

PREFACE

This is a book aimed at helping local educators and leaders move away from teacher-centered education models and toward approaches that encourage student self-direction, mastery, and engagement. Despite growing interest in personalizing education, students are still spending too much time learning as a group, passively sitting on the rug in elementary school and in rows at the secondary level. Most of the teachers and leaders we encounter want to improve at meeting the academic and emotional needs of their individual students and engage them as independent learners. Most agree the current system has become somewhat irrelevant but have no process for changing course.

We wrote this book because we have witnessed too many conversations at thirty thousand feet and not enough strategic discussions on the ground where teachers, students, and administrators design, explore, and learn together. We fill this gap by offering a framework for supporting meaningful change that we developed after observing, supporting, and collaborating with close to five hundred teachers and administrators—from more than forty different districts across Rhode Island and the country—over the past five years.

Our framework is also greatly informed by our own experiences as teachers. We both believe that personalization is a critical strategy for providing a meaningful, rigorous, and equitable education to all students. In 2000, Shawn began his teaching career in a multi-age second- and third-grade classroom in a new experimental urban charter school focused on personalized, project-based learning. He and his colleagues had a clear vision for instruction forged through research and

best practices that stemmed from Big Picture Learning and the Coalition of Essential Schools movement. There was a strong culture of collaboration at the school, and the small faculty was determined to transform the elementary school experience by putting students at the center of their own learning.

Shawn's first classroom included a heterogeneous mix of students who struggled in their traditional public school, English language learners (ELLs) whose families had recently arrived in the United States, and upper-middle-class students looking for a progressive elementary experience. He had students with moderate special needs next to students who had been reading since prekindergarten. Given significant latitude around curriculum and instruction, Shawn worked with each student to build an individual learning plan around an interest-based project. He managed this effort with a clipboard, homemade spreadsheets, and black portfolio boxes. Planning and executing daily lessons based on individual learning plans while still meeting the needs of his diverse learners quickly became unsustainable for both Shawn and his colleagues.

After three years, school leaders hit the pause button to reflect on the school model. It was clear students were enjoying the personalized nature of their learning. (Shawn still keeps in touch with students from those early years and they continue to tell him that designing and implementing individual learning plans and personalized projects represent the most empowering moments of their K–12 school experience.) However, it was also clear that the small faculty was poorly equipped to handle the workload associated with creating learning objectives, personalized learning plans, activities, projects, and assessments that were tailored to the needs of each student. More than 60 percent of the staff left the school after the first two years and the remaining teachers struggled to maintain the rigor of personalized projects and academic work in their K–5 classrooms. Quickly, the experimental elementary program began to shift back to a school with great culture but a more traditional model. While school leaders had the right vision, staff, and intention, they were not able to create a viable process or a manageable workflow for teachers.

As the school moved from a focus on interest, engagement, and project-based learning to a focus on targeted and differentiated instruction, Shawn transitioned to teaching kindergarten. He began moving students between various centers based on their needs and tracking data with red, yellow, and green crayon on a printed spreadsheet. To differentiate, he made multiple photocopies of six different beginner readers every few days and built scaffolded centers on weekends. He knew that if he could deliver instruction at each student's zone of proximal development, then

he had the best chance of moving each child forward, while simultaneously building an ethic of struggle and reward into their learning experiences. While the focus of the school had evolved, Shawn continued to struggle with managing the workload associated with differentiating within a traditional system. Yet, his approach was working. Each fall his benchmarking data would show that over 60 percent of his students were significantly below grade level; by the spring, 95 percent of his eighteen students were performing at or above grade level.

Five years later, when Shawn got his hands on a first-generation iPad, he began to realize how instrumental the device could be in supporting personalized learning approaches by blending digital and face-to-face instruction. He leveraged targeted apps and engaging websites to support students struggling with specific standards and skills. He experimented with screencasting, image annotation, voice-over, and movie creation tools, empowering five-year-old students to demonstrate their learning through creative design, building, writing, and performance. He tried various formative assessment tools to help him identify current levels of mastery and regrouped students to support their strengths and needs.

After ten years of teaching, Shawn was excited to share his new insights and outcomes with more teachers and administrators. He left the classroom to join forces with Cathy at the Highlander Institute, an education nonprofit in Providence, Rhode Island. A former math teacher with experience supporting students with diverse learning styles on both ends of the socio-economic spectrum, Cathy was also keenly aware that one-size-fits-all instructional approaches were not meeting most student needs and that efforts to personalize instruction required an intense level of additional planning. Cathy had been leading efforts centered on building teacher knowledge and school support systems around differentiated approaches to instruction, such as response to intervention (RTI), with the goal of helping schools and districts close gaps for struggling students.

Together, we established a blended and personalized learning arm of the Highlander Institute to support teachers and leaders struggling to figure out how to personalize learning through the integration of new technologies. Looking around the state, we saw a sudden influx of devices in classrooms without a connected vision or understanding of how these tools were a valuable addition to teaching and learning. As an organization committed to the high ideals of personalized learning and willing to test, tinker, and fail forward, our goal was to leverage strong teacher practice and high quality software to develop solutions to the same complex problems Shawn had experienced in his own classroom.

In 2014, we developed a state-level fellowship called Fuse RI, pairing early adopter educators with district leaders interested in implementing blended and personalized learning in their schools and districts. To date, we have trained 105 Rhode Island fellows and partnered with forty-one districts or charter schools across the state. As Fuse spreads nationally, we have worked with an additional sixty fellows, creating a small army of change agents who are scattered across the country. Through our Fuse fellowship, we have seen what works and what does not work when attempting to implement and replicate personalized learning initiatives across a range of school cultures and structures. And, we have come to several important realizations:

- There is nothing new or novel about educational theories regarding personalized learning. They are aligned to the writings and wisdom of great thinkers such as Dewey, Duckworth, Freire, Vygotsky, and Papert. Over the past several decades, many school and district leaders have articulated their hopes for offering more personalized and experiential learning opportunities for their students, but years of standardization, combined with the inefficiency of personalization strategies, has prevented leaders from imagining *a pathway* for realizing these hopes and dreams. Implementation efforts that enable *all* students, not just high achievers or students from wealthy zip codes, to benefit from innovative, motivating, engaging, personalized instruction is the central challenge before us now.
- There is great power residing in schools in the form of creative, motivated, and committed teachers who are best positioned to define, test, and translate the promise of personalized learning in a sustainable way for all students. While education reform efforts have typically been defined by district administrators who look externally for a solution, the most effective personalized learning initiatives that we have observed have been defined by teams of teachers addressing local problems of practice through personalized approaches.
- Implementing and scaling personalized learning across a school or district requires a focus on rethinking change management strategies, not a focus on technology integration. We have observed many creative classroom models that leverage technology, but most have been unable to scale beyond the individual teachers who spend countless hours operationalizing their own visions. Traditional, top-down, change management efforts rarely garner desired outcomes when working with emerging and undefined practices. Instead of adopting

initiatives at scale and working to ensure fidelity across an entire school or district, we have seen the benefit of small, iterative approaches to change. Instead of using testing data to pronounce an initiative a failure or success, we have watched teachers engage in cycles of continuous improvement where multiple measures are used to support the ongoing iteration of promising ideas.

Our field work, coupled with research into the most effective national models, has enabled us to develop our Pathway to Personalization Framework to articulate a more personalized change management process for teachers and leaders. Our framework is beneficial for leaders with a wide range of knowledge and expertise within the field of personalized learning, for teachers who have realized the benefits of personalized learning in their classrooms and are interested in supporting school- or district-wide initiatives, and for policy makers, funders, and others interested in learning and supporting new educational approaches.

This book is a step-by-step explanation of our framework, which serves as an implementation roadmap for determining where to begin, how to target efforts to meet local needs, and how to measure progress along the way. Our framework supports leaders regardless of how far or fast they want to move. For novice leaders who are learning about the potential of various practices, and veteran leaders who have enacted change and are looking to accelerate initial successes, our process offers five distinct implementation phases that can help teams construct a personalized pathway through the work. Chapters guide leaders through change management strategies, using stories and examples drawn directly from districts and schools, both in Rhode Island and across the country.

This is not a book that says, “If you do X, then Y will happen,” because we do not suggest stock solutions for implementing blended and personalized learning in schools or classrooms. Our framework combines the wisdom of educational philosophers, lessons from current practitioners, and best practices from industry change management theorists. Through examples, case studies, and tools, this book shares our perspectives in a format that explains the “why” and the “how,” not just the “what.”