

# A Shared Commitment to Success

**PERSONALIZED LEARNING VISION FOR THE STATE  
OF RHODE ISLAND** BY KATHRYN DUSAL



# Table of contents

<b>Executive Summary</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>1 The Problem/Need</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>2 The Vision</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>3 Competitive Advantage</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>4 Landscape Analysis</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>5 Strategies for Change</b>	<b>18</b>

# Executive Summary

American education seems to be at a real crossroads. The tug-of-war between doing things as we always have and trying to find a way to meet the unique needs of today's learner has become a controversial topic as innovators clash with traditionalists. The fact of the matter is, though, that today's students are being promoted through schools and are emerging underprepared for the challenges of the future. A study from the National Center for Education Statistics shows that 20 percent of students needed remedial classes upon starting college, and 20 percent of students seeking to enter the military were unable to pass the academic portion of the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery.<sup>1</sup> Other staggering statistics show that 25 percent of United States high school freshmen fail to graduate on time, and every year 1.2 million students drop out of high school. Almost 2,000 high schools across the United States graduate less than 60 percent of their students.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Forum Guide to College and Career Ready Data, May 2015.

<sup>2</sup> dosomething.org, "11 Facts About High School Dropout Rates."

A shift to a personalized learning model is a solution to this problem because rather than simply reforming the current system, it will *transform* the way education is practiced. Richard Culatta of the Rhode Island Office of Innovation defines personalized learning as "learning experiences in which the pace and the approach are adjusted to meet the needs of individual students and in which the learning is tied to students' interests and experiences." James Rickabaugh of the *Institute for Personalized Learning* further expands this definition:

*An approach to learning and instruction that is designed around individual learner readiness, strengths, needs, and interests. Learners are active participants in setting goals, planning learning paths, tracking progress, and determining how learning will be demonstrated. At any given time, learning objectives, content, methods, and pacing are likely to vary from learner to learner as they pursue proficiency aligned to established standards. A fully personalized environment moves beyond both differentiation and individualization.*<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Tapping the Power of Personalized Learning, James Rickabaugh, p.6.

It is easy to see how this model greatly contrasts traditional education, in which students are not assigned tasks based on readiness, strengths, needs, and interests, but rather by the dictation of a curricular framework, demands of seat-time, and grade-level expectations. Students rarely are given the opportunity to choose how learning will be demonstrated, but rather must pass the test, turn in the essay, or participate in a project that has little meaning for them. In the current system, students are expected to progress at the same pace. While many teach-

ers will offer differentiation in an attempt to help students meet the expectations of the current objectives, students are expected to move to the next unit whether they've mastered the previous one or not. The students who are not meeting the expectations fall further and further behind, become less engaged, and stop seeing a purpose for their attention, effort, and attendance. Shifting to personalized learning will alleviate these problems by engaging students and inspiring them to achieve, be curious, and be equipped for a lifetime of problem solving and learning.

The transformation to true personalized learning for Rhode Island's students requires the buy-in of *all* stakeholders involved. What would the pieces of this look like?

- Administrators would provide a clear vision and direction for their districts, and provide appropriate resources and professional development activities
- Principals would create a flexible environment in which teachers and learners can flourish
- Parents would be excited about the brand new opportunities for their children and become more involved than ever before in the educational process
- Students would become key resources in their education and have a voice in their learning goals and outcomes
- Community partners would engage with schools and students to provide practical and hands-on learning experiences
- Teachers would adjust their pedagogical practices to employ a collaborative approach to education in which they partner with all of the above stakeholders to facilitate a shared commitment to success

The *teacher* is the imperative—and often overlooked—piece of this intricate puzzle. As the “face of the classroom” and the traditional deliverer of instruction in our *current* industrialized system of education, the teacher must become an enthusiastic champion of personalized learning in order for a successful transition to this model to happen. Most teachers have powerful assumptions about what school should be, and the idea of change is often met with the wary need for assurance that the change will result in a vast improvement. Also, many school leaders do not take the time to appropriately engage teachers to prepare them for a change of such magnitude. Initiatives are rolled out with little concern for teacher acceptance or readiness.

While not all teachers understand personalized learning as it is stated in the above definitions, many may already have had some sort of snapshot of personalized learning in their classrooms. When tapped, these experiences can open the door to a conversation about real transformation, rather than simply finding ways to tweak the current system. Ryan Krohn, assistant superintendent in Waukesha, Wisconsin asked his staff, “Can you tell me about a time where you were part of an effective learning experience?” He shares that everyone had a story, and just about everyone could articulate a powerful personalized learning experience.<sup>4</sup> These stories can inspire teachers to yearn for more positive outcomes and create a conversation about change.

This vision will serve to outline several essential components of this transition for the teacher, will shed light on possible obstacles to teacher participation, and will propose some solutions to make teachers more accepting of a new learning model which will increase student engagement and achievement and also prepare students to be productive and prepared citizens in our twenty-first century landscape.

<sup>4</sup> *Tapping the Power of Personalized Learning*, James Rickabaugh.

## The Problem/Need

This vision for educational transformation in Rhode Island comes at a time when real change is not only necessary but completely possible. The necessity is simple: Many of our students are not fully engaged in their learning and are not prepared for the demands of their futures. In many schools, education is manifested as something a teacher does to a student rather than something a teacher does *with* a learner. The best students are simply complying with the process of accumulating academic content rather than building learning capacity. The students who attend and participate are provided a curriculum that many times is not relevant nor contextualized, and leaves the students prepared to achieve in yesterday’s world—not today’s or tomorrow’s. This is the system that we have inherited from our parents and grandparents, and it is not simply enough “to prepare today’s learner for yesterday’s challenges.”<sup>5</sup> In many cases, the current system is not even achieving *that* outcome. The underachieving students are merely attending, and many of the underachieving students stop attending regularly altogether. In Rhode Island, 43 percent of middle school students and 56 percent of high school students in urban districts are absent twelve or more days in a school year.<sup>6</sup> This norm has come to be accepted, and

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<sup>5</sup> Rickabaugh, p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> *2015 Rhode Island KIDS COUNT Factbook*.

in many cases these students fall behind but move on anyway. Due to curricular demands and linear learning frameworks, “many students are ushered on despite an insufficient and limited understanding of content, leaving them with serious gaps in their ability to learn at the next level.”<sup>7</sup> Students are pushed along to the next level, regardless of proficiency. In this current model, teachers feel as if they have very little autonomy in what happens in their classrooms. They feel as if their ability to create meaningful learning experiences is stifled by the demands of seat-time and curriculum frameworks that are centered around standard units of study that all students must complete using set classroom materials. Teachers have become accustomed to dealing with achievement gaps by engaging in one education reform initiative after another instead of considering the possibility of a true transformation of the classroom where the role of the learner and the teacher are *shifted* to ensure purposeful education where *learning*—rather than instruction and curriculum—is the focus.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> *A Transformational Vision for Education in the US, Education Reimagined.*

<sup>8</sup> Rickabaugh, p. 7.

### ***Teacher Tales***

*In my English/Language Arts classroom, students are exposed to five units of study. I use the word “exposed” because the breadth of skills and standards that students are expected to achieve is really presented at a drive-by pace. Students who are compliant will complete the work, meet the standard on the essay and score high on the assessment and move on. Students who show up but do not complete the work, who fall below proficiency on the essay, and score poorly on the assessment will also move on to the next unit—and ultimately, the next grade. The learning environment is not flexible enough for me to inspire the proficient learners to move on while slowing down to find a way to engage the reluctant or less adept learner. The frightening result of this is that there are 14-year-old students walking around with 10-year-old proficiency. The gap widens for these students and the idea of achievement seems further off. This disengagement leads to a myriad of other problems for the student and the school.*

—anonymous RI teacher

So why is *now* the time for a total transformation of Education in Rhode Island? First and foremost, teacher dissatisfaction seems to be at an all-time high. A poll conducted by the *Huffington Post* revealed that teacher dissatisfaction is connected to the education debate at the national level.<sup>9</sup> No Child Left Behind, Race to the Top, the new Common Core Standards and the standardized test debate—these all have worn teachers down as they try to quickly become acclimated to the new initiatives (oftentimes with insufficient support) while still manag-

<sup>9</sup> “Teachers’ Satisfaction Tanks on Survey When Higher Expectations Come with Fewer Resources,” *Huffington Post*, 2012.

ing their normal teaching responsibilities. These findings corroborate the evidence compiled by MetLife, who published an extensive report in 2011. Many teachers are ready for something different but are wary of showing up on the first day of school to hear about another quick-fix bandage that will be put on the system. RTI, PBIS, another intervention block for the struggling learner, an enrichment activity for the over-achiever—these are all reform initiatives meant to solve the problems in our *current* system, rather than identifying the *system* as the problem. As frightening as the idea of a fundamental makeover to education is, there are two pieces of good news. The first is that there are many successful models of personalized learning happening all over the country—some in our very own back yard. The second is that Richard Culatta, the Chief Innovation Officer at Rhode Island’s Office of Innovation, is passionately focused on transforming Rhode Island’s education system to a personalized one. His vision sees Rhode Island as a “Lab State” in which all schools are all-in. Culatta’s vision, coupled with the flexibility that could be afforded to schools due to Rhode Island Commissioner of Education Ken Wagner’s Empowerment initiative, provides the opening that innovative educators and partners need to start implementing real change. The burning questions left are:

1. What would it take to change the school culture around education initiative so that teachers are willing to invest their energy and enthusiasm for the long haul (rather than simply waiting for the “fad” to pass, as so many before have)?
2. How can we create a space for innovation in a traditional school environment?

### ***Possibility***

*As you enter a middle school classroom, you see learners highly engaged in a variety of activities. You notice a few of them at low carrels in one corner of the room working by themselves, a small group that appears to be working on a joint project, some students in pairs, and others cycling through individual conferences with the teacher. The teacher explains that the learners are meeting with him to update their goals, and in some cases, to set new goals for the next phase of their work. He notes that managing classroom behavior is almost a thing of the past—he spends much more time processes instead. He used to spend his time planning, delivering, and following up on lessons and reminding students to do what he expected of them. Now, he says, they play an active role in setting individual learning goals aligned to standards, planning what and how they will learn, identify-*

*ing the resources they will need, and determining how to demonstrate their learning. As a result, the learners feel a much greater sense of ownership and responsibility for their learning. The teacher works primarily as a coach and adviser, providing specific strategic instruction when necessary.*

—Tapping the Power of Personalized Learning, James

## The Vision

# 2

In order for a smooth transition to personalized learning to take hold, there needs to be a shared acceptance of the new model among the state, administrators, and most of all, teachers. Veteran teachers are used to the coming and going of educational fads, and many of them are conditioned to simply dig in their heels and wait for a new fad to come along and replace the old one. It is important for teachers to not view the shift to personalized learning in this way, but rather they should become excited at the new opportunities that personalized learning will provide for them and their students. To facilitate this change of mindset, a multi-step, careful rollout of personalized learning is outlined and elaborated on below.

### ***Step 1: Union endorsement and involvement***

Many teachers are skeptical of the transition to blended learning—which is a part of personalized learning—because they fear that putting kids in front of computers will open the door to larger class-sizes and the elimination of jobs. *Local* union leaders (at the district level)—who are champions of protecting jobs and rights of teachers—may be wary about a new initiative if they don't fully understand how it will positively impact students without negatively affecting the union's contract. It is wise to not only ask for the union's support in promoting personalized learning, but also ask for its involvement in designing the new model and plans for its implementation. Kerrie Dallman, the president of the Colorado Education Association shares her thoughts about why teachers may show resistance and how the union can help:

*Innovation has landed on the shoulders of schools and teachers at a fast and furious pace for the last decade or more. Some of these innovations stuck around for a year, sometimes three, before they were*

*replaced with the next greatest innovation. It is reasonable for teachers to be suspect of learner-centered education, not because of what it is meant to achieve, but because of the history and often failure of past innovations in education. What's different about this newest innovation called learner centered approach is that it isn't really new at all. The concepts have been around since the sixties and are something that teachers and their unions have been advocating for a long time. However, it is reasonable that our members approaching this latest launch of this initiative with great trepidation. The reason for this is that unions are not often included from the very earliest stages of the visioning process and so it is perceived as just one more thing that is being done to teachers. If this movement to reimagine public education is to be successful, it is imperative that representatives of the education associations be full partners in the visioning, planning and implementation of learner-centered education. Schools and districts that have created strong collaborative partnerships with their unions have experienced great success, while those that have not often see implementation falter due to a lack of buy-in.*

Working collaboratively with unions at the state and national level to plan the implementation of personalized learning, to provide an endorsement, and to equip local union leaderships with a basic understanding and vocabulary with which to discuss personalized learning, will increase the amount of teachers who are willing to participate by alleviating their suspicions and debunking the myth that increased technology eliminates the need for certified classroom teachers.

***Step 2: Employ an energized campaign for personalized learning***

People naturally fear what they do not understand. Public school teachers may be inclined to believe that personalized learning is a “Charter School Thing” and shy away from it. The reality is, however, that many public school districts are utilizing personalized learning and experiencing very few problems with teacher buy-in because they have provided materials to reach out to teachers to help them have a better understanding about this new style of teaching and learning.

Rhode Island is already making strides towards creating opportunities and resources to inform about personalized learning. The Office of Innovation, under the direction of Richard Culatta, and partners (including the Rhode Island Department of Education) is currently working on a “white paper” detailing Rhode Island’s vision for a shift towards personalized learning. Also, the RIDE conference in September 2016 will discuss personalized learning. Shawn Rubin of Highland-

er shared about FuseRI, which is a district catalyst program that helps early adopters of personalized learning become more proficient so that they can help others.

While the above strategies are important, if Rhode Island is going to make a statewide transition to personalized learning, it is necessary to find a way to energize teachers in districts who have *not even begun* this dialogue, so that when they begin to make the shift the teachers will have an abundance of resources to catch their eyes and help them get excited. Some of these resources could be:

- Short videos that show what personalized learning looks like at specific grade levels, content areas, and demographics
  - This will prevent teachers from saying things such as, “well sure, personalized learning is great for an elementary classroom, but I can’t possibly make it work in a biology classroom.”
  - Example: Elmbrook Public Schools in Wisconsin also has engaged in a video marketing campaign of sorts, to show other teachers and the community what this new type of learning looks like from teachers’ perspectives. They have created a short video that allows a glimpse into the classroom and does a great job of piquing interest.<sup>10</sup> This type of media is powerful because it allows teachers to see the success that their colleagues have had in implementation.
  
- A “Personalized Learning Myth” sheet to help teachers immediately debunk the myths they may have heard about personalized learning. For example:
  - *Myth*: Personalized learning means putting kids in front of computers all day and simply monitoring their progress
  - *Myth*: Personalized learning eliminates the need for certified classroom teachers and will result in the loss of jobs
  - *Myth*: Personalized learning is an educational “free-for-all” in which students can study whatever they want and aren’t accountable to standards
  - *Myth*: Personalized learning means I’ll have 25 different students learning 25 different things
  
- Local workshops or panel discussions for teachers to find out more about personalized efforts and progress
  - Teachers should be provided some incentive to attend

<sup>10</sup> *Personalized Learning in Elmbrook Schools*, <https://youtu.be/ShVXboCxAvU>

If teachers were to see the real benefits that a transition to personalized learning would yield for their students, they would surely become excited about investing their time and effort in such a change. By allowing teachers to learn about personalized learning in a way that allows their questions to be answered while glimpsing real, live classroom environments and teacher testimonies, the comfort and energy levels of teachers will increase, greatly improving the chance of success for a transition to personalized learning in Rhode Island.

### ***Step 3: Solicit teacher input***

An anonymous superintendent in Maine experienced tremendous success when his district made the decision to go personalized. When asked about his strategy to get teachers excited about making this change, he shared that he simply went to a staff meeting at his middle school with some chart paper and markers and asked teachers what they would want if they could completely change the way education was done. He encouraged them to be bold and not to feel confined by the current system, schedule, requirements, or contract—that this was simply a place to dream. It wasn't surprising, he shared, that the teachers all had ideas of personalized learning in their visions. As they started to put these ideas down on paper, the excitement grew.

In personalized learning, the educator asks the learner for input about his learning path, and this superintendent employed a similar approach with his staff when he asked the teachers what *they* wanted to see change. From a teacher's perspective, this is much more powerful than a school administrator simply telling their staff that the district has bought into a new system and that this year will begin the implementation. Such an authoritarian approach leaves teachers skeptical, nervous, and uninspired—which is probably how many students feel when they don't understand how the content we teach is going to be relevant or add value to their futures.

### ***Step 4: Allow teachers to ease into the change***

It is only natural that some teachers will experience a higher level of comfort with the idea of personalized learning than others. One strategy for implementing a lasting change is to allow for a soft-start of personalized learning in schools. The teachers who are *ready* to make a full transition should be identified, embraced, and cultivated. These early adopters will become valuable mentors for the first-followers who will see the value in what their colleagues are doing and want to experience similar results. Other teachers, who aren't quite ready to jump in with both feet, should be coached to step in gradually. Dana Monogue, assis-

tant superintendent of Elmbrook Public Schools in Wisconsin shares about how her district softly rolled out the transition to personalized learning to support teachers:

*We believe in our teachers and work to support their efforts at the classroom level. We have used our personalized learning emphasis to empower our teaching staff to identify issues they have been struggling with in their classrooms and learn different approaches to better meet the needs of their learners. We respect teacher readiness in our process and through invitation, not expectation, have created professional learning opportunities for our teachers that expose them to both the theory and practice aligned with our personalized learning framework. We invite our teachers to start small and find logical entrypoints in their practice. We are now 4 years into our work and are nearly 85 percent implemented K-12 with a variety of PL approaches including a workshop model in both literacy and numeracy, learner profiles, a focus on formative assessment, and meaningful integration of instructional technology.*

*Our teachers have blown us away by their willingness to learn, grow, and expand their practice and the results we are seeing from both a student achievement and staff engagement perspective are hopeful and encouraging.*

Four years and 85 percent are impressive results. A similar “tortoise” approach might be beneficial in Rhode Island if the goal is to create a lasting impact on the culture of education.

***Step 5: Provide meaningful and ongoing professional development***

Jessie Butash, the assistant principal at Cumberland High School here in Rhode Island (who is in charge of professional development) shared about her strategy for inspiring teachers to consider personalized learning. “How can teachers teach personalized learning if they’ve never experienced it themselves or have never seen the value in it?” she asks. This conundrum has led her to provide personalized professional development opportunities for her staff. She helps her staff to focus on the *process* of learning and engages them in activities such as pre-assessments to determine what they know and need to know in regards to personalized learning. Also, she has facilitated an “open-door initiative” in which teachers identify an area of personalized learning that they want to learn more about and the get paired with a classroom in the state that is engaging in that work with success.

It is also important that there is a plan for ongoing professional development opportunities in which teachers can engage once the initiative is introduced. After the first professional development session in which personalized learning is introduced, teachers should know when the next opportunities are to learn more so that they can begin building confidence in this new style of teaching and learning.

Once teachers begin to implement personalized learning, Shawn Rubin of Highlander Institute emphasizes the need for job-embedded professional development. It is essential that teachers are provided with real-time trouble shooting as they work in their classrooms, and he advocates for the utilization of personalized learning coaches in schools to help teachers make these transitions.

Another trend in professional development is the Open Badge system. Schools districts such as Lindsay Unified School District in California, and Hamilton City Schools in Ohio are using this strategy to allow for a personalized professional development approach with their staff. Staff can earn badges for completing professional development through non-traditional means—such as through an online course, wiki, or webinar. The badges can be displayed in portfolios, resumes, and even in social media networks such as Facebook or Linkdin.<sup>11</sup> This type of competency based professional development is extremely efficient when trying to move large numbers of staff members who are at varying levels of proficiency toward a common goal.

**11** "Open Badges in Professional Development: A Framework," [hamiltoncityschools.com](http://hamiltoncityschools.com)

### ***Step 6: Compile a comprehensive database of ready-to-use resources***

One hurdle that may prevent teacher excitement for the idea of shifting to personalized learning is the amount of leg-work that needs to be done to convert their current curriculum to a personalized model. In a state as small as Rhode Island, there is a real opportunity to collaborate on the accumulation of resources. Shawn Rubin of Highlander Institute suggests that teachers should have at their disposal a database of content area specific units of study that are tiered across competency levels. This speaks to the adage “why reinvent the wheel?” If there is an eighth grade teacher who has an English/Language Arts Unit of Study that is tailored for personalized learning—why not share it so another teacher can focus on the culture shift rather than spending hours upon hours trying to recreate the unit for herself? Districts should be able to share resources on a state-controlled database, which allows for the filtering of results based on standards, content, topic, or competency level. Teachers may be more willing to “give it a try” if they had resources with which to get started.

Cumberland Public Schools has created a personalized learning page with resources for their teachers.<sup>12</sup> This is very helpful to the teachers in Cumberland, but it would save a ton of time and resources if teachers and districts didn't have to "beg, borrow, and steal" materials from others. Rhode Island is likely to see a greater success in personalized learning implementation if there were an abundance of resources available to help teachers get going.

### ***Step 7: Encourage mentorships and partnerships among personalized learning sites***

Once a district—or even a classroom—has implemented personalized learning in a way that is consistent with the vision of the state, it would greatly assist other districts and teachers if those early adopters would be willing to mentor those who are just getting started. There is no better way to understand personalized learning than to see it in action, and a partnership among teachers who are willing to share what they have done can be very powerful. Shawn Rubin of Highlander Institute provides teachers involved with FuseRI the pipeline to partner up with other local teachers. This is a great idea and the state needs to adopt a similar approach. As Rhode Island makes the shift to statewide personalized learning it is important for doors to open throughout the state. Incentives for teacher-leaders to open their doors will increase the number and types of classrooms open to others. In order to make this type of collaboration happen, it will be necessary for districts to provide the necessary time out of the classroom for teachers to visit other sites. This will require increased professional development absence allowances, and also an increase of quality substitute teachers available to cover classes while teachers are out in the field.

### ***Step 8: Equip teacher preparation programs***

As the State of Rhode Island has creates a demand for teachers who are able to teach in a personalized learning model, it is going to become necessary for the state colleges and universities to amend their teacher preparation programs. It is inefficient to have aspiring teachers go through a preparation program and then need to be re-trained upon being hired into a district that utilizes personalized learning.

In order to facilitate this change, the state will likely need to provide ongoing professional development opportunities and incentives to college professors and staff—most of whom likely have had very little—if any—experience with personalized learning. As the demand increases for personalized learning, however, colleges will have to jump aboard the train.

Note: While this is identified as “Step 8,” these opportunities should be offered in tandem with the other efforts outlined above. To begin, it is important that the state keep our local colleges and universities in the loop about what is happening in the effort to transition to personalized learning. Professors in the Schools of Education should be included in communications about the personalized movement in Rhode Island and encouraged to attend local events about personalized learning. The men and women who are training tomorrow’s teachers have tremendous influence and opportunity to impact this movement and it is imperative that we invite them to the table.

## Competitive Advantage

# 3

As a teacher, I have seen numerous initiatives come—and go. Personalized learning, though, is more than just an initiative. It is a complete transformation of education as most teachers know it. While many teachers may have experienced some form of personalized learning at some point in time, very few have been given the real facts, background information, training, materials, and support to feel confident in making this transition. The vision outlined above really puts the needs of the *teacher* at the center of this transition, which is completely necessary if the teacher is going to be truly able to put the needs of the *learner* at the center, going forward. The pace and effort that is used in preparing teachers for a successful transition to personalized learning is crucial, because underprepared teachers are unenthusiastic, and unenthusiastic teachers cannot engage learners. The teachers are the public face of the schools. It is the teacher who interacts with parents on a regular basis, and it is the *teacher* that lingers in the mind of the student long after the school year has ended. Teachers have influence—so it is important to take the time to influence the *teacher* so that personalized learning really has a chance to take hold.

There are many factions in Rhode Island that are doing a great job of using and promoting personalized learning. This vision has outlined some of those resources and also provided a national perspective on several issues. If all of the steps in the above vision are carefully planned and rolled out when they are ready (instead of prematurely!), and if the state continues to nurture and cultivate the first adopters, then Rhode Island truly has a chance of becoming a powerful ecosystem for person-

alized learning. The result of this will be students who are achieving success like never before. They will be engaged, curious, and ready to face the unique challenges of tomorrow. Our little state will turn out a new generation of citizens and leaders who will be able to take the helm and guide us to the tomorrow that we can't even see.

## Landscape Analysis

# 4

### ***Major barriers and gaps***

One major barrier that stands in the way of *all* teachers in the state of Rhode Island getting excited about the transition to personalized learning is the inequity of resources across the state. For example: some middle schools enjoy the benefits of one-to-one technology for their students while teachers in other schools must compete for an hour in a shared computer lab. Since blended learning is an important part of personalized learning, the lack of technology can be a real hurdle for teachers who want to implement personalized learning. This barrier is likely caused by difficult budget decisions that need to be made by districts.

Another barrier is the lack of *knowledge* that many teachers—veteran and brand new—have about personalized learning. While some districts are going strong with personalized, many have not gotten started and the teachers in *those* districts may not have even heard of personalized learning. Or—they may *think* they know what personalized learning is but are mistaken. For example: Some teachers may confuse *personalized* learning with differentiated instruction, when the reality is, personalized offers much, much more.

### ***How to address these issues***

To hurdle the barriers listed above, the following policy gap could be addressed. First, the way funds are provided for districts could be changed. Currently, school districts are only allowed to ask for a four percent budget increase from their city or town, annually. This four percent hardly covers salary increases and facilities maintenance. One policy issue that could correct this would be to allow districts a temporary increase in what they are allowed to ask for, and the surplus could be used for technology and innovation. For example: If a district were allowed to ask for 6 percent for the next 5 years, the additional 2 percent per year could be designated for technology and other person-

alized efforts. This prevents the hard decisions about whether or not to buy computers or fix the locks on doors, or repair a leaky roof. Another possible solution would be a specific state fund designated solely for technology—similar to the funding provided to districts transitioning to full-day kindergarten. Either of these solutions would help districts get the technology they need.

A policy issue that could address the issue of teachers having the same knowledge about personalized learning would be for the state to allow more professional development days for teachers. In some districts, teachers are only allowed up to two days per school year for professional development that is not provided by the district. This limits the opportunity for teachers to conduct site visits and learn from other experts in the field. If the state were to mandate that districts allow teachers more time to engage in off-site personalized learning professional development then teachers in the state would be able to garner a common language and vision.

An additional issue that prevents teachers from wanting to leave the classroom for professional development is the lack of quality substitute teachers to watch over students in their absence. A policy issue that could address this would be a mandatory pay increase for substitute teachers, and perhaps a series of training modules for substitutes to complete. A higher pay-grade for substitutes will make the job an attractive alternative for professionals looking for flexible work.

### ***Culture shifts***

In order for teachers to really buy-in to personalized learning, they need to see it as more than just another educational fad that is coming from the top-down. Teachers are used to being told to implement new ideas without being able to understand why these policies have been put in place or see that how they really will benefit their students. Many of these ideas are met with reluctance, skepticism, and stubbornness. To shift away from this mindset, it is important that teachers and their unions are a part of the conversation about the statewide effort to implement personalized learning. Teachers need to see that the effort for this change will yield positive results for their students without jeopardizing their jobs. They need to feel that they will be adequately supported and made to feel confident as they take the steps to transition their classroom practices.

# Strategies for Change

## ***Areas of focus***

The budget and the shared vision for Rhode Island's teachers are equally important parts of the problem that need to be tackled first and in tandem. If the resources are there but the vision is not, the resources will be wasted. If the vision is there but the resources are not, the teachers will be frustrated.

One additional main focus of our efforts going forward should be to find the technological resources that schools need so that all students can experience the benefit of blended learning. Another should be to create a serious campaign for personalized learning so that teachers who are less familiar with it can understand what it is, why it's good, and how to do it well and with efficiency. This campaign needs to be coupled with immediate and engaging professional development activities for teachers who are excited and ready to jump on-board. Those teachers will serve as the catalyst and resource for other teachers as districts are ready to implement a full shift to personalized.

When these pieces are in place teachers will be more willing to try personalized because their questions will be answered and they will have the necessary resources available to be confident and successful.

## ***RI-CAN role***

RI-CAN can continue to engage teachers and provide connections between teachers and educational leaders at the state level. These conversations help to empower teachers and reduce the skepticism about the motive behind the transition efforts.

Another interesting idea is for a RI-CAN fellowship with school-board members of local districts. RI-CAN could engage them in a similar discovery about personalized learning and see what the hurdles are from a school board point of view. This would also allow RI-CAN to continue to investigate the budgetary issues that prevent some school districts from having the ability to allot funds for technology and innovation.

## ***Role of partners***

*Partners we need to work with:*

*NEARI*—it is imperative that teachers understand that personalized learning is not an effort to pack students into computer labs and eliminate the need for highly qualified teaching staff. The way to do this is to

solicit the endorsement of NEARI and then have a convening of local union leaderships for a formal Q&A. Teacher unions have a lot of power in influencing their memberships, so it is important to work with them to help create the shared vision and provide the answers to their concerns.

*Highlander and Summit*—or other expert agencies that are able to help in the effort to educate Rhode Island’s teachers and provide meaningful resources and professional development.

*State Legislature*—to find out how we can better support schools financially to move towards personalized learning—whether it be by increasing the amount schools are allowed to ask for from their cities and towns, or by providing grant money, or a statewide capital campaign to be voted on—something needs to be done to allow schools to get every student access to a computer.

## 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](http://www.ri-can.org)

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

***Kathryn Dusel, from Thompson Middle School***, has been teaching eighth-grade English language arts in Newport, RI since 2005. In addition to teaching, Kathryn is working with her school committee, community and other educators to write her district's new strategic plan. She also serves as the public outreach chair for the Teachers' Association of Newport. Kathryn works on an interdisciplinary team at her school to determine strengths and needs of students, collect and examine data to inform student placement and instruction and meet with parents and school support staff to bolster student achievement. She lives in Bristol, RI with her husband and two children.

Kathryn will use her work as a Learning Pioneer to increase opportunities to provide personalized learning to students in her district. Newport encompasses a diverse community of learners, and Kathryn is excited to help create policies that will provide tailored learning experiences to her students' unique needs.

*Kathryn on her classroom:* "My students begin each class with a do-now activity to either activate prior knowledge or pique interest for the day's activity. In addition to reading and synthesizing texts together as a class, students are asked to provide creative responses to independent reading selections."

