

Stretching the Brick & Mortar

PERSONALIZED LEARNING VISION FOR THE STATE
OF RHODE ISLAND BY JOHN BOUTCHER



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Executive Summary

Over my 16 years in the high school classroom, I have seen many students meet success. I have also seen many students struggle to find a reason and a motivation to conform to the increasing demands of the legacy traditional educational system as it is now practiced. For the last two years I have been department chair in the mathematics department and have gained a new perspective on a broader population of students than can usually be seen from a single classroom.

For a few years prior to becoming department chair, I worked with some students for whom the brick and mortar school setting and the “one size fits all” curriculum was not meeting their needs. I saw the benefit to those students when a little creativity and flexibility were allowed to be endeavored and the decisions for those students allowed to expand opportunities. In these educational moments, students had their educational needs met but also their interests and goals. When I became department chair, I saw an opportunity to work toward expanding this creativity and flexibility to all students. After some research I realized that personalized learning was the perfect fit for this vision.

While there are many possible visions for personalized learning in Rhode Island, this one is grounded in these experiences, values, and the need I see for our future students—as well as informed by many of the ideas at the forefront of educational thought and practice in recent years. Specifically, this vision is founded on nine key components, all of which are instrumental in changing the way that we do “school” in the future.

- *Competency-Based*: Using competency-based education to move away from “seat time” and “age-cohort” based evaluations of student learning;
- *Contextualized, Relevant*: This competency-based education must be personalized, contextualized and relevant for every student to be fully engaged in learning.
- *Flexible Pathways*: Flexibility in location, content, delivery method and student-competency driven timing is vital to student success;
- *Learner Agency*: Student choice and voice in all aspects of their program of studies, including place, method of instruction, pacing and options to show competency;

- *Open-walled:* Content instruction and/or course options are expanded out of the school building into other locations, whether through technology or physical placements;
- *Socially Embedded:* Students have opportunities to interact with many and various elements of society in order to gain skills and dispositions to give them the ability to grow socially and emotionally as well as academically;
- *Learner profiles:* capturing multi-faceted inputs (skills, interests, aspirations) about each student;
- *Personal learning paths:* enabling students to tailor experiences to their own needs and goals;
- *Individual mastery:* assessing progress against standards and goals and advancing students at their own pace; and
- *Flexible learning environments:* offering multiple instructional delivery approaches.

Every student would have an individual learning plan in which the key components of flexible pathways, learner agency, and options for learning outside of the school building are detailed. Learning outside of the school building is sometimes called “open-walled” and needs to be “socially-embedded” as well to nurture a student’s growth in all facets of life, including formal content education, social and civic responsibilities and readiness for ever-changing career pathways. The goal of these components is to increase student engagement so that the student has not only the opportunity to learn, but the desire and motivation as well.

This vision is also well positioned to allow for gradual changes in the culture of education in the state. The vision calls for an expansion of current practices and the addition of new, related practices to expose students, teachers and the community to the benefits of these changes without a fundamental restructuring of the whole system. The gradual, incremental changes will provide an increasing comfort level on the part of all constituents with the idea of change in the educational system. This and the expected gains for students from these changes should lay the foundation for more radical, transformative change in the future.

The Problem/Need

The education of our children is a right and is the responsibility of our whole society. Yet, too many students in classrooms today are not engaged in their own learning—and too few community members are engaging in students’ learning. In order to improve engagement, not only students, but parents, teachers and the community at large, must increase engagement with the education for each and every student.

There are many factors which have led to a decrease in engagement in students, with the three main conditions often suggested being: a “one size fits all” curriculum, a factory model of education which was inherited from the Industrial Era, and a “Teacher/Curriculum centric” model.

On base, the “one size fits all” curriculum is not necessarily a problem. It is important that students all have basic competencies in academic areas that our society has deemed vital and valuable. I consider these basic competencies the “core academic skills and knowledge” that our children should know and be able to use to be successful members of society. The issue arises in looking at the breadth of “core academic skills and knowledge” students are asked to learn: It seems that, in the last 20 years, what is considered “core academic skills and knowledge” has expanded so that it leaves little room for student choice in coursework or voice in expressing or investigating their own interests.

Building off this “one size fits all” curriculum is a factory model of how we do learning: a teacher in a classroom of 28 or more students who are supposed to learn the exact same information in the same sequence, at the same time, has the potential to stifle creativity and restrict flexible and critical thinking in students and teachers. The traditional setup of a classroom with 28 desks in rows facing the teacher, also serves to reinforce the desire for conformity and limits efforts to develop an atmosphere of flexibility and individuality. Students are expected to be passive receivers of information, to move from class to class to be taught the next subject. There is little flexibility in scheduling either of courses or in the day of the student. Due to age-based or grade-based cohorts for accountability there is also not flexibility in the time allowed for students to become proficient at the curriculum chosen for them.

The traditional classroom model also puts the curriculum and the teacher at the center as the focus of learning. There needs to be a change of focus, so that teachers can teach students, not the subject. In the secondary school, teachers are credentialed or licensed in a subject area. Under “No Child Left Behind,” in order to teach a course in a core subject

area, teachers had to be “Highly Qualified” in that area. While the idea that secondary teachers need to be fully trained and knowledgeable in the content area is valid and necessary, it is not sufficient. The term “teacher of mathematics” for example, implicitly or explicitly focuses attention on the subject area, not the student. Until the focus of all subject area teachers is on the strengths, needs and interests of the student, the mandate for education will not be fulfilled. The onus of responsibility for education has been placed on the school and teacher. Until and unless students have buy-in to their own education, and the educational system has the flexibility to meet each student at her need, improvement in readiness for college and careers will be slow and hard-won.

The legacy of the old “one size fits all” model clearly impacts many different elements of society—the most immediate of which is on students and their families. If students drop out or are edged out of school before graduating by a system that doesn’t work for them, they often become a continuing burden on their families and on society more broadly. High school dropouts are more likely to have low paying jobs: on average, a high school dropout will earn \$200,000 less than a graduate and \$1,000,000 less than a college graduate over her lifetime. They are more likely to have children at a young age, when they can barely afford to care for themselves let alone a new family. And they are many times more likely to commit a crime (high school dropouts commit about 75 percent of crimes in the U.S.).¹

Teachers also are impacted negatively. The increasing rate of people who are leaving the profession due to burnout, low wages and poor working conditions is another symptom of a system that is not functioning well. As *The Atlantic* reported: “With the exception of retirement ... there are only a handful of overarching factors that push teachers out the door—family or personal reasons, other career opportunities, salary, administrative support and overall job dissatisfaction... Some were wholly unhappy or drained and left in pursuit of another career completely; some wanted more money; some wanted both.”²

The costs for turnover of teachers are significant. Richard Ingersoll of the University of Pennsylvania estimates that teacher turnover costs districts upwards of \$2.2 billion every year.³ This total includes hiring costs as well as indirect costs such as loss of professional-development investment, experience gained, and school specific knowledge. “Students from the lowest-income families suffer the most. Inexperienced teachers (those with less than three years on the job) frequently land in classrooms with the neediest and often the most challenging students. Beginning teachers frequently start their careers at hard-to-staff schools where resources may be scarce—most often urban schools—simply because there are more jobs available there.”⁴

1 DoSomething.org, (2016). “11 Facts about High School Dropouts, DoSomething.org.” Retrieved from <https://www.dosomething.org/us/facts/11-facts-about-high-school-dropout-rates>

2 *The Atlantic*, (2013). “Why Do Teachers Quit? And Why Do They Stay?”. Retrieved from <http://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2013/10/why-do-teachers-quit/280699/>

3 Owen Phillips, National Public Radio (March 30, 2015). “Revolving Door of Teachers Costs Districts Billions Every Year.” Retrieved from <http://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2015/03/30/395322012/the-hidden-costs-of-teacher-turnover>

4 George Lucas Education Foundation, (2016). “Public Education Faces a Crisis in Teacher Retention.” Retrieved from <http://www.edutopia.org/new-teacher-burnout-retention>

In the long term this has a great impact on the community, on business productivity and on the economy as a whole. Students who are not prepared for and do not have the skills to be productive members of the community become another segment of our society which requires resources that are insufficient already. This can only hurt economic growth and what hurts one segment of society hurts all.

Rapidly changing career and social factors have made this a critical moment to examine the need for changing the educational system. The abundance and relative affordability of technology has created an opportunity to get new and innovative teaching and learning methods into the hands of all children. The proliferation of technology allows all persons the opportunity to explore and expand their knowledge outside of the smaller world of their home, school and community. They can access information, personal connections and experience ways of thinking that will broaden their horizons and connect them to a greater knowledge base than ever before.

The knowledge base of the world has changed dramatically in the last 20 years. No longer is the general knowledge base a relatively fixed or static body. The printed encyclopedia is a good example of this rapid change. In the past, an encyclopedia was able to give you information about many topics or areas and it would need to be updated regularly to keep up with innovations or changes in accepted views in many subject areas. Today, some books and encyclopedia are out of date even before they can be printed and distributed. When it once took a decade or more to make significant changes in or progress on an area of knowledge, it now only takes years or even months. “Buckminster Fuller created the ‘Knowledge Doubling Curve’; he noticed that until 1900 human knowledge doubled approximately every century. By the end of World War II knowledge was doubling every 25 years. Today things are not as simple as different types of knowledge have different rates of growth. For example, nanotechnology knowledge is doubling every two years and clinical knowledge every 18 months. But on average human knowledge is doubling every 13 months.”⁵ As this pace of change has increased, we have moved from a static knowledge base to one which is dynamic, or changing constantly. These changes are disseminated instantaneously with the proliferation of the internet and instant worldwide communication capabilities.

This change in knowledge base growth and proliferation of technology has drastically changed the modern work-world and society. Many tasks which were done by rooms of people are now completed by one laptop or tablet, a robot in a manufacturing facility, or a team of people working in different parts of the country or the world, communicating

⁵ David Russell Schilling. (2013). “Knowledge Doubling Every 12 Months, Soon to be Every 12 Hours.” Taken from <http://www.industrytap.com/knowledge-doubling-every-12-months-soon-to-be-every-12-hours/3950>

in real-time. Because of this shift in work condition and requirements as well as the dynamically changing knowledge base, students must be afforded the opportunity to gain both practical and flexible skills in order to thrive in this environment. How people interact socially has also changed greatly in a short period of time. Social media outlets have increased the reach of interaction from a local family or community unit to virtually the whole world. While this surely has benefits, it has also caused a decrease in the opportunities for young people to learn important interpersonal social skills, such as face-to-face communication and conflict resolution, phone etiquette, and business writing skills which are vital for success in the work world.

Even with the massive growth in information, there is still a need for common set of skills and understandings. This need is addressed in the “Core Academic Skills and Knowledge” component of this vision. In Rhode Island, this is prescribed at the high school level in Secondary Regulations as 14 courses of basic skills in the major content areas: four courses in English Language Arts, 4 courses in Math, 3 courses in History/Social Studies and three courses in Science and 6 courses in other areas such as the fine and performing arts, physical education, financial literacy, civics and world languages. Students must also pass one performance-based diploma assessment. New enhancements to the traditional diploma currently being considered include an optional Commissioner’s Seal which will allow students to demonstrate numeracy or literacy skills by performance on optional assessments such as ACT, SAT, AP, PSAT, PARCC or other industry based credentials. Another enhancement are optional pathway endorsements in areas such as Business & Industry, STEM, Humanities, Arts or others.⁶

⁶ Rhode Island Department of Education, (2015). “The Rhode Island Diploma System.” Retrieved from <http://www.ride.ri.gov/StudentsFamilies/RIPublicSchools/DiplomaSystem.aspx>

The Vision

Currently the BEP is approached with a traditional course-based sequence of content using Carnegie units and grade systems to verify seat-time requirements. While there are no specific course names or sequence specified in the BEP, Rhode Island has adopted national standards in many areas. These include, the Common Core State Standards in English/Language Arts and in mathematics, the Next Generation Science Standards as well as content specific standards in science. In my short-term vision, all students would still be required to complete

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these same “core academic skill and knowledge” components, however, a competency-based evaluation system would be used to give flexibility to students and schools as to when and how students met these requirements. Inclusion of competencies in civic, social and life skills will be essential to ensure all students are well-balanced and productive members of society.

The competency-based evaluation system would allow students flexibility, by allowing them to show competency when they are ready. This focus on student readiness requires a change in the use of age-based or grade-based cohorts. A student is not required or expected to stay in step with others of his or her age or “grade” in school. Each student is viewed as an individual with strengths and needs, interests and abilities. This is the fundamental change in “personalization.”

Each student would be required to design a “Personal Learning Plan” which would take into account both the “core academic skills and knowledge” components of his or her education, but also the student’s interests and vision for their future. This learning plan is intended to give the student both the voice and the choice over many aspects of their education. This plan would offer an education that would be relevant and contextualized to their own interests and life, and also provide learner agency. The learning plan will increase student engagement because it will be student focused and designed.

“A personal learning plan (or PLP) is developed by students—typically in collaboration with teachers, counselors, and parents—as a way to help them achieve short- and long-term learning goals, most commonly at the middle school and high school levels. Personal learning plans are generally based on the belief that students will be more engaged to learn, will achieve more in school, and will feel a stronger sense of ownership over their education if they decide what they want to learn, how they are going to learn it, and why they need learn it to achieve their personal goals.”⁷

Each student will meet with a team of school faculty, staff, administration, guidance counselors, support personnel, parents and perhaps community members to develop a plan that meets the short-term and long-term needs and interests of the student. The team will ensure the student attains those competencies set out by statute and designed by the student with team support.

The learning plan will generally fall into a set of learning pathways. These learning pathways will include components that support and encourage students to complete and fulfill their own learning plan. These components are the specific elements which “stretch” the brick and mortar. The developing Career and Technical Education (CTE)

⁷ Great Schools Partnership, (2014). “The Glossary of Education Reform.” Retrieved from <http://edglossary.org/personal-learning-plan/>

pathways are already in place in many schools and this effort will be expanded and coordinated with the “core academic skills and knowledge” components in the student’s learning plan. The CTE pathway may also include opportunities for students to learn outside of the school building, including internships, paid or unpaid, work-study programs and mentoring by community members. Courses and experiences within the CTE pathways or other external placements can and should allow students to meet core knowledge competencies as an integral part of their curricular composition.

Students who choose an academic learning pathway can plan to include varying elements into their plan, including virtual learning, part-time college, early entrance to high education. These students will also be able to design their learning plan to complete their “core academic skills and knowledge” components and focus on a specific area of interest within the content areas. Students could focus on STEM or a specific STEM area, humanities, social sciences, performing or visual arts. Through distance learning, internships, higher education opportunities or community-based experience, students can earn credit for learning in ways that “stretch” the traditional school experience.

The increased amount of flexibility in time and how competencies are met means that students may choose to combine more than one area of interest, or develop pathways that combine “career” and “academic” elements. This becomes possible because students will be able to show mastery through competency-based education.

Along with changes in how school looks for students is a critical change in how the education workforce will function. As *Promising State Policies for Personalized Learning* published by the iNACOL Center for Policy Advocacy explains: “Educators and leaders will take on new roles as the work individually and collectively to design customized pathways to graduation for every student. Many will require new skills to adapt to instruction for students with varying levels of competency and interests. This will require changes to pre-service preparation, professional development, and evaluation frameworks to ensure educators have the support and resources to make this transition.”⁸

In personalized learning practice the role of the teacher must change. The teacher’s role as the imparter of knowledge will need to decrease as that role is taken on more by technology or non-traditional “teacher” models. The teacher’s role will change to that of a coach/advisor. The teacher guides and advises each student on the pathway which the student has chosen. The teacher needs to be able to identify student learning strengths and styles, adapt instruction to student needs, establish a culture of collegiality and respect and encourage

⁸ Patrick, S., Worthen, M., Frost, D. & Gentz, S. (2016, May) *Promising State Policies for Personalized Learning*. Vienna, VA: International Association for K-12 Online Learning (iNACOL)

and support flexible scheduling and pacing within the classroom. This shift in responsibilities in the classroom as well as the likely changes in school structure and timing will require professional development that targets areas that are personalized to the teacher as well.

The use of micro-credentials or badging is a way to make professional development personal and relevant to teachers. With ESSA's new flexibility current teachers could stack competency-based micro-credentials as part of a teacher focused professional development scheme in order to develop important skills for improving practice in personalized learning. These could also form or contribute to competency-based teacher credentials and licenses.⁹

Digital Promise, whose mission is to “accelerate innovation in education to improve opportunities to learn,” has developed a framework to ensure micro-credentials: Focus on a single competency; have a key method backed by research; require the submission of evidence; and include a rubric or scoring guide.¹⁰

The MacArthur Foundation defines digital badges—a type of micro-credential—as “an assessment and credentialing mechanism that is housed and managed online. Badges are designed to make visible and validate learning in both formal and informal settings, and hold the potential to help transform where and how learning is valued.”¹¹

With the change in teacher roles must also come a change in the evaluation systems used to assess teacher effectiveness. Evaluation systems must be able to measure how effectively a teacher is performing according to a set of expectations or standards. When a teacher's role changes, the set of expectations or standards must as well. Bellwether Education Partners says that “states and districts should ensure that the multiple measures used in educator evaluation systems are broad enough to include appropriate indicators of teacher effectiveness in personalized learning contexts. Because blended learning models leverage technology to regularly collect data on student progress, these models produce a wealth of real-time data on teachers' impact on student learning that could be included in evaluations, as appropriate to the model used in a particular school.”¹²

A glimpse at the long-term vision shows a fundamental restructuring of both the educational requirements and the physical plant of our school systems. The organization of the LEAs will be regionalized to some degree with neighboring school systems combining into regional large campus facilities. These facilities will be organized into a university model with specific buildings or areas for varying content or career areas. The “core knowledge” competencies will be embedded as much as possible in each “school's” course of study. Interdisciplinary learning will be the norm within and among the different schools. Social,

⁹ Center for Teaching Quality, (2016). *Micro-credentials: Driving teacher learning & leadership*. Retrieved from <http://www.teachquality.org/microcredentials>.

¹⁰ Digital Promise, (n.d.). “Educator Micro-credentials.” Retrieved from <http://digitalpromise.org/initiative/educator-micro-credentials/>

¹¹ MacArthur Foundation, (2016). “Digital Badges.” Retrieved from <https://www.macfound.org/programs/digitalbadges/>

¹² Bellwether Education Partners, (2014). *A Policy Playbook for Personalized Learning: Ideas for State and Local Policy Makers*. Retrieved from http://bellwethereducation.org/sites/default/files/Play10_ModifyTeacherEval.pdf

emotional and civic competencies will also be embedded in the course of study through experiential learning in the community, service opportunities, mentors, work-study or internships.

This vision addresses many of the needs identified above by allowing flexibility in the curriculum the student can choose. Outside of the “core academic skills and knowledge” components, students can have great flexibility in what courses or pathways they choose to follow. Within the “core academic skills and knowledge” components, students can have options for how they learn and prove mastery of the key concepts and skills they need within the BEP. Students can choose a traditional classroom setting, a blended-learning environment or even a virtual or distance learning program. This would be decided and evaluated regularly by the student and the learning plan team based on the student’s personal strengths, needs and desires, family circumstances and availability of resources targeted to the student’s learning pathway. This involvement of the student in decisions about his or her own education is called “learner agency.”

The vision will have a positive impact on student engagement because of a shift to learner agency and a culture change that focuses on the needs and strengths of the student. Education will be student focused and flexible. Another positive impact will be a change in the culture of education in the school system as well as the view of education in the community in general. Improved outcomes in each student’s education also improves the social and business climate of the whole community.

Learner agency increases student engagement and offers the student flexibility as to the pacing of their learning. Students do not need to “stay with the class” as competency-based evaluation frees the student from the traditional school day and school year restrictions. Students can choose to concentrate on one or a few competencies for shorter time periods to complete those competencies before starting other competencies within their plan. Students would also have the option of working on their full course load at the same time as well. All these aspects of learner agency would need to be made in cooperation with the student, parent and learning plan team.

Research into personalization and blended learning has shown an increase in not only engagement, but also gains in proficiency on academic skills and standards. According to a Rand corporation survey,

Achievement analyses find that there were positive effects on student mathematics and reading performance and that the lowest-performing students made substantial gains relative to their peers. These gains in both mathematics and reading translate into effect sizes that

*are relatively large compared with those measured in studies of other types of interventions. Although results varied considerably from school to school, a majority of the schools had statistically significant positive results. Moreover, after two years in a personalized learning school, students had average mathematics and reading test scores above or near national averages, after having started below national averages.*¹³

13 *Continued Progress: Promising Evidence on Personalized Learning.* Retrieved from http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR1300/RR1365/RAND_RR1365.pdf

This vision also helps meet needs of students by allowing flexibility in the delivery of content. This includes not only the way the content is delivered by the teacher, but also who delivers the content. These changes in delivery of content are currently being developed and evaluated in many areas. For example, these alternate delivery methods include “flipped classrooms” (imagine using Khan Academy videos as homework, allowing more flexibility during class time for project-based learning or small-group instruction), station rotation, blended learning, distance learning, and virtual learning, among others. These methods all include the need for a classroom teacher to deliver content and assess competency, or to monitor student progress and effort—or a combination of the two.

All the content delivery methods mentioned are based within the school building itself and leverage currently available resources. Another flexibility factor in this vision is the location of delivery of education. When stretching the brick and mortar, other locations must be considered as viable. With distance and virtual learning expanding the options for delivery, they also expand the locations in which students can learn. With the presence of technology everywhere, students will not be limited by the time or location in which they can learn. In effect, learning can occur twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. As with life-long-learner adults, learning can take place in any situation or location. Learning is not restricted to school or home, but can be accessed in all aspects of life. Learning can take place at work, in community service and also in religious or social activities.

The workplace becomes a viable, alternative learning space for credits in many competencies. These could be academic as well as applied or skill-based, or social-emotional competencies. Vetting and monitoring of assigned workplaces will be the responsibility of the school or some other public agency which will monitor progress on competencies and compliance with regulations. Cooperation between secondary education and higher education also offers many opportunities for alternate placements and locations. Students who show the ability and need to access learning at higher education institutions will

have the flexibility to attend local courses or take virtual courses from any location.

Credit flexibility is a better approach to enable personalized learning because it moves away from seat time as a basis for credit. A policy shift to statutory credit flexibility is preferable because it avoids the need for one-time waivers which require districts and school leaders to make a bureaucratic appeal and require state approval. These policy changes allow school districts to award credit based on mastery of standards and competencies.¹⁴

While there are effective and promising examples of personalized learning occurring in these leading states and around the country, there is still a need to expand these programs “at scale,” district-wide, state-wide, and even regionally. Education Cities a non-profit network of 31 city-based organizations that is working to accelerate the pace of innovation at scale. To reach this ambitious goal, systems were challenged to design, launch, and replicate schools that implement personalized learning in a holistic manner, and to overhaul supporting district and city functions (e.g., human capital and facilities) so that they fully support the redesigned schools. Ongoing support for some of these sites is being provided by CEE-Trust and Next Generation Learning Challenges (www.nextgenlearning.org).¹⁵

One of the key components of Education Cities’ personalized learning system is the “Personalized Learning for All Students.” Learning experiences for all students are tailored to their individual developmental needs, skills and interest. Personalized learning includes the following elements:

Learner profiles, personal learning paths, individual mastery and flexible learning environments.

Another interesting component is the inclusion of a requirement that it be “Optimized for Scale.” The model must be replicable and financially viable on public funding, which requires:¹⁶

- *Financial Sustainability:* The school can fund 100% of operating expenses on public per-pupil revenue within four years of launch;
- *Scalability:* The school model can be replicated at scale if it demonstrates impact.¹⁷

14 Patrick, S., Worthen, M., Frost, D. & Gentz, S. (2016, May) *Promising State Policies for Personalized Learning*. Vienna, VA: International Association for K-12 Online Learning (INACOL).

15 Education Cities. (n.d.). *Personalized Learning at Scale: Case Studies of Leading Cities*. Retrieved from http://education-cities.org/wp-content/uploads/EC_PL_leading-cities-case-studies.pdf

16 Education Cities. (n.d.). *Personalized Learning at Scale: Case Studies of Leading Cities*. Retrieved from http://education-cities.org/wp-content/uploads/EC_PL_leading-cities-case-studies.pdf

17 Education Cities. (n.d.). *Personalized Learning at Scale: Case Studies of Leading Cities*. Retrieved from http://education-cities.org/wp-content/uploads/EC_PL_leading-cities-case-studies.pdf

The Competitive Advantage

The New England Secondary Schools Consortium (NESSC) is working to promote forward-thinking innovations in the design and delivery of secondary education across a five-state region. Rhode Island is one of the partner states. Its objectives are:

- *Schools that truly prepare students for life:* Ensuring that every high school diploma awarded in our states certifies student readiness for college, careers, and civic responsibility.
- *Student-centered learning opportunities:* Providing multiple learning pathways, both inside and outside of schools, that allow students to pursue their interests, passions, and career ambitions. Measuring what matters most: Building practical, commonsense, and effective accountability systems that value educators, create stronger schools, and ensure student preparation.¹⁸

And Rhode Island is already moving in this direction: State regulations are changing to provide more flexibility for LEAs to determine how best to meet a student's needs. The newly proposed Secondary Regulations and changes in the Diploma System help to position Rhode Island as a leader in school reform. The institution of a Commissioner's Seal and endorsements for specific career pathways help to move personalization to forefront as a goal for the state's educational plans. Dr. Ken Wagner, Rhode Island Commissioner of Education notes, "As our 2015–2020 Strategic Plan notes, Rhode Island is committed to creating an education system in which every student is engaged in learning environments that meet their individual needs. We also aspire to measure the progress of our students based on their mastery of rigorous academic standards and 21st-century skills. In particular, we believe all students will benefit from access to a wide range of high-quality early college and early career programs through which they can earn valuable, portable credits and credentials. We know that the New England Secondary School Consortium shares these values and commitments."¹⁹

The increase in the use of technology in many or most aspect of a student's education will also mean a large increase in the amount data available for analysis. The analysis of this data will affect how all agencies relate to and react to the educational system. Students and parent can monitor progress and make data-driven decisions about each student's education. Schools and local educational agencies will be able to monitor student progress and the effective of ongoing programs

¹⁸ New England Secondary Schools Consortium, (n.d.). "About NESSC." Retrieved from <http://newenglandssc.org/about/>

¹⁹ New England Secondary Schools Consortium, (n.d.). About NESSC. Retrieved from <http://newenglandssc.org/states/rhode-island/>

and practices. State educational agencies will be able to monitor effectiveness at the local and state levels, while the federal Department of Education will be able to monitor and coordinate state results.

This vision for stretching the traditional brick and mortar school system includes elements of most of the current pilots or reformed systems already in practice in leading parts of the country. Still, this vision includes a conscious decision to maintain some of the effective traditional elements of the current system. The first is maintaining the “core knowledge” as outlined in the Basic Educational Plan in Rhode Island. Another is to maintain a sense of community within the school, but expanding that impact by establishing a team of teachers who help each student develop their learning plan. By “stretching” the walls, students are able to expand that community outside of the school environment. By maintaining a flexible view of education, students who benefit from a traditional approach are also able to have their needs met.

These additions and changes to the current system aim to be a practical and realistic plan for short-term reformation of the school system, while establishing “stepping stones” to longer term radical, transformative changes. These “stepping stones” are integral parts of the vision and prepare different parts of the school system for further changes. In particular, once students have experience with an education that is engaging to them, they will advocate for more opportunities and flexibility which will further “stretch” the boundaries of place and method for education. As teachers become comfortable with these changes and new means of schooling, they will continue to innovate and also advocate for more changes and more flexibility for their students and for themselves.

Recent changes in federal regulations as well as changes in Rhode Island State regulations have opened up possibilities for the changes entailed in the vision. With the passage of ESSA (Every Student Succeeds Act), the states have been given greater latitude in designing accountability systems that allow localities to show where students are in their learning in real-time, as well as the ability to use multiple measures of students learning or growth. This allows states to more easily choose how, where and when students can show that they meet state defined standards and competencies.

ESSA also allows states to design systems of assessments that provide data to support continuous, real-time improvement of student learning towards college and career readiness, rapid closure of subgroup achievement gaps, and provide flexibility to align with and support next generation learning models. ESSA specifically permits the use of competency-based assessments, instructionally embedded assessments,

interim assessments, cumulative year-end assessments, computer-adaptive assessments, and performance-based assessments.²⁰

While there are new initiatives being presented for increasing the amount of personalized learning in Rhode Island there are still policies in place that could be considered barriers to full implementation. Some of these policies are being considered for change to help implement personalized learning and others are not even in the discussion stage. The two most relevant policies are a numeric grade-based determination of success, and the broad-based 20 Carnegie units or “courses” required by the Basic Educational Plan. The introduction of competency-based education, moving from seat-time and this grade-based determination of success to credit flexibility and the establishment of multiple flexible pathways would set the stage for a fundamental change in how education is done in Rhode Island. Further, the educational system should consider whether the current “mile wide and an inch deep” curriculum and standards called for in our 20 Carnegie units at the high school level is optimal or even realistic. Perhaps a reduction in the number of standards and basic requirements but a deeper more thorough understanding of the reduced set of standards would be more beneficial.

There are also some policy areas that, while not necessarily barriers to progress, may need to be modified or expanded to allow for the changes mentioned above to be put in practice. One of these policies is the requirement for a teacher of record. Another is the traditional length of day, length of school year and standard period arrangement of the school day. If and when a student has flexibility and opportunity in their educational choices, the responsibility and accountability for that student’s education must also be expanded. When students are gaining competencies and/or credit in placements outside of the school or classroom, there will need to be a community-wide oversight and accountability procedure in place for the protection of the students as well as to ensure that they are supported and held responsible for their learning. Allowing multiple flexible pathways for students will also necessitate a development of innovative systems of assessment and new generations of accountability models. At this time, in Rhode Island, there are no policies in place for a comprehensive, coordinated, cooperative instructional, assessment, and accountability model that are meant to move schools and students to personalized learning.

New Hampshire has been moving toward a statewide competency-based education for more than 10 years. In July 2005, the New Hampshire State Board of Education adopted rule changes²¹ to require high schools to base academic credit on mastery rather than seat time.²² This change was in full effect for the school year 2009 and beyond. In

20 Patrick, S., Worthen, M., Frost, D. & Gentz, S. (2016, May) *Promising State Policies for Personalized Learning*. Vienna, VA: International Association for K-12 Online Learning (iNACOL).

21 New Hampshire Department of Education, (2014). *Minimum Standards for Public School Approval*. Retrieved from <http://education.nh.gov/legislation/documents/ed3062014-min-stands.pdf>

22 New Hampshire Department of Education, (2006, May 2). *Technical Advisory #12: Competency Assessment of Student Mastery*. Retrieved from <http://education.nh.gov/standards/documents/advisory12.pdf>

2013, in collaboration with educators from across the state and the National Center for the Improvement of Educational Assessment and the Center for Collaborative Education, the Department developed state-level competency standards in mathematics, English language arts, science, art, and work-study practices.²³

New Hampshire is pioneering the Performance Assessment of Competency Education (PACE) pilot program, a first-in-the-nation accountability strategy, offering reduced levels of standardized testing together with locally-developed common performance assessments.²⁴ The transformation to a more competency-based system has helped New Hampshire schools cut the dropout rate from 2.5% in 2008 to 1.26% in 2012.²⁵

These new policies and practices will require a shift in the culture of not only the school and the educational establishment, but also the student, parent, teacher, and community. As the teacher's role changes, the expectations of all facets of the community will also have to change to understand and accept that change. Students and parents will need to know and understand that the focus of accountability and responsibility will be on the student to a much greater degree than it currently is, and that the responsibility will grow as the student ages and matures. The student will need to be an active rather than a passive agent in his education. If there are going to be multiple flexible pathways then businesses and other agencies in the community will have to expand their support for education and the opportunities for students.

The need for communication and a common understanding of what personalized learning is and is not, is top-priority for the introduction of personalized learning either in pilot programs or as a state wide rollout. Unless and until everyone involved with education in the state has a common language for personalized learning, there will be avoidable misconceptions and misunderstandings that could easily derail any efforts to promote change. There are many opportunities to let all people know what personalized learning is and most importantly, what it can do to benefit students.

Helpfully, determining the roles that participants can play in the spread of good news and information about personalized learning has been an ongoing effort among many of the partners interested in this work here in Rhode Island.

As one example, Eduvate RI is leading the way in promoting personalized learning at-scale in Rhode Island. As they note, "personalized learning demands new practices of students, families, teachers, schools and districts, and the institutions that support them like state governments and teacher preparation institutions. For personalized learning

23 New Hampshire Department of Education, (2014). "State Model Competencies." Retrieved from <http://education.nh.gov/innovations/hs-redesign/competencies.htm>

24 New Hampshire Department of Education, (2014). "Performance Assessment of Competency Education (PACE)." Retrieved from <http://education.nh.gov/assessment-systems/pace.htm>

25 New Hampshire Department of Education, (2014). *New Hampshire: Our Story of Transformation*. Retrieved from <http://education.nh.gov/documents/nh-story.pdf>

to be effective at a scale, all parts of the ecosystem must be aligned to thinking about supporting students in these new ways.”²⁶

The efforts of this group have a broad base of support and they are clearly a vital partner for teachers to educate and influence decision makers toward personalized learning. As the program coordinator for Eduvate RI, Katie Beck, says “RIDE, the Rhode Island Office of Innovation, Rhode Island Mayoral Academies, Highlander Institute and other partners are launching the RI Personalized Learning Initiative to support personalized learning state-wide. The initiative aims to support educators and administrators to develop, pilot, and grow new models for personalized learning, and to facilitate the sharing of lessons learned and best practices.”

I fully support these efforts to engage Rhode Island in discussions about personalized learning. I also look forward to the day when these efforts can be rolled-out at-scale for the whole state. This is an exciting time to be a leader in education and I look forward to the future of education in Rhode Island. A future full of hope, renewal and promise.

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

John Butcher, from North Kingstown High School, is a 26-year veteran teacher in North Kingstown, RI. He has taught high school math for the last 17 years and is currently the mathematics department chair. He enjoys music performance and also learning various world languages.

John is excited to work in the Learning Pioneers program to synthesize the personalized learning opportunities that are appearing in Rhode Island regularly. He feels that working to develop and promote policy around personalized learning is important and timely.

John on his classroom: “Class starts with student questions on the previous assignment, followed by a review of student-generated notes from the next section. Then I model a few representative problems on an interactive whiteboard. For the remainder of the class, my students work in small groups or individually, as desired, and I serve as a coach and mentor for their problem-solving.”

