

## A Definition of Personalized Learning

*The philosophical shift that occurs when personalized learning transforms practices in a building affects everyone, including me as a school leader. Our roles become less focused on reactive ways to address concerns, whether academic or social-emotional. Instead, our efforts become more global and systemic—we are able to proactively support all students as they grow by investing our time and energies into systems that ensure they have the mindsets and behaviors to be successful in their current and future endeavors.*

—Randy Daul, principal, Asa Clark Middle School,  
Pewaukee, Wisconsin

You've probably heard the term "personalized learning" many times and discovered it to mean many different things. Currently, the best-known and most widely publicized definition is the one included in the U.S. Department of Education's (USDOE) National Education Technology Plan (2010):

Personalization refers to instruction that is paced to learning needs, tailored to learning preferences, and tailored to the specific interests of different learners. In an environment that is fully personalized, the learning objectives and content as well as the method and pace may all vary (so personalization encompasses differentiation and individualization).

Though helpful, this definition misses a key element of truly personalized learning environments: repositioning of the student within the learning and teaching process. The USDOE definition stops short of recognizing the powerful role students must be allowed to play in setting learning goals, planning their learning paths, tracking their progress, and demonstrating their learning as partners and codesigners alongside educators. It misses the shift in instruction from something we do *to* learners to something we do *with* them, which accounts for the real power of personalization. In a truly personalized environment, learners play

a key role in planning, developing, demonstrating, and applying their learning, and in so doing develop greater self-efficacy, ownership, and learning independence—key preparation skills for the lives they will lead and careers they will build.

According to the USDOE definition of personalized learning, each learner pursues unique learning objectives and engages with individually tailored content at a pace that is personally comfortable. One might conclude that such learners may not develop a common body of knowledge or skills and, as a result, that educators are left without a comprehensive view of what learners need to know and be able to do before graduating. An absence of standards debated and adopted by the community risks depriving schools both of a common focus and of accountability to the community and could leave students ultimately unprepared for future success. Without question, learners need to move at their own pace and engage in classroom activities suited to their individual interests and levels of readiness, but alignment of instruction to appropriate standards remains enormously important.

We define truly effective personalized learning as follows:

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.