From Passive to Active Learning

Personalized learning helps students develop skills to be life-long learners

Richard Halverson, UW-Madison

Schools invested in personalized learning make a conscious effort to confer daily with students.

SESSION *Personalized Learning: Ideas + Research + Application = Results*
Presenters CESA 1 Institute for Personalized Learning: Ryan Krohn, director; UW-Madison: Richard Halverson, Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis professor; Elmbrook: Dana Monogue, assistant superintendent for teaching and learning

What do students need to be active members of today's society?" asked Ryan Krohn, director of the CESA 1 Institute for Personalized Learning. Attendees responded that students need to know how to think, problem solve, be creative, communicate, and access and apply quality information in their learning.

These are skills that personalized learning systems help develop and promote in students. Personalized learning empowers students to co-design their learning and develop skills to be life-long learners.

Although it varies in each school district, in a personalized learning system, a student's "learner profile" is developed. This identifies a student's strengths and weaknesses. Using the learner profile, students and teachers develop customized learning paths used by students to reach their individual learning goals. Ultimately, in personalized learning, there should be a shift in the role of the learner from passive to active.

"One of the things we're really grounded in is seeing students as a resource," Krohn said. "How do we design a classroom that allows the student to be a co-designer of their classroom experience?"

Richard Halverson, a professor in Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis at UW-Madison, has been studying personalized learning in Wisconsin school districts and shared findings from his research.

Halverson emphasized the importance of educators turning learning over to students. This doesn't have to be complex, it can be as simple as helping the student find the space or pace that best suits their learning.

Technology also plays a big role. In addition to laptops or tablet computers, Halverson pointed to software like Google Classroom, an online tool that helps teachers track individual student progress and communicate with them.

Halverson also found that schools invested in personalized learning make a conscious effort to confer with students — to build in time each day to check in with each student. This step is about building a relationship with all students and can be key to drawing failing students back into their learning.

Dana Monogue, assistant superintendent for teaching and learning in the Elmbrook School District, shared her district's experience in establishing a personalized learning system. Monogue said the work started about four years ago when the district began an honest conversation about how they were serving their students.

"We found that we were doing a good job of teaching to the middle," Monogue said. "We weren't serving the needs of our lowest-performing students and our most gifted students weren't growing at an acceptable rate."

The district started small — adopting a workshop-style reading and writing approach in its elementary schools and moving from rows of desks in its classrooms to more flexible learning spaces.

Additionally, the district invited any interested teachers to form a small cohort to receive professional development and establish personalized learning models in their classrooms. Today, the cohort model has been replicated several times over and now all 500 of the district's teachers have a personalized learning action plan supported by their principals.

Monogue reported that since the district adopted a personalized learning approach, it has seen improvements in its report card data.

"Not only are we closing gaps, but we're raising achievement," Monogue said. "All of our schools rated either proficient or advanced on the last report card. That was not the case four years ago." ■