Title: Personalizing the High School Environment: A Primer

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Extend Your Learning (PDF Resource)

About the Course Developer

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Introduction

"To engage all students in learning...we need a different kind of high school. We have called that a personalized high school, a place where students discover their own pathways to the future, where teachers act as advisors to their students...and where all members of the school community work together to help each member succeed. That kind of high school cannot be the gigantic organization of several thousand students called the comprehensive high school."
-- Joe Dimartino and John Clarke*, in *Personalizing the High School Experience for Each Student*, an ASCD book

This ASCD PD Online course will introduce you to a growing trend in high school reform – personalization. This approach emerges from the belief that the traditional high school model cannot help students attain academic success.

We will explore what personalization is and entails, as well as the systemic change required to successfully implement and sustain this reform strategy. This examination includes an overview of common challenges schools encounter when considering and subsequently establishing personalization initiatives.

While there are myriad high school personalization approaches – many of which are often combined to achieve a range of desired results – this course will look closely at small learning communities and advisory programs, two common strategies that have proven to effectively support student learning.

Course Objectives

- Explain what high school personalization is within an institutional context.
- Describe the purpose and value of high school personalization.
- Summarize the systemic elements that contribute to the effective personalization of a high school environment.
- Give examples of and describe several approaches to personalization.
- Examine two key personalization strategies: small learning communities and advisory programs.
- Classify challenges associated with implementation of high school personalization.

Pre-Assessment

1. Personalizing a high school involves establishing the structure, policies, and practices toward supportive learning environments that encourage and promote student success. **(True)**

2. Collaboration across school systems is critical to the implementation of high school personalization. (**True)**

3. The absence of district support is a significant personalization challenge. **(True)**

4**.** Small learning communities encompass a variety of personalization approaches. **(True)**

5. Student engagement always leads to student achievement. **(False)**

5. Advisory programs strengthen teacher/student relationships. **(True)**

Discussion Question

How can high schools best support students on their educational journeys, while simultaneously addressing their socio-emotional needs, interests, and desires, all necessary for academic achievement and lifelong productivity?

Additional Readings

Hammond, LD and Friedlander, Do. (2008, May). "Creating Excellent and Equitable Schools." *Educational Leadership*, 65(8), 14-21.

Schleicher, A. and Stewart, V. (2008, October). "Learning from World-Class Schools." *Educational Leadership,* 66(2) 2, 44-51.

Wise, Bob. "High Schools at the Tipping Point." (2008) *The Best of Educational Leadership 2007-2008.* 42-47.

Internet Resources

The Association for Personalized Learning Schools & Services.
www.theaplus.org/personalized_learning.html

The Education Alliance at Brown University. Changing Systems to Personalize: Personalized Learning.
www.alliance.brown.edu/pubs/changing_systems/personalized_learning/

The Knowledge Loom. Redesigning High Schools: Promising Practices for High Schools to Personalize Learning.
knowledgeloom.org/practices3.jsp?location=1&bpinterid=1095&spotlightid=1095

Course Working Title: Personalizing the High School Environment: A Primer

Lesson 1 Title: Personalizing the High School: An Introduction

CONTENT

Rationale

Personalization of the learning environment is a growing trend in the high school reform movement. It places young people first in the educational process, requiring schools to revisit their infrastructure to ensure that students achieve and graduate, prepared to participate productively in college and the workforce.

The approach emerges from the belief that the traditional high school neither adequately leads students to academic success, nor nurtures them as individuals. Rather, the standard design is often noted for promoting depersonalization, lack of adult support, unresponsive teaching, imperceptible results, invisibility, and isolation.

Source: From *Personalizing the High School Experience for Each Student* (pp. 5-6), by J. DiMartino and J. Clark. 2008. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. Copyright 2008 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Those who standardized the school system did so with good intentions. From creating the Carnegie unit, to establishing the large, consolidated, high school, to designing a structure around divided academic disciplines, the goal was no less than to offer quality instruction. However, that construct is now less suitable. Recent data indicate that the traditional high school is faring poorly when it comes to student achievement:

According to the National High School Alliance:

- In the 35 largest cities, fewer than 50 % of 9th graders complete high school
- More than 70% of high school students go to schools with more than 1,000 students

Source: From National High School Alliance. Statistics. Retrieved on March 5, 2009. www.hsalliance.org/statistics/index.asp.

The Alliance for Education reports that:

- Every year, over 1.2 million students (about 7,000 each day) do not graduate from high school on time

- Nationwide, only about 70 percent of students earn their high school diplomas

- Only 57.8 percent of Hispanic, 53.4 percent of African American, and 49.3 percent of American Indian and Alaska Native students in the U.S. graduate with a regular diploma, compared to 76.2 percent of white students and 80.2 percent of Asian Americans.

- Many high school students do not learn the basic skills needed to succeed in college or work: 42 percent of community college freshmen and 20 percent of freshmen in four-year institutions must take at least one remedial course

Source: From Alliance for Excellent Education. Retrieved on March 5, 2009. www.all4ed.org/about_the_crisis/students.

- Based on results of the 2005 National Assessment of Educational Progress, the average 12th grade reading scores are the lowest they have been since 1992; and in math, only 23% of 12th graders scored at or above proficiency

Source: From *The Nation's Report Card: 12th-Grade Reading and Mathematics 2005*, by W. Grigg, P. Donahue, and G. Dion. 2007. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office. Copyright 2007 by the National Center for Education Statistics.

While times have changed – and data indicate an academic demise – many high schools continue to operate within a structure of the past. Yet, there are turnaround solutions, such as personalization, proven effective in enhancing student engagement and achievement.

Personalization Elements

High school personalization focuses on the student – not only around issues of academic success, but also the socio-emotional elements that factor into educational advancement. A personalized high school has support systems, structures, and a culture that address students' development and needs. It has refashioned its infrastructure to create a learning environment that supports students on several fronts. It provides multiple pathways to the high school diploma. The following are key characteristics of personalization:

- Recognition of students as individuals with unique needs, interests, attitudes, strengths, and knowledge to promote engagement
- Clear, high, and shared expectations for students
- Safe and welcoming school environment
- Engaging the whole school community in a student's education
- Close and ongoing relationships between adults (specifically teachers) and students
- Teachers and students share accountability for student learning and achievement
- Caring classrooms
- Family involvement
- School autonomy (in-house decision making)
- Autonomous and interactive leadership
- Students engaged in challenging coursework

• Student choice

Studies of high schools that have strategically implemented aspects of personalization demonstrate its value. According to The National Evaluation of High School Transformation's evaluations of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's High School Grants, 2001–2004, schools with changed learning communities (including personalization) reported "a very positive learning culture, characterized by close interpersonal relationships, common focus, and mutual respect and responsibility…and a much more positive climate — in terms of both personalization of the learning environment and a common focus among teachers and students…"

Source: From *Executive Summary: Evaluation of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's High School Grants, 2001–2004*, (pp. 3-4), Washington, DC: American Institutes for Research. Copyright 2005 by the American Institutes for Research.

END CONTENT

1.Multimedia Interactive Activity

Source: From High Schools at Work: Creating Student-Centered Learning, Show 2: Personalizing the School, 2006, ASCD.

TRANSCRIPT

Joe DiMartino: …the school really needs to become a personalized environment; a place where students …feel welcome; where they know there's an adult there that…knows them well; that can recognize when they're having a bad day and can address that and really help them grow, to become productive adults and responsible adults…It has to be part of a whole school activity, a whole school design, a whole school structure that allows for relationships to develop, between students, between teachers, and between students and teachers.

Linda Nathan: I think in this country…we make an erroneous assumption that high school kids are grown and don't care about community and want to be anonymous and don't need families both biological and metaphoric…I think that all young people need an environment where they're known well, where they're cared for and cared about and where they're challenged to reach the highest level of artistry, both in an intellectual and academic sense, and in a creative sense. And when high school kids are given that opportunity, then I think that they do wonderful, positive things.

Joe DiMartino: Learning isn't going to take place if students don't feel welcome. They don't feel that they're honored. They don't feel they have a voice in what happens to them in their lives. They don't feel that they have some choices in what happens within their educational program. If they don't feel part of the community, all of that is part of what we all need to become better learners.

Carmen Garcia: The thing that makes me proud is…the atmosphere that is created by our staff to encourage our kids to do well, both at high school and then eventually as they go on to college.

END TRANSCRIPT

What is at the heart of high school personalization?

TEXT BOX

SUBMIT

1.Interactive Activity
Title: Personalization's Value

Why is high school personalization a valuable – and viable -- approach to supporting students' academic achievement?

TEXT BOX
SUBMIT

2. Interactive Activity
Title: Assessing Personalization Possibility

Consider the existence or possibility of personalization at your school. Review the common characteristics in the first column. Reflect on where your school stands with regard to these elements and complete the remaining columns according to the following questions:

- If these elements exist, which are most successful or which need improvement? (It is possible that they are successful but could still be improved.)
- If there is potential for the implementation of one or more of these personalization elements, what changes must the school make to accommodate their entry?

Please note the example below:

Personalization Element	Exist	Success/Improvement Areas	Potential	Requirements for Implementation
Caring classrooms	X	Students know they can contribute to others in the class and lend their experience to the learning tasks		
Safe & welcoming school environment				
Recognition of students as individuals				
Teacher/student shared accountability				
Clear, high, shared expectations				
Entire school community engagement				
Close/ongoing relationships between students & adults				
Challenging coursework				

Student Choice			
Family involvement			
School autonomy			
Autonomous and interactive leadership			

TEXT BOX
SUBMIT

Lesson 2 Title: The Construct of High School Personalization

CONTENT

Schools approach personalization in varied ways, opting to implement only one strategy or several. They select those that best address their students' specific needs.

"Because no two schools have the same set of issues, the same set of students, the same set of teachers…Every high school community needs to engage in their own conversation about how to personalize their school and what they want to accomplish in their school."

-- Joe DiMartino, in an excerpt from *High Schools at Work: Creating Student-Centered Learning, Show 2: Personalizing the School*, an ASCD video.

The following highlights several common personalization elements that schools utilize. (Lessons four and five further detail small learning communities and advisory programs, inherent to many school personalization efforts):

Small learning community (SLC)
These are typically the heart of personalization. They involve breaking larger schools into smaller schools, or segmenting them into SLCs, such as academies, units, or houses. Each smaller community typically has 400 or fewer students. Among the many things these "learning organizations" promote are reduced student anonymity and student-centered instruction. They contribute to the enhancement of a school's overall culture, from teachers' increased work satisfaction to limited/reduced bureaucracy. They encourage and rely on high levels of parental participation. It is within the SLC that other personalization programs and structures are put in place.

Advisory programs
These draw on the principle of student/teacher relationship building: they ensure that all students have at least one adult in school who looks out for their well being. Students are partnered with a faculty member who -- as an advisor/coach -- oversees their academic progress and helps them resolve educational or interpersonal problems. They also are liaisons between the school and students' families, as well as the community.

Rigorous -- and relevant -- curriculum
Studies demonstrate that when students take more challenging courses, they are often more likely to succeed. Thus, personalized high schools implement rigorous, standard-based academic content. Built into this construct are components that include integrated curriculum, personalized learning, personal learning plans (engaging students in decision-making about their academic development), instruction combined with assessment, and curricula with real-life application (authentic learning).

Strengthened teaching and instruction
In personalized school settings, teachers' roles are redefined, as well as the structures in

which they teach. Teachers work together to develop and revise curriculum. They team teach, partnering with teachers across subject areas to discuss students' progress and needs. Teachers might have longer instructional blocks to teach critical subjects, flexible scheduling, looping opportunities, common planning time for collaborative instructional development, and decision-making input for relevant professional development.

Differentiated and authentic instruction, the elimination of academic tracking, accelerated learning offerings, project-based learning, and authentic assessment are among the flexible instructional strategies teachers in personalized schools use to engage more students with diverse learning styles.

Student Choice
In personalized high schools, students are connected to school because they are personally connected to learning.

"*Students who work with teachers to negotiate the curriculum, develop personalized learning plans, scaffold complex tasks, or structure internships are invested in their learning because they can see and explore the relationship between school, who they are and their goals for the future.*"

Source: From "Personalized Environment," Oregon Small Schools Initiative, E3 Employers for Educational Excellence. http://www.e3smallschools.org/pe.html. Retrieved March 5, 2009.

Comprehensive support systems
Comprehensive (integrated) support systems bolster students' engagement and achievement through additional academic and socio-emotional supports, from the time they enter and graduate from high school. Such supports are especially important for struggling students: they can help get them back on track. Because students are recognized as individuals with unique needs, support systems are holistic; they are often coordinated between the school and community agencies, and include tutoring programs, study skills courses, leadership and career development, college preparation, and transition management.

Community-based learning
Schools often establish partnerships with community-based organizations to extend student learning beyond the classroom into the "real world." The community provides the learning context; students contribute to the community. Community partners can also collaborate in teaching and learning. This engagement can involve project-, work-, and place-based learning, service learning, internships, relationships with higher education institutions, field trips, etc.

END CONTENT

1. Multimedia Interactive Activity
Source: From *High Schools at Work: Creating Student-Centered Learning, Show 2: Personalizing the School,* 2006, ASCD.

TRANSCRIPT

NARRATION: To enable students to become better learners, many of these high schools have established and advisory program, which ensures that each student is known by at least one adult.

Joe DiMartino: A group of…students meets regularly with an adviser, who becomes a mentor and guide to them and helps them monitor their progress through high school….

Abdi Ali: The kinds of things that we do in an advisory involve part of the administrative logistical things, such as managing students' transcript coursework, their graduation plan, communication with families about the curriculum in school. And then there are more interpersonal aspects of the advisory about helping them manage their workload, their relationships…to their peers, to their art major, to teachers.

NARRATION: Another way to personalize the high school is to create smaller learning communities through teacher teaming. Schools often refer to these communities as Houses, Teams, or Units.

Amy Koheler: …But we do have quite a bit of autonomy within our group of teachers and myself to make most of the big decisions that affect our students and our lives throughout the day. So, we're given a framework of a schedule, for example. And we can make decisions within that schedule…how long we want students to take math and English, who's teaching which groups of students when…

Marcy Muzykewicz: It's really helpful to coordinate curriculum wise. But, I also think it's really important as far as the individual students. Because, often times, there's a student that will be doing very well in a math class. And I'll be surprised to find out who is doing poorly in English class. Because I had in my head that image of the student of, oh, this student does well in everything. Or the exact opposite. A student is really struggling with me. I'll find out from one of the English teachers or science teachers is really being successful. And so, by sharing that information, we're able to help all the students be more successful and also the teachers who have better relationships with a particular student start to know how they're doing in other classes.

END TRANSCRIPT

TEXT BOX

What is critical about enhanced student/teacher connections as they relate to academic achievement?

SUBMIT

2. Multimedia Interactive Activity
Source: From *High Schools at Work: Creating Student-Centered Learning, Show 2: Personalizing the School,* 2006, ASCD.

TRANSCRIPT

NARRATION: A strategy some high schools use to support students in taking ownership of their learning is the student-led conference.

Joe DiMartino: Many schools have chosen personal learning plans or personal plans for progress for students combined with a student-led conference as a vehicle to personalize learning within the school.

NARRATION: Edoucha-Elsa High School offers a comprehensive support system to help students become successful learners, from the time they enter as freshmen to the time they leave for college of for post-high-school careers. The system includes such components as classes in study skills and leadership skills, a tutoring program, advisory, and trips to college…

Carmen Garcia: A lot of our kids are low economic [background], so they may need, uh, a little bit maybe more nurturing, more pushing to let them know that they can do it…and they feel that they don't have the background necessary to succeed, and that's something we have to push and tell them…hey, you can do it too…

NARRATION: Another support for Edcouch-Elsa students is offered through their Peer Advisory Center or PAC. PAC helps students identify their career interests and options, and recognize that college is an achievable goal. They also organize visits to universities around the country to help students in the college-selection process.

END TRANSCRIPT

TEXT BOX

Describe the personalization approaches presented and what they have in common when it comes to students.

SUBMIT

3.Multimedia Interactive Activity
Source: From *High Schools at Work: Creating Student-Centered Learning, Show 3: Community-Connected Learning,* 2006, ASCD.

TRANSCRIPT

Joe DiMartino: Meeting the needs of students now requires us to think much more broadly about the learning environment and where learning can take place…And there's a way to do that. And that's to get them outside the school, to get them out into the community. To get them to a place where…they can understand why their learning matters and what it can lead to and how it can be important to them as an individual and to society as a whole.

NARRATION: In this program, we'll explore several ways that high schools promote community-connected learning, by using the community as a classroom, by partnering with local organizations, by fostering links with institutions of higher education and by arranging internships with local businesses and institutions…

Joe DiMartino: So, there are a variety of ways that schools can engage in community learning. They can use the community as a classroom…Or, they could connect with a community organization that is supportive in a way that supports the school, but also in a way that supports the community meeting the community needs.

Joe DiMartino: There are a number of ways that schools can connect with higher ed…One is that students in the high school could take part of their high school program courses or in the college.

NARRATION: Endoucha-Elsa High School also works with a local community college to offer course in the high school, even bringing some courses into the classroom by way of interactive satellite conferencing.

NARRATION: At South Texas High School for Professionals, all students participate in internships during their senior year – selecting from a range of experiences at hospitals, nursing homes, pharmacies, dental offices, and veterinary clinics.

Joe DiMartino: Internships are as varied as the workplaces. And the role of the schools is to ensure what's happening in that internship connected to the learning that that students needs to have as part of their high school experience.

END TRANSCRIPT

TEXT BOX

How do the presented community-based learning connections mesh with high school personalization overall and within your school setting?

SUBMIT

1.Interactive Activity
Title: Creating Change Toward Personalization

In examining the various approaches to high school personalization, what type of change (systemic, infrastructure, leadership, etc.) would have to occur in your school community for these initiatives to be implemented?

TEXT BOX
SUBMIT

2. Interactive Activity
Title: Assessing What Exists

If personalization exists in your school, describe the components that have had the most impact and how these positive results have emerged.

EXTEND YOUR LEARNING (PDF)

Examining Personalization Approaches

There are myriad personalization strategies that high schools implement, depending on the needs of their student population. The following are among the possibilities. Select, define, and further explore those you feel might be appropriate for your school setting.

Accessible counseling staff
Adult/student relationships sustained over years
Adults addressed by their first names
Advisory groups & parent conferences
Applied learning
Career explorations
Community based learning
Community meetings
Community mentoring
Community of learners emphasized
Democratic classrooms
Extra time and help available from teachers
Flexible scheduling
Foxfire classrooms
Guidance/teacher partnerships
Heterogeneous grouping
Home visits
Inclusive practices
Independent studies/student presentations
MAPS (student action plans)
No bells
No class interruptions
Personal learning plans
Portfolios of student work
Seminar-based instruction
Senior projects
Service learning
Shared mission and goals
Small classrooms
Small schools
Socratic seminars
Special education available to everyone
Student choice in courses and class work
Teachers and kids eating together
Teachers and students as co-learners
Teaching and learning teams
Varied instruction

Source: From "Changing Systems to Personalize Learning: Introduction to the
Personalization Workshops," (p. 22), by J. Clark. 2003. Providence, RI: The Education
Alliance at Brown University. Copyright 2003 by Brown University.

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