational reforms, including personalized learning, the further you get from the classroom the more similar the lessons on leading change become.

Personalized Learning and Change Management

Change management is a popular but seldom scrutinized concept in personalized learning. While there are many flavors of change management, common mental models often involve several codified steps where a single leader (or small group of leaders) paints a compelling vision of the future then gradually convinces everyone else to come along with them. What we saw in these three case studies was more complex and more reflective of the values of personalized learning than traditional conceptions of change management. Leaders did start with a sense of where they wanted to go, but held significant ambiguity and relied upon ongoing iteration plus input from multiple parts of the system to improve upon their original ideas. The ensuing process relied more on co-creation than top-down authority. "Change" was not linear, but flowed in multiple directions within the system, leading to more distributed, resilient structures. Our findings suggest the field would benefit from a more critical look at change processes in a personalized context.

So what distinguishes leadership in a personalized learning context? On one hand, the leadership qualities we saw at Henry County, Mesa D51, and CICS West Belden recall popular constructs such as adaptive leadership[1] and building learning organizations.[2] We saw that in implementing personalized learning, these leaders also benefited from new technology tools that gave them a finer understanding of student and school progress (although this capacity is still developing). And the comprehensive nature of personalized learning helped leaders focus on multiple reform efforts within their systems.

But what stood out the most was how the leaders in these three contexts modeled the values of personalized learning in approaching change at the student, teacher, school, and system levels:

- At CICS West Belden, for instance, school leaders realized in Year 2 that their returning personalized learning teachers had very different professional development needs than new ones. This led to a broader recognition that teachers, just like students, needed individualized learning opportunities. CICS West Belden began introducing greater choice into its teacher professional development, along with different learning tracks to better meet teachers where they were.

- When district leaders in Mesa D51 visited every school in the system to communicate their vision of personalization, they also emphasized autonomy. Schools could move at their own pace and develop their own models, as long as they kept progressing. District leaders, just like teachers, would not have all the answers but would offer support and be learning alongside the schools at every step of the way.

- Henry County placed similar emphasis on autonomy. District leaders called this a "loose-tight" strategy, holding tight to a small set of requirements for personalized learning but being loose on how these tenets manifest in school. In coaching school leaders, Henry emphasized that taking risks was encouraged and making mistakes was ok. The key would be for school and district leaders alike to retain a growth mindset and continue learning as they moved forward.

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1 See work from Ron Heifetz and Marty Linsky: https://cambridge-leadership.com/adaptive-leadership/

2 See work from Peter Senge: https://www.solonline.org/peter-senge/

By threading values like choice, growth mindset, autonomy, and self-direction through different levels of their systems, these leadership teams slowly changed how their systems functioned. CICS West Belden, Mesa D51, and Henry County all became more distributed organizations over the course of their personalized learning journeys. In doing so they shifted the core function of the central office away from accountability and control and towards providing support (mirroring the shift that teachers make for students to direct their own learning). Aaryn Schmuhl of Henry Country described this transformation well: "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."

5. KEPT MOVING DESPITE OBSTACLES

Mesa D51, CICS West Belden, and Henry County share another, basic lesson from their personalized learning journeys: they kept going. In retrospect this seems simple, but in the midst of the work it was not assured. Each of these schools and systems faced obstacles, resistance, and wrong turns. They could have stopped or veered back. But each built shared commitments, structures, and cultures that helped them continue. When Mesa D51 engaged community and business leaders in crafting a personalized learning vision, they expanded ownership for that vision but also created accountability for the school system to deliver. When Henry County shared its eight-year plan for all 50 schools to undertake personalized learning, they signaled it was not a passing innovation, but was the work, and there was no going back. And when CICS West Belden added new layers to its model year after year, school leaders kept grounding their work in core values like trust, growth mindset, and doing what's best for students.

Perhaps the most telling marker of persistence was that all three schools and systems underwent leadership transitions in the middle of their journeys. Henry County has seen three superintendents since 2010; each has championed personalized learning in different ways and been supported by continuity from other key leaders. At CICS West Belden, the school director moved to the central office and the assistant director assumed leadership of the school. Mesa D51 managed its transition a little differently, with the superintendent moving up his retirement so that a supportive school board could pick a new leader who would sustain personalized learning. In each case, these transitions were planned carefully, but each succeeded due to the strength of other leaders in the system and the degree to which personalized learning had become ingrained in the fabric of the school or district. This is a sign of success that prepares each system well for the journey ahead.

Large-scale organizational change is hard. But perhaps because of its difficulty, it often brings out the best in people, drawing out their creativity, strengthening their relationships, and firing their imagination of what teaching and learning could be. We hope that reading the stories of these three organizations' journeys inspires you as much as writing about them inspired us.

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