

Competency- Based Learning and the Community Schools Model

PERSONALIZED LEARNING VISION FOR THE STATE
OF RHODE ISLAND BY MARY A. BUSH



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Executive Summary

When we consider that currently, fewer than 20 percent of Rhode Island’s low-income eighth graders are proficient in reading and math on the Nation’s Report Card, it’s time to self-reflect on our educational practices and decide what changes need to be made.¹ And it’s time we take this to heart: We cannot continue to work at the margins. There are already so many reforms in place and so much effort being done, yet we’ve only shown incremental improvements over the past thirty years. We know we have to do something big. This is where personalized and competency-based learning comes in.

Though there are a myriad approaches all aimed at raising student achievement, I feel a competency-based learning system would work best for our population in Rhode Island and especially in our school districts that have the highest level of low-income and high-needs populations. According to the Great School’s Partnership:

Competency-based learning refers to systems of instruction, assessment, grading, and academic reporting that are based on students demonstrating that they have learned the knowledge and skills they are expected to learn as they progress through their education. In public schools, competency-based systems use state learning standards to determine academic expectations and define “competency” or “proficiency” in a given course, subject area, or grade level. The general goal of competency-based learning is to ensure that students are acquiring the knowledge and skills that are deemed to be essential to success in school, higher education, careers, and adult life. If students fail to meet expected learning standards, they typically receive additional instruction, practice time, and academic support to help them achieve competency or meet the expected standards.²

With a competency-based approach, the “output” is the students’ learning rather than the seat time spent on the task. Infused in the competency-based approach is a strong multi-tiered system of support (MTSS), which focuses on the development of the whole child.

This new system would address two core issues that I see in the current education system: 1) Lack of stakeholder engagement in education and 2) Social promotion and the loss of a core foundation in the early grades.

And as a kindergarten teacher I understand that change to our educational practices has to begin from day one. Kindergarten is the foundation of education; it has to be strong and solid. Doing this well takes a team effort from family, school and community partners to get the job

¹ <http://ri-can.org/research/reimagining-education-reimagined-rhode-island>

² <http://edglossary.org/competency-based-learning/>

SCHOOL BACKGROUND

I work at the Veazie Street School, a K-5 public school in the heart of Providence. The school’s population hovers around 600-625 students, comprising mostly of Hispanic (50%) and African American (25%) students with some Caucasian (11%), Asian (4%), Native American (3%) and Multiracial (8%).

Veazie has an English as a Second Language (ESL) strand with one ESL classroom at each grade level. We also house a Special Education Discipline Referral Room for placement of special needs students throughout in the district. This room serves as a 40-day evaluatory placement room for new kindergarten students before they are assigned their “best fit” classroom in the district.

Our school is very much focused on implementing the Common Core State Standards, several professional development sessions are offered through the district and at the school level; teachers’ common planning time centers on addressing the standards in our classrooms.

In kindergarten we mainly use the Pearson’s Reading Street program to both assess and meet the literacy needs of the students. STAR’s Early Literacy Assessment is used on the district level to monitor student growth in both math and reading.

Coming up in the next school year we look forward to implementing a Blended Learning Model by increasing technology to a 3:1 ratio in each classroom. Software programs have been purchased to better track student growth and assist in personalizing instruction.

done right. Much like a building, if the foundation is weak and poorly built the higher levels of the building will surely crumble with no footing to stand on.

The same holds true for education. We want to present knowledge in a way that the students can embrace, layering firm levels of understanding and building on what they know, giving them opportunities to applying their knowledge going forward, and instilling in them the curiosity and self-direction that will, together, pave their way to becoming lifelong learners.

The Problem/Need

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Diversity in our student population

As an ESL kindergarten teacher, I have students with diverse needs. Generally speaking about a third of the students entering kindergarten have had pre-school experience, which prepares them well for learning. Some students are entering the learning environment for the first time. Some are new to this country and speak little to no English. Further, about a third of the students do not start kindergarten on the first day of school. Some parents wait until their child's sixth birthday before enrolling them.* Providence tends to have a transient population; it's not uncommon to lose or gain students during the year as they move from one neighborhood to the next, moving to a nearby town or to another state all together.

Inadequate wraparound services and social supports

Along with varied levels of readiness come varied levels of educational engagement—both from students and from families. It discourages me to have some disengaged students so early on in their educational journey. Unfortunately, the way our school system is structured enables this to happen. With a lack of strong social support systems in place (social workers, school psychologists, occupational and physical therapists, etc.) students' social and emotional needed go unattended. Chronic absenteeism runs high at my school at 34 percent. Indeed, across New England, Rhode Island has the highest chronic absentee rate.³ Some families new to the American culture do not realize the importance of establishing a strong home-school connection to better support their child's education while others simply do not have the bandwidth, with jobs and other obligations, to dedicate the time necessary—especially in the early grades.

***ATTENDANCE NOTE**

It has also historically been the case that students could enroll as late as mid-year, depending on their birthdates. In 2016, however, Rhode Island passed a law mandating that all students who would turn six years old within a given school year must attend kindergarten for that full year. This should make a big difference moving forward because under the old law whether a child spent 90 school days with me or 180 days, they moved along to the first grade the following year.

³ Rhode island chronic absenteeism

Lack of student agency

Especially at the early grades, all adults need to model a care and ownership of students' learning. When that doesn't happen, the evidence is not difficult to see: Students display lethargic behaviors, homework is seldom completed, and more often than not student's achievement suffers greatly. These students need our help to learn the importance of formal education and build their own self-motivation in order to engage with their learning. With more social services in place for parents on how to better assist their children in school, these children can be guided in taking ownership of their educational experience.

Higher levels of rigor

Kindergarten today is not what it used to be years ago. In the past, the focus was more specifically on social development; it was more fun and play. Today's preschools offer those early social development skills and kindergarten instead focuses on learning to read and write, developing number concepts and starting analytical thinking, solving problems, and drawing conclusions. There are Common Core standards that need to be met in both math and literacy.⁴ Kindergarten sets the academic groundwork for the years to come.

Social promotion

It's currently not uncommon to socially promote students to the next grade level even if they have not shown complete mastery in a particular subject area or grade level. I bet we all know someone who just made it through by the skin of their teeth! For some students this practice may work; their work is scaffolded in the later grade, and with this extra support they are able to backfill knowledge, "catch up" to their peers, and move along. But for many students, moving them along year after year creates a wider gap between what they know and what they're expected to know.

They just continue to be a step, or multiple steps, behind the rest, struggling to keep up with their academics—which unfortunately often leads to higher dropout rates, ill prepared high school graduates, and higher rates of disciplinary problems, both in high school and beyond. Looking specifically at third-grade reading prowess, students who do not read on grade level by third grade are four times less likely to graduate high school on time—six times less likely if the student is from a low-income family.⁵ And even more jarring, a high school dropout is sixty-three times more likely to be incarcerated than college graduates.⁶

⁴ http://www.corestandards.org/wp-content/uploads/Math_Standards.pdf;
http://www.corestandards.org/assets/CCSSI_ELA%20Standards.pdf

⁵ <http://www.aecf.org/resources/double-jeopardy>

⁶ http://www.prisonpolicy.org/scans/The_Consequences_of_Dropping_Out_of_High_School.pdf

The Vision

With the guidance of families and schools and with social and emotional support systems in place, a competency-based approach to learning, where we all collectively strive for every student’s excellence, would enable student agency, voice, and choice, and create a system where all stakeholders take ownership over our students’ learning.

Understandably, this is a lot to digest. I came across an interesting passage while reading “A Path to the Future” that pulled it altogether for me. Simply put, *“the combined impact of competency-based education and personalized learning is amplified when integrated with blended learning.”*⁷ If we look at each of these components separately, it’ll frame our thinking going forward.

Rhode Island’s own Richard Culatta summarizes competency-based learning as: “Learning experiences in which students progress through a learning pathway based on their ability to demonstrate competency [what they know or can do] rather than on their time spent learning or completing previous courses.” He builds off of this in his definition of personalized learning: “Learning experiences in which the pace and the approach are adjusted to meet the needs of individual students [so that they may all reach competency] and in which the learning is closely tied to students’ interests and experiences [so that they may develop agency over their own learning].”⁸ Blended learning is an educational program in which a student learns at least in part through delivery of content and instruction via digital and online media with some element of student control over time, place, path, or pace. If competency or content mastery is the goal line, personalized learning is how we get there—and blended learning is the way to make personalized possible.

With these definitions in mind, my vision for the ideal learning environment in my school setting became clearer. Recently I attended the Highlander Institute’s Blended Learning & Technology Conference in Providence, RI and specifically a session that I felt I could apply to the needs of our Providence students titled: Why Do We Need Grade Levels? Blending for Competency. The superintendent, Dr. David Richards, and assistant superintendent, Carrie Wozniak, of the Fraser Public School District in Michigan presented.

As Superintendent Richards stated: “One of the greatest challenges we are facing in education as a whole is the call to redesign and rethink schools. We must ask ourselves ‘what is in the best interest of our students, and what do we want graduates to know and be able to do?’ and determine how we can create a school system that will allow them to demonstrate their mastery of learning on an individual basis.” With

⁷ <http://bellwethereducation.org/publication/path-future-creating-accountability-personalized-learning>

⁸ <http://ereducause.edu/articles/2016/3/what-are-you-talking-about-the-need-for-common-language-around-personalized-learning>

these questions in mind, the Fraser school district has taken a strategic approach to developing a K-12 competency-based and customized learning system that allows students to progress on an individual path, pace, and place and take ownership over their own learning.⁹ Innovative teaching is the norm rather than the exception. Teachers have broken the grade barriers by working cooperatively to meet the needs of all their students. As Dr. Richards stated, they are “working a lot smarter not harder!” to meet individual needs. Also, the district has made a commitment to fostering student leadership and ownership over their learning.

With a strong multi-tiered support system (MTSS) in place, they have created an environment that extends beyond the traditional classroom, students experience flexibility in learning, in pacing, and in demonstrating their understanding. By holding students accountable for their learning and promoting a growth mindset, Fraser Public Schools is transforming learning for each and every student. “We are creating lifelong learners who will be able to access information, communicate, research, and demonstrate inquiry,” says Wozniak. “We want a Fraser Public Schools diploma to represent much more than a piece of paper.”

A competency-based approach similar to that in Fraser would suit the needs of the diverse Providence student population well. There are many components of competency-based learning in place in Providence already from which we can build. Personalizing learning through use of personal literacy plans (PLP) and individual educational plans (IEP) are already in use. Advancements in technology to create a rich blended learning practice has already begun. Schools are presently incorporating the use of data walls and tiered assessments to analyze and better understand the needs of all students and to guide differentiated instruction. These are just some of the elements needed to construct a solid learning environment for developing lifelong learners.

Here’s what it could look like for all students starting with kindergarteners who are just entering school:

Addressing diverse needs immediately and throughout

Students enter formal schooling at widely varying levels of readiness. By implementing a “soft-start” model, Providence Public Schools can take the needed time to evaluate students and place them in classroom by homogeneous groupings. By assessing students first to determine their knowledge of letter names and sounds, determine math skills and reading levels, and to get to know the kids and let them get to know the teachers better, we will ease anxieties and set the stage for more personalized learning.

Creating a community of support for students

With so much focus on teaching to the standards, the students' social and emotional skills are often overlooked. Providence could join the bandwagon of a number of districts that have already begun exploring social-emotional learning. Indeed, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, which is also known as CASEL, is exploring this field that emphasizes nurturing concepts like students' relational skills, decision-making and self-management to help foster greater life success both inside and outside the classroom and Rhode Island is a part of this work. It also comes as the Every Student Succeeds Act, the new federal education law, places a greater emphasis on non-academic concepts and "whole child" issues.¹⁰

Providence would also benefit from a multi-tiered support system similar to that in Colorado. With response to intervention (RtI) and the positive behavior interventions and support (PBIS) program in place in Providence for a number of years now, we could do what Colorado did and combine these efforts with a stronger family, school, and community partnership. Colorado defines their MTSS as a prevention-based framework of team-driven, data-based problem solving for improving the outcomes of every student through family, school, and community partnering and a layered continuum of evidence-based practices applied at the classroom, school, and district level.¹¹

The collaboration of families, schools, and communities as active partners in improving learner, classroom, school, district, and state outcomes is essential. Their MTSS provides both academic and behavioral support in a safe and caring environment—which is an approach that any school would flourish under. It's true what they say, "It does take a village to raise a child."

Allowing for student voice to be heard

Basically student agency refers to empowering students through curriculum approaches that engage them, being respectful of and seeking their opinions, and giving them opportunities to voice their thoughts.¹² By including a student-agency component allowing a level of control, autonomy, voice, and choice, we'd empower students and give them the opportunity to take ownership of their own learning. Those students who are self-motivated and have had strong educational ethos and skills instilled in them early in life can pick up their pace and are free to explore areas of interest at will. Some may need more coaching from the MTSS community, helping them to get and remain focused and invested in their learning.

¹⁰ http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/rulesforengagement/2016/08/social-emotional_learning_states_collaborate_to_craft_standards_policies.html

¹¹ <http://www.cde.state.co.us/mtss>

¹² <http://nickrate.com/2013/06/04/student-agency/>

An effective way to engage students in their own educational growth while still ensuring necessary content is being learned is through Individual Learning Plans (ILPs). Similar to the PLPs and IEPs already in place in our schools, the ILP is a personalized document that tracks student progress toward needed content and skill development. What separates ILPs from PLPs or IEPs is the student's ownership over the creation of the ILP.

Each ILP is developed by the student with guidance from her teachers and community supports and charts her progress toward goals during each school year, to ensure she is on the right path to meeting the standards. ILPs are viewed as integral to student success and are considered a strategic priority in achieving the goals of high school reform. As seen in the district spotlight, these ILPs can be fluidly integrated into student learning even at the kindergarten level, creating a foundation of student agency and ownership over their own learning.¹³

Ensuring mastery before students progress

By holding students accountable for achieving mastery through use of their PLPs, IEPs, and ILPs, we can ensure that students are cognitively and socially ready for each new level of their learning. This will ensure that students graduate high school without gaps in their knowledge and are fully ready to engage in either college or career.

Research suggests that learning how to read happens in the first few years of school (after which students begin to “read to learn”).¹⁴ It's been said that third grade reading levels determine high school graduation. Whether that's true or not, it does emphasize the importance of solidifying the learning that takes place in the early school years.

13 <http://bellwethereducation.org/publication/path-future-creating-accountability-personalized-learning>;
<http://www.personalizelearning.com/2012/02/personal-journeys-in-kindergarten.html>

14 http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/inside-school-research/2011/04/the_disquieting_side_effect_of.html?_ga=1.240372618.846556897.1457993116

Competitive Advantage

Moving to this competency-based model of learning and growth would transform but not upend the system as we currently know it. Staying true to the components of competence-based learning, expecting “mastery” levels of understanding, will ensure that the students are given the time they need to grasp concepts and build on their knowledge.

Because learning isn't linear, true personalization can't be either. Learning is a complex, interconnected web, particularly in the early elementary grades. Students need to have the opportunity to learn con-

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cepts and construct their own knowledge and understanding in a way that honors their ideas.¹⁵

When learning is personalized students take ownership of their education. Teachers shouldn't be the hardest workers in a classroom—students should be! Allowing greater student agency, by increasing student choice engages students in learning, they want to learn because they chose the topic and understand what they need to do to meet the standard.

If we as a district are committed to creating life-long learners that will become tomorrow's independent citizens and active members of society then we must understand the importance of personalizing learning and personalizing teaching from the bottom up. Let's start personalizing on day one in order to develop lifelong learners with a strong foundation on which to build on.

¹⁵ <http://www.dreambox.com/?gclid=Cj0KEQjwoau9BRDMvsnv5MCh24UBEiQAKOqcfb0DWR4qdzUjlcE5z9zull.9jUeV78Eg-NQb4FpEY1vkaAv5f8P8HAQ>

Landscape Analysis

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What are the major policy barriers currently in place that stand in the way of a competency-based approach with a strong MTSS that addresses both the academic, social and behavioral needs of students and their families?

As we work to move toward a competency-based approach to learning using wraparound services to overcome social difficulties, there are a number of policies and other barriers that emerge:

- **Money:** The first barrier that comes to mind is funding and resource allocation. It would be a costly endeavor to furbish schools with full time social workers, school psychologists, occupational and physical therapists, and special education resource teachers using the same formulas for funding that are currently in place in the district.
- **Mindset:** It might be difficult to get some teachers, parents, and students on board with a “no grade level” mind-set. Teachers would have to be able to let go of their traditional teaching ways, working solely with those 26 students assigned to them, and think of the whole student body as “our kids,” working with children based on their needs rather than what grade level they're in. Some teachers get set in their ways and become intimidated by having to try some-

thing different. Parents and students, accustomed to traditional ways may also need to adjust to demonstrating mastery of competencies before moving ahead. And students would need to see the benefits of competency-based as they progress at different speeds through the content they need to learn.

- *Special populations:* English-language learners and special needs students may also seemingly create issues in a competency-based approach to education: Will English-language learners need to show competency in English before they can show competency in their core subjects? How much time will be allowed for English limited students to catch up? Will severely disabled students and special needs students be held accountable for meeting the same level of academic and social-emotional standards as their peers? What happens if they are held back too many times?
- *Teacher of Record:* The definition of the teacher of record may have to be clarified. As of now this role is defined as “an educator who is responsible for a specified proportion of a student’s learning activities that are within a subject/course and are aligned to performance measures.”¹⁶ In a competency-based setting where teachers are taking shared responsibility of all students, the question of accountabilities may pose an issue.
- *Carnegie Units:* In the older grades specifically, the dilemma of moving from seat-time to credit flexibility may pose as a barrier. Everyone seems to be comfortable with or at least used to the Carnegie Unit base system. It may take some time for school districts to base academic credit on mastery rather than only on seat time.

¹⁶ <http://www.tspc.state.or.us/meetings/nov2012/3.9b.pdf>: Developing a definition of Teacher of Record

What are the major policy gaps that must be filled before a competency-based approach, with a strong MTSS that addresses both the academic, social and behavioral needs of students and their families, can be realized?

My vision of a competency-based school with a strong support system in place is closely related to that of a community school. By definition a community school is both a place and a set of partnerships between the school and other community resources. Its integrated focus on academics, health, social services, and community engagement leads to improved student learning. The Coalition for Community Schools makes the following recommendations for supporting community schools:¹⁷

¹⁷ www.communityschools.org
Coalition for Community Schools,
c/o Institute for Educational
Leadership 4455 Connecticut
Avenue, Suite 310 Washington, DC
20008

- *Define and Support Community Schools:* The community school strategy should be defined in district, local government, state, and national policy. It should be supported by legislation. Regulations and guidelines for all programs that provide funding that touches the lives of children, youth, and their families, in the journey from early childhood to college should be supported as well.
- *Provide Incentives:* Policy at the federal, state, and local levels should provide incentives for schools and community partners to work together to achieve results through the community school strategy.
- *Fund Site Coordinators:* Policymakers at all levels are urged to provide or contribute to a dedicated funding stream to support the work of community school coordinators. As findings show, site coordinators are the fulcrum of a community school and they have proven their value as a resource to principals, allowing school administrators to focus on instructional improvement.
- *Fund Professional Development:* Movement to a community school strategy requires a shift in mindset among people working in schools and in community partner organizations. It requires them to share leadership and to embrace partnership and teamwork.

What capabilities are needed to realize my vision?

Realizing my vision and financing this type of community school would be quite different to the funding formulas currently being used by my district and by the state. The Coalition for Community Schools offers a comprehensive view of where resources may come from:¹⁸

- *District:* On average, districts supply approximately one quarter of total community school funding. In Rhode Island, 52 percent of funding comes from the district.
- *Federal Government:* The second highest percentage of resources, after local school districts, comes from the federal government—approximately 20 percent—through coffers like Title I. In Rhode Island, 9 percent of funding comes from the federal government.
- *State Government:* State government resources amount to 14 percent in community schools. In Rhode Island, state government covers 39 percent of costs.¹⁹

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ All state revenue reporting from RI-CAN's State of Education microsite: <http://ristateofed.ri-can.org/>

- *Private Foundations:* On average, 13 percent of community school funding comes from private foundations; philanthropic and corporate partners provide a notable source of dollars, technical assistance, community influence, and volunteer time and talent.
- *City Government:* Local municipalities provide similar amounts of support at 12 percent.
- *Community-Based Organizations:* The balance of resources (15 percent) comes from a mix of community based groups such as the United Way; in-kind support, which includes local building use and volunteers; and smaller amounts from county, local, private, and individual donor contributions.

The role of the site coordinator is vital to securing and managing diversified funding. Community schools are better prepared to survive the ups and downs of grant funding and budget fluctuations by developing various sources of support.

What shifts in culture must be made?

Ownership Across All Stakeholders: Competency-based learning enables students to take responsibility for their own learning by becoming aware of the educational standards they are required to meet and reflect on ways of achieving these standards. With the use of Individual Learning Plans (ILP), learners are individually taking ownership for their learning by recording their goals and documenting strategies for meeting these goals. They'll come to understand that effort is rewarded and competency is needed to move ahead.

Teachers' roles will be more of a "partner" in learning with their students. Working with students in homogeneous groupings, which might include children of different ages and grades, teachers will work together to address the individual needs of their learners. Once they understand the process they'll see that they are working smarter, not harder! Also, teachers will no longer be asked to socially promote students who aren't ready to move on, giving them more agency over their students' learning.

Parents' would also become more active participants in their students' learning: They would be able to track their children's growth, identify specific target areas of strength and weaknesses, and support their children more discretely.

This will also give parents a clearer understanding of the child’s learning needs—and the negative consequences of absenteeism. Coupled with a stronger social-emotional support sector, this should help improve attendance rates amongst students.

Whole-Child Education: Schools would no longer be viewed as isolated entities; instead support services for students and their families would be integrated directly within schools. Wraparound services would help schools address social and non-academic barriers to student learning. The theory behind wraparound services suggests that students whose health and wellness needs are attended to will be healthier, more focused, and better able to learn.²⁰

²⁰ http://massbudget.org/report/_window.php?loc=Uplifting_the_Whole_Child.html: Uplifting the Whole Child: Using Wraparound Services to Overcome Social Barriers to Learning—Colin A. Jones, August 11, 2014

Strategies for Change

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State Level

- *Define Community Schools:* At the legislative level RI-CAN could advocate for community schools by defining this strategy and highlighting its relevance to the population of our state.
- *Procurement Flexibility:* RI-CAN could advocate for budgetary flexibility within these schools, addressing the start-up and long term cost.
- *Site Coordinators:* RI-CAN could urge legislation to contribute and support the need to hire site coordinators in community schools that would handle funding formulas and budgetary decisions.
- *Incentives:* Working with state officials, RI-CAN could address the need for incentives for schools and community partners wanting to work together for the good of the community.
- *Human Capital:* RI-CAN could continue to address the need for teachers’ professional development and training in a community school setting, redefining the teacher’s role, and the importance of adding non-instructional staff to this community school setting.

- *Accountability:* RI-CAN could lead the discussion on revising the “Teacher of Record” role in community school settings.
- *Research and Policy:* RI-CAN could conduct ongoing research of community schools using this in-depth analysis to guide policy-making reforms.
- *Communication:* RI-CAN could keep the entire community school population informed through electronic and social networking. They could act as a liaison, forming partnerships, between school and community leaders.
- *Fellowship Program:* RI-CAN could continue to do what it did this summer—forming fellowships to communicate and inform educators that are interested in being a part of school reform.

Individual Level

- *Leadership Role:* As a result of my RI-CAN fellowship I can bring what I’ve learned back to my practice. I can apply what I’ve learned by becoming more involved in school leadership groups such as the School Improvement Team (SIT) or the Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) team.
- *Role Model:* I can act as a role model among my peers for addressing individual student needs. I’ll attempt to increase the lines of communication between teachers in hopes of working more closely with them in grouping students homogeneously for literacy instruction in programs such as “Walk to Read” where students can be a part of instruction on their own level of understanding.
- *Student Agency:* I will be including a stronger student-agency component into my own kindergarten class, developing a kindergarten ILP template to use with my students. I’ll focus on the importance of getting to know the whole child and building on their background knowledge. Using ILPs will empower students by allowing a level of control and choice, giving them the opportunity to take ownership of their own learning.
- *Social-Emotional Support:* I will continue to address the social-emotional needs of students by tapping into the partial support team already in place and reaching out to community agencies as

needed. I'll continue using the Second Step program to help students transition to elementary school giving them the skills and confidence they need to adjust to a full day of learning.

- *Kindergarten Registration:* Looking ahead to next year, I plan to re-introduce a “soft start” to beginning kindergarten. Kindergarten is the first impression of school for so many children; assessing them first and getting to know their personalities better will enable us to group them homogeneously in a setting that best meets their needs. Personalizing starts on day one!

Community level

- *Highlander Institute:* I was pleasantly surprised to learn that members of the Highlander Institute will be working at Veazie Street School during our blended learning rollout. There is so much talent in our own little state that we can tap into and learn from. This approach should be used more often, why reinvent the wheel when there has been so much work and effort already done in educational reform?
- *Connections:* RI-CAN could act as a liaison, connecting schools that are seeking change with educators and leaders in our community that have the experience and are willing to act as role models, guiding others and helping them to turn strategic visions into realities to better personalize learning for all students.

ABOUT RI-CAN

We founded ri-can because all children deserve access to great public schools, regardless of their address, the color of their skin or how much their parents earn. This work has never been more critical in Rhode Island, as our kids face persistent opportunity gaps and our state struggles to redefine itself in a 21st century economy.

www.ri-can.org

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mary A. Bush, from Veazie Elementary School, is a 32-year veteran of the Providence School Department. She is currently an English as a second language kindergarten teacher at Veazie Street Elementary School. Having been an ESL student herself, she has a strong connection to English-language learners and is constantly seeking new ways of customizing instruction so that ELLs can reach their learning potential.

As a Learning Pioneer, Mary will use her years of experience to address the growing challenges of diverse learners. She'll dive deep into best practices and blended learning models to shape a forward-thinking vision for personalized learning in Rhode Island schools.

Mary on her classroom: "My kindergarten classroom is multisensory. Guided by the Chinese proverb 'I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I understand,' my students are exposed to various tasks throughout the day that allow them to learn through various modalities. Students navigate through activities they are involved in using iPads and computers, listening centers, hands-on activities and role-playing.

