

Preface

Schools in the United States have endured many fads and phases, often embracing and discarding philosophies and approaches in search of the next best thing. Phonics or whole language? New math or old math? Common Core or traditional algebra? Again and again, school districts and politicians have adopted education approaches touted to find the one best and right way to reach every student. But seasoned educators know this search for the one right and true thing to be futile. There is no best way, no right way, no one way to engage every student in learning. Administrators and classroom teachers all have different backgrounds and bring distinct skill sets to their work each day. Teachers have varying depths of knowledge of their subjects as well as levels of curiosity. Each teacher has strengths and weaknesses. Every teacher is unique. Students also have individual learning strengths and differences. They bring their own interests and passions to school, as well as the effects of their personal living situations and families. Every student is unique.

Each of us vividly remembers a point when it became clear that the promise of high-quality education for all would not be realized without personalized learning.

Mary Ann Wolf remembers:

Like many teachers, when I was teaching in a fifth-grade classroom nearly twenty years ago, I had students working on seven or eight different grade levels. One student, in particular, stands out at shaping my work in education for the twenty years since then. Riley came to me barely able to read. He could not even consistently read the high-frequency first-grade words. I quickly discovered, however, that Riley could remember the facts from our science or social studies lessons with ease. He listened, participated in activities, and could remember and apply complex ideas on the assessments if the questions were read aloud to him. I realized that Riley could learn, but the phonics and other traditional approaches that our school had been trying for five years now had not worked for him.

I asked Riley if I gave him ten flashcards each day on a big ring if he would practice those words ten times each night. Each day we added ten more cards, and each night he would practice the new words and all of the words that he had received previously ten times. If I forgot to give him new cards, he always reminded me. Before long, Riley had eight hundred to one thousand words that he was practicing and reading. One of my very best moments of teaching happened when my students were reading a social studies passage in pairs. Riley's buddy John raised his hand and said, "Ms. Wolf, Riley won't let me read!" Riley had put together those hundreds of words and was now able to read almost any text.

While I was able to help Riley learn to read through personalized instruction and involving Riley in his own learning, I struggled with the fact that I could only truly personalize learning for a couple of students every day, despite my best efforts. I knew that each student could benefit from personalized learning, but there was no realistic way of bringing it about in my classroom.

Elizabeth Bobst remembers:

On the first day of my first year of teaching, I was introduced to Nathan by another seventh-grade student in the class. "This is Nathan. He's already been expelled from school—twice!" Nathan sat right in front of my desk and talked to me constantly. It didn't take long to figure out that Nathan was smart—likely brilliant. He loved ideas, the bigger the better. Instead of grammar rules, Nathan wanted to talk about apartheid. He had no interest whatsoever in the young adult coming-of-age novel I was teaching. He finished the novel in a day, summed it up (sardonically) in a few sentences, and was ready to move on. The rest of the class, however, had thirty more chapters and many discussions to get through.

By accident, I found something challenging for him to do. Someone in the class suggested making a movie of the novel we were reading. Nathan volunteered to write the script. As the screenwriter, he often spent time in the library working on the script. Nathan shared his writing project and the class goal of making a film with the librarian, and the librarian volunteered to teach Nathan how to storyboard, how to use a video camera, and how to edit film. Nathan, with the help of others in the class, chose filming locations around the school, cast parts in the film, and spent a week making a movie. A few weeks of postproduction work finished the film, which garnered rave reviews when we showed it at the all-school assembly.

Nathan became a leader during the creation of that film, engaged in learning new skills, and took a lot of pride in the final product. Because of this engagement and the independence it offered him, Nathan excelled in my class.

In other classes, he remained disengaged and acted out. Near the end of the school year, facing yet another expulsion for chronic bad behavior, Nathan withdrew from the school and enrolled in an experimental boarding school.

And Nancy Mangum remembers:

During my third year of teaching, I moved to a new school. The school structure was set up differently from many traditional schools, with open classrooms where three teachers shared responsibility for a classroom of fifty-five to sixty students. To create a positive learning environment, all three teachers needed to collaborate to deliver instruction and facilitate learning, ensuring the needs of all of the students were met. We conferenced with each student individually at the beginning of every quarter and created personalized education plans. Data notebooks helped students and teachers track progress and allowed students to play an integral role in monitoring their progress. These data notebooks allowed the students to set goals for themselves. Even my kindergarten students did this, and the responsibility and goal setting that it taught them was amazing to see, as they were able to talk with confidence about themselves as learners! The teachers met weekly with the curriculum coach to discuss the progress each child was making. We spent extra time talking about those students who were struggling, making plans for how we might better meet their needs. While we didn't have a lot of technology to help us with this tracking and the data notebooks were literally an individual binder each student kept on a shelf, we worked hard to personalize education for all the children by meeting them where they were and helping them set goals for themselves. The three years that I taught at this school helped shape my beliefs and understanding about what a personalized education could be and how, especially in a public school setting with a diverse student population, it was possible for us to create a learning environment that could meet the needs of all learners.

It became clear to us, through our experiences in the classroom, that education needed to embrace personalized learning. For students to fully engage in their own learning, all students must be involved in creating their own learning paths, and all of them must be supported in following those paths, making adjustments along the way. In the past, this degree of personalization in a classroom was not possible. Too many students, too few teachers, and too few resources did not allow for personalization at scale in a traditional school setting. Educators became accustomed to making compromises concerning student learning. Sometimes the students at the top were sacrificed; at other

times, the students at the bottom. Often, the students in the middle skated by unnoticed. Because instruction couldn't be tailored to meet the needs of each individual student, failure of some sort was inevitable.

Now, however, advances in digital technology have created the opportunity for broad changes in the educational system. It is increasingly possible to meet all students where they are in their learning journey and to collaborate with each student to create an individual educational path to follow. Digital tools allow students to learn in a multitude of different ways from a seemingly infinite array of resources. Technology has progressed to the point that educators, students, and parents now have the capability to completely reshape the structure of classrooms and schools. The shift to utilizing personalized and digital learning in our classrooms is so much more than simply adding technology to an existing curriculum. Technology allows us to change the way schools define and enable learning and provides us with the tools to make learning more relevant, immediate, and global.

Personalized learning that utilizes digital tools engages both students and teachers and transforms almost everything that happens in a traditional school. Shifting to personalized and digital learning is the next essential step in the evolution of teaching and learning in the United States and around the world. Personalized learning empowers students, engages them, and makes connections with and between students, meeting students where they are on their individual educational paths and traveling with them on their learning journeys. Educators no longer have to make do with failing students. We now have the ability to connect with every student.

Every school and every school leader's journey is also unique. There is no one right way to personalize and digitalize learning for schools. The field is still nascent but perhaps because so many educators see the need and the common sense of this approach, the interest is overwhelming. One thing, though, is crystal clear to us: as in so many change efforts, leadership is key. Making this fundamental shift has many pitfalls. Through our over seventy years of collective experience in education, we have worked with hundreds of district and school leaders who are making the transition to personalized and digital learning, and we have learned so much through our time in schools and their journeys.

Through our work at The Friday Institute, we have had the opportunity to create research-based programs that help these leaders transition to per-

sonalized and digital learning. We have implemented year-long cohort-based programs, helped facilitators in sixteen states lead school leaders through our programs, applied design thinking for school leaders to address their own challenges, and reached all fifty states and even eighty countries across the world through the Massive Open Online Course for educators (MOOC-Eds) on leading personalized and digital learning, coaching digital learning, and learning differences. We have written about personalized learning, the culture shift needed in schools, and leadership.

During the process, we have listened to the stories of school leaders, asked them critical questions, and helped them develop action plans to guide them toward their goals. All this work has led us to the conclusion that essential lessons exist for all principals, aspiring principals, and others who want to successfully implement personalized learning. Without heeding these essential lessons, efforts to personalize are doomed. We have identified eight lessons—we call them Leadership Essentials—and present a framework to introduce them to leaders in this book.

We can't tell you what approach is going to be successful in your classroom(s) or your school(s) because there is no one-size-fits-all plan. We can, however, give you a framework to use as a touchstone on your journey to create change in your schools. We also can give you examples of others who have made successful and significant changes in their educational environments, highlighting the strategies they used. Because we believe in distributed leadership, you will hear their voices in this book. We wrote this book to share what we have learned with school and district leaders who are in the middle of, just beginning, or even reflecting on implementation and determining next steps. We hope that you will dive into our book seeking to learn from others, while also creating your own personalized approach for your school.

Before we begin, we want to emphasize the three things we know to be true about school leaders:

1. They got their start in education because they want to help kids learn and reach their potential.
2. They are always trying to figure out how to improve teaching and learning to improve or strengthen student outcomes.
3. They work really, really hard.

In this book, we want to help you think about your role and consider how you can channel your hard work and ideas to maximize the potential for personalized and digital learning for your students. We want to build on your strengths and the great work you are already doing by sharing our insight from working with hundreds of school and district leaders across the country and world. At the same time, we also want to share with you some specific examples of how some principals have approached this transition to personalized and digital learning. We are excited to dive in with you, and we look forward to continuing to exchange ideas through social media and invite you to join in our conversation at #LeadingPDL.