

Personalized Learning at a Crossroads: Early Lessons from the Next Generation Systems Initiative and the Regional Funds for Breakthrough Schools Initiative

Executive Summary

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Personalized learning in K-12 education is at a crossroads. Its big ideas—giving students more freedom and control over their learning, allowing students to move at their own pace, and letting students’ interests and talents drive what they learn—resonate with many parents, students, and educators. Its emphasis on self-direction, agency, and complex reasoning aligns with a society and economy that increasingly rewards creativity, problem solving, and adaptability.

Although the big ideas of personalized learning draw from long-standing themes associated with progressive education, personalized learning in its current form is still a relatively new phenomenon. As Kevin Bushweller explained in a recent *Education Week special report*, “Opinions about what it [personalization] should, or should not, look like vary widely” in the field. RAND Corporation researcher John Pane said in the same report that the ideas behind personalization seem intuitive, but “the evidence base is very weak at this point.” Meanwhile, advocates of personalization believe in its promise but are also unsure how to best move beyond a few isolated exemplars to spread personalization to more students and schools.

To better support the spread of personalized learning, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation launched two ambitious initiatives in 2014: the Next Generation Systems Initiative (NGSI) and the Next Generation Learning Challenge (NGLC) Regional Funds for Breakthrough Schools initiative. The Foundation funded six districts and six regional partners.

Next Generation Grantees

Next Generation Systems Initiative Grantees	Next Generation Learning Challenge Regional Fund Grantees
Dallas Independent School District, Texas	CityBridge, Washington, D.C.
Denver Public Schools, Colorado	Colorado Education Initiative
Henry County Public Schools, Georgia	Great Schools Partnership from New England Secondary Schools
Lake County Public Schools, Florida	LEAP Innovations, Chicago
Pinellas County Public Schools, Florida	New Schools for New Orleans
Riverside Unified School District, California	Rogers Family Foundation, with Oakland Unified School District

The Foundation charged the grantees with designing, launching, and replicating new personalized school models. That is, the Foundation expected the grantees to create coherent strategies for how schools should organize time, teachers, and students and the instructional approaches they should use—an ambitious goal given the nascent state of the field and the complex problems associated with change in schools. Though the Foundation wanted this investment to generate models for personalized learning and hoped that some models (or at least the start of models) would emerge during the grant period, they and their grantees understood that this grant program was the start of a much longer effort that would continue after the grants concluded.

In 2015 the Gates Foundation asked the Center on Reinventing Public Education to observe these grantees through the first two years of the initiatives. Our goal was to learn more about how these districts and regions were beginning to define and pursue personalized learning and what they were learning about how to innovate around personalized learning at scale. We oriented our work around two central questions:

- How do teachers and principals go about designing and implementing personalized learning approaches?
- How do the capacities, policies, and structures in schools and districts support or impede school-level innovation and its spread?

To answer these questions, we conducted over 450 interviews with more than 300 teachers, principals, superintendents, and central office staff in 17 different towns and cities. We observed classrooms in 39 schools and held focus groups with students. We surveyed 908 teachers from the initiatives about their instruction in these schools, as well as a nationally representative sample of about 3,600 teachers, which we used as a benchmark on teacher practice. We reviewed documents pertaining to district and partner plans for implementing personalized learning and other documents generated from the initiatives.

What we learned

Personalized learning had strong support in schools—and they changed instruction.

“I wish I had the opportunity to be in my own classroom as a student,” an enthusiastic elementary teacher in Florida said. “I love teaching like this,” she continued. “The students can see how excited I am, so they’re feeding off of that.” A Colorado elementary school principal said that personalized learning “is right for kids, and it’s not just a feeling . . . kids in the school are seeing growth.” In Dallas, an elementary school student said personalized learning was “not like any other kind of learning. We learn different stuff than other schools in a better way.” This enthusiasm was matched by significant effort on the part of teachers and, for some teachers, examples of interesting and exciting new practices.

At the same time, principals let teachers define personalized learning on their own, leaving academic rigor to chance and hindering schoolwide approaches.

During the course of our fieldwork, personalized learning practices rarely got beyond a handful of pilot classrooms in most of the schools we visited. In those pilot classrooms, teachers often focused on changing structures in their classrooms (e.g., seating arrangements, stations) rather than on rethinking how teachers and students engaged with academic content. At the district level, most central offices responded to personalized learning by granting schools waivers and exceptions rather than changing the system to support new approaches. At the end of two years, despite some pockets of innovation, few schools had developed replicable strategies for personalized learning as originally envisioned by the Gates Foundation.

Teachers were tasked with innovating but didn't have the strategies or supports they needed to successfully innovate.

In the end, the early stage challenges we observed in the initiatives reflect what happens when educators try to innovate—that is, discover ideas, procedures, and processes that are new to their school and use them—in systems and conditions that were not designed to support innovation. Among the challenges schools faced:

- Teachers and principals struggled to translate abstract goals into meaningful student outcomes to guide classroom practice.
- Teachers lacked useful systems and structures to learn through prototyping and iteration.
- Principals often failed to provide the coordination and guidance necessary to formalize and codify individual teacher experiments and convert them into school-level practices and principles.
- Central offices, despite encouraging schools to experiment and explore personalized learning, generally failed to fundamentally change structures, policies, and supports to facilitate innovation in schools.

Recommendations and a path forward for innovation

Taken together, the experiences of the schools in the Foundation's personalized learning initiatives followed a familiar pattern of promising practices struggling to replicate at scale across systems. For all their promise, the initiatives' challenges through the first few years of effort underscore the difficulty of innovating inside a system that was never designed for innovation.

The lessons learned from the successes and struggles of educators, school and district leaders, and partners who participated in the initiatives suggest that leaders who want to support innovation at scale must do four important things to build a more strategic system to support innovation:

First, districts must help leaders and teachers in schools **get clear on the problems that need to be solved** and what needs to change to address them by:

- setting clear goals to focus innovation
- bringing together educators to identify important problems
- reviewing the needs and contexts of their schools and treating each school as a case that needs tailored support

Second, districts must **create flexibility in the system**, at both the school and classroom levels, by:

- being explicit about what flexibilities already exist and identifying remaining rules and administrative practices that create specific pain points for innovating schools
- engaging all central office departments in personalized learning goals for students and ensuring they respect promised freedom of action for schools
- giving principal supervisors and principals more flexibility to consider broader outcomes in evaluation
- looking for or creating “spaces” that provide opportunities for flexibility, such as after school programs, summer school, or special purpose innovation “zones”

Third, districts must **build support for adult learning and knowledge management strategies** for innovation by:

- building embedded coaching supports for prototyping and iteration in schools
- creating structured support systems that help school leaders with change management
- creating and implementing a plan to collect, refine, and distribute knowledge and information with the goal of getting it in the hands of many educators

Fourth, districts must **identify which principals and faculties are positioned to design new models for instruction** and which are positioned to adopt and adapt existing innovative practice by:

- seeking leaders who are interested and motivated to innovate by hosting discussions about personalized learning and the system's broader goals for students
- establishing communities of practice to recruit and support collaborative learning among teachers and leaders from several schools
- supporting a design competition for schools to map out a new personalized design
- seeking out local charter partners who are poised for innovation and open to collaboration with the school district

In light of the major social and economic changes likely on the horizon, public education must find ways to support more innovation and experimentation. For a future where learning and work will look fundamentally different than it does today, personalized learning offers a path forward. But if personalized learning and other innovative approaches to improve teaching and learning are going to make the most of their potential and succeed at scale, public education must build a new strategic system for innovation. To meet every student's needs, changes to policy and practice—many of which will likely upset existing interests—are going to be necessary. Like other promising reforms that came before it, personalized learning is at a crossroads, and it is urgent that those who believe in its potential lead a path forward.

See our [full, interactive report](#) for detailed findings and recommendations, video interviews, and student projects.

About the Center on Reinventing Public Education

CRPE is a nonpartisan research and policy analysis center at the University of Washington Bothell. We develop, test, and support bold, evidence-based, systemwide solutions to address the most urgent problems in K-12 public education across the country. Our mission is to reinvent the education delivery model, in partnership with education leaders, to prepare all American students to solve tomorrow's challenges. Since 1993 CRPE's research, analysis, and insights have informed public debates and innovative policies that enable schools to thrive. Our work is supported by multiple foundations, contracts, and the U.S Department of Education.