PowerSchool

Beginner's Guide to Personalized Learning

Personalized learning is a strategy, mindset, and approach to instruction.

It sets students on a path to realizing themselves as learners and contributors in this fast-paced and ever-changing world. Classroom structures and practices based on the principles of personalized learning meet students where they are and intentionally move them forward by offering choices, building confidence, and providing customized learning opportunities.

To effectively incorporate personalized learning into our districts and schools, we must observe, categorize, and measure how educators and students are personalizing learning. Then we can see what's working and what's not. [1]

The Aurora Institute, a nonprofit organization that aims to drive the transformation of education systems and accelerate the advancement of breakthrough policies and practices, believes that personalized learning is:

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> **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 support to ensure mastery of the highest standards possible.**

This definition captures the essence of personalized learning and inspires a shift from the one-size-fits-all approach to authentic student-focused learning. It also encourages us to create learning environments that provide spaces, resources, and opportunities for students to embrace their strengths, identify their needs, and make informed decisions about their futures.

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[1] Horn, Michael. "Finding 'Personalized Learning' and Other Edtech Buzzwords on the Gartner Hype Cycle." EdSurge, 3 Jan. 2017, www.edsurge.com/news/2017-01-03-finding-personalized-learning-and-other-edtech-buzzwords-on-the-gartner-hype-cycle.school-climate-and-culture.

Personalized Learning vs. Differentiated Learning vs. Individualized Learning

There is no shortage of instructional approaches and pedagogies for educators to apply in the classroom. In fact, with such an abundance of ways to impact the learning experience—especially in the age of digital learning—it's easy to get confused.

People often use the terms differentiated learning, individualized learning, and personalized learning synonymously. However, at a high level:

- **Differentiated learning** is a step away from the one-size-fits-all approach to teaching. This approach considers the content, process, product, and learning environment. Differentiated learning examines the needs of students—whether that's looking at what content is best suited for their learning needs, how they best process information, or what product will best demonstrate their understanding.

- **Individualized learning** places more focus on student pacing. As Dale Basye, co-author of *Get Active: Reimagining Learning Spaces for Student Success*, put it in an article from ISTE, "If differentiation is the how, then individualization is the when." [1]

- **Personalized learning** provides the most student autonomy. Students have an active role in designing lessons and projects that are meaningful and relevant to them based on their interests, aspirations, and passions.

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[1] Basye, Dale. "Personalized vs. Differentiated vs. Individualized Learning." ISTE, 24 Jan. 2018, www.iste.org/explore/ Education-leadership/Personalized-vs.-differentiated-vs.-individualized-learning.

How to Think about Personalized Learning

While the Aurora Institute's definition of personalized learning is thorough and emphasizes the formal elements, consider reframing your mind to think of **personalizing learning** as a verb. For example, teachers are personalizing learning for students. Or teachers are **helping students personalize their learning.** Repositioning the word as a verb allows us to focus on how personalized learning looks in action, what makes it effective, and how we measure it.

With this in mind, for teachers and students to personalize learning, the learning must be:

Flexible

Students can learn on their terms, anytime, anywhere. It's about the "how, when, and where they learn."

Tailored

Teachers consider "each student's strengths, needs, and interests" to customize learning opportunities and match students' needs with specific content and instruction.

Empowering

Students have the freedom to make choices and be active in the learning process (and, by extension, to impact others' learning interactions).

Mastery-based

Students are evaluated on proficiency in key subject areas (against defined standards) as a better way to understand where students are excelling, making progress, or struggling.

Personalized Learning Examples & Best Practices

Flexible Learning Environments

A flexible learning environment where **students can learn at their own pace,** anytime, anywhere is an essential component of personalized learning. But what does that look like in practice? Consider providing flexible seating options and space to create models that illustrate student learning and understanding. Think about creating blended learning experiences to enhance and streamline instruction.

Achieving a flexible learning environment requires us to be innovative and resourceful. We have to get to know our students well. We need to know their strengths, needs, and interests to create an environment that provides various options for how, when, and where they learn. A blended classroom offers a balance of face-to-face and digital instruction, involves students in the planning and designing of learning opportunities, supports flexible pacing, and allows us to differentiate instruction in real-time.

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Empowering Students

Empowering students to be **active and invested in their learning** begins with giving them the freedom to make choices about things like how they learn, how they create evidence of what they know, and how they use what they learn to move forward.

Creating ePortfolios helps to invite students into the learning process. Students feel empowered when they choose which pieces to highlight or showcase as evidence of their learning. As they add to the portfolio, they also gain a sense of accomplishment over and ownership of the work they have produced. When students reflect on their work in the ePortfolio, they can celebrate what went well and identify what could be improved. This reflection is a powerful step in the learning process because it allows students to make informed and intentional choices about how to prepare as they move forward.
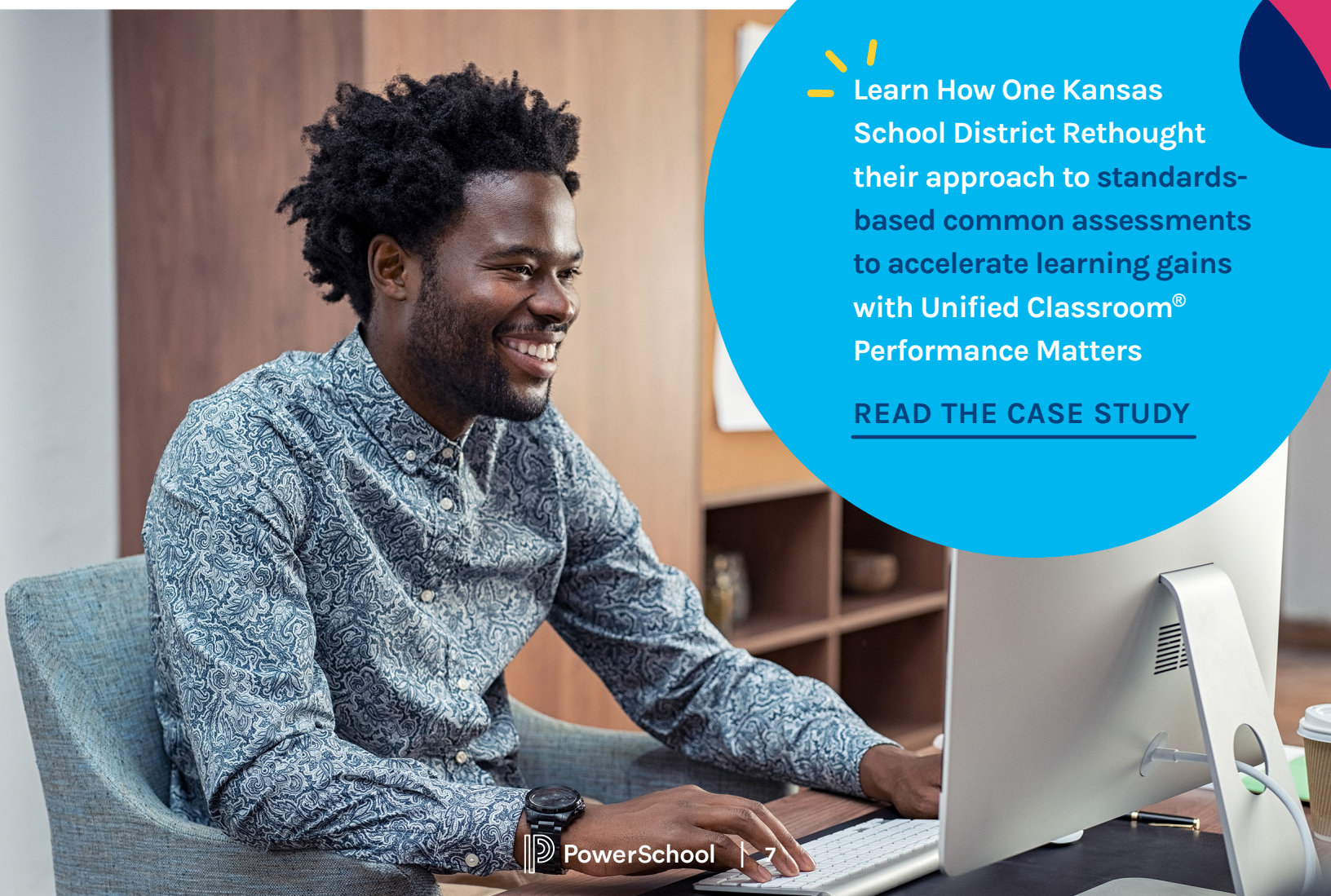
Tailored Content and Instruction

As a society, we have become quite accustomed to personalized services. We spend big money and lots of time gathering data from our online activity to curate news feeds, Spotify playlists, and pop-up ads that suit or satisfy our interests and needs. This type of analytical practice and curation is similar to what we do when we use data to drive our instruction. We use the numbers on standardized tests and other assessments to help tailor our education for our students. But it doesn't end there.

To customize and differentiate our instruction, **we consider how each student learns and processes information** and what types of resources and interventions may be needed for students to master the content. Then, we seek out platforms and programs that allow us to curate the learning experiences for each student. This process enables us to monitor the real-time progress of student learning and provide interventions or extensions based on each student's performance.

Mastery-Based Approach

The mastery-based approach is like performance reviews used in most industries to evaluate an employee's overall performance. These reviews are based on standards the company sets to measure employee performance and offer relevant feedback about where an employee performed above, on, or below the company's expectations.

We can employy standards-based grading or target skills-aligned rubrics in the same way. Students should **know what they are learning and how teachers will measure their performance** before learning begins. Schools that use mastery-based evaluations in conjunction with student-led conferences find that their students have better learning outcomes and a better understanding of their overall performance. An added benefit is that as students become more comfortable with assessing themselves, they begin to appreciate the strengths and weaknesses of their peers.

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