

# A Vision for Personalized Learning in Massachusetts

## White Paper

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Center for  
Collaborative  
Education



Essential  
Personalized  
Learning

## ABOUT THE CENTER FOR COLLABORATIVE EDUCATION

The Center for Collaborative Education (CCE) was founded in 1994 with the mission of transforming schools to ensure that all students graduate college- and career-ready, and are prepared to become compassionate, contributing global citizens in the new century. CCE has a rich history of supporting in-district public schools that have autonomy to be more innovative, believing that schools have the best opportunity for educating a diverse enrollment of students when they are provided maximum control over their resources and decisions, paired with a strong accountability system and expectations of high performance on multiple measures.

To learn more about CCE's work on developing and promoting innovative models of schools, where students are engaged, challenged to excel, and encouraged to have fun in their learning, please visit: [www.cce.org](http://www.cce.org).

## ABOUT ESSENTIAL PERSONALIZED LEARNING

The Essential Personalized Learning program at CCE provides schools with alternatives to the current “one size fits all” approach to district and school design. In empowering student voice and choice in classrooms, personalized learning places students at the center of their learning and helps every student to succeed. Through the lens of Five Principles (Competency-Based Learning, Flexible Learning, Student-Driven Learning, Dispositions for Learning, and Authentic Learning), Essential Personalized Learning partners with schools and districts to create their own vision of personalized learning.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors would like to thank members of the Massachusetts Personalized Learning Network for their valuable contributions to this white paper. The Massachusetts Personalized Learning Network, launched in 2016 by CCE, partners with schools to design and implement personalized learning plans that provide learning experiences tailored to students' individual needs, skills, and interests and that foster engaged and active learners.

Massachusetts Personalized Learning Network member schools and design teams include:

*Boston Big Picture, Boston Public Schools  
Boston Collaboratory, Boston Public Schools  
Holmes Elementary, Boston Public Schools  
Walsh Middle School, Framingham Public Schools  
Garfield Middle School, Revere Public Schools  
TechBoston Academy, Boston Public Schools  
Powderhouse Studios, Somerville Public Schools  
Personal Pathways Program (P3), Holyoke Public Schools*

## DESIGN AND LAYOUT BY EMILY SIENKIEWICZ





## INTRODUCTION

*Imagine a high school in which students progress in their learning as they demonstrate proficiency over broad competencies through projects, research papers, social media, and multimedia presentations, often before panels of teachers, students, parents, and community members. Many of students' courses have a flipped classroom model, with students reading and researching primary and secondary texts online, outside of the school building with school-issued Chrome books, freeing up school-based learning time for greater concentration on meaningful project-based and experiential learning. Students regularly engage in out-of-school learning through multiple college, career, and civic-related opportunities, including internships, apprenticeships, service learning, volunteer work, and field research on important community dilemmas. Students, teachers, and parents can track each student's progress toward attainment of competencies and eventual graduation online. Each student regularly meets with a teacher advisor to review progress and identify supports that are needed. Determination of graduation is made through successful completion and presentation of a year-long, interdisciplinary Capstone Project and Portfolio of selected work.*

This vignette is but one example of what a personalized learning experience could look like for a high school student of the future, with teachers working with students to craft individual pathways that meet students' needs and interests through endeavors that engage them in real-world learning.

THE CURRENT CONTEXT OF TEACHING AND LEARNING IN MASSACHUSETTS

There are growing signs that point to the fact that the state’s current education system does not serve many students well, and the outlook does not look better for the future.

Massachusetts has long been viewed as the leader in education reform across the nation. The state has been at the top of National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) test scores in Reading and Math for a number of years, widely attributed to a focus on high academic standards and an accountability system featuring a high-stakes standardized test regarded as rigorous. Massachusetts also performs well on international measures, such as the 2015 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), placing among the top-scoring nations in the world, particularly in reading and science. As well, even while having one of the highest student participation rates, Massachusetts’ students do well on the SATs in comparison to their peers in other states.

Yet, there are growing signs—within state and national education trends—that point to the fact that the state’s current education system does not serve many students well, and the outlook does not look better for the future.

STUBBORN ACHIEVEMENT GAPS

The fact is that Massachusetts should perform well on standardized tests in comparison to other states. The strongest correlation to student performance on standardized tests continues to be parental income and education and, in these measures, Massachusetts is near or at the top of the nation. According to Education Week’s Quality Counts 2017 report, Massachusetts, in relation to other states ranks:

- 1st in percentage of adults with a postsecondary degree
- 4th in percentage of children with at least one parent with a postsecondary degree
- 2nd in percentage of adults with incomes at or above the national median
- 4th in the percentage of children in families with incomes at least 200% of the poverty rate

MASSACHUSETTS ACHIEVEMENT GAPS BY RACE, INCOME, AND LANGUAGE

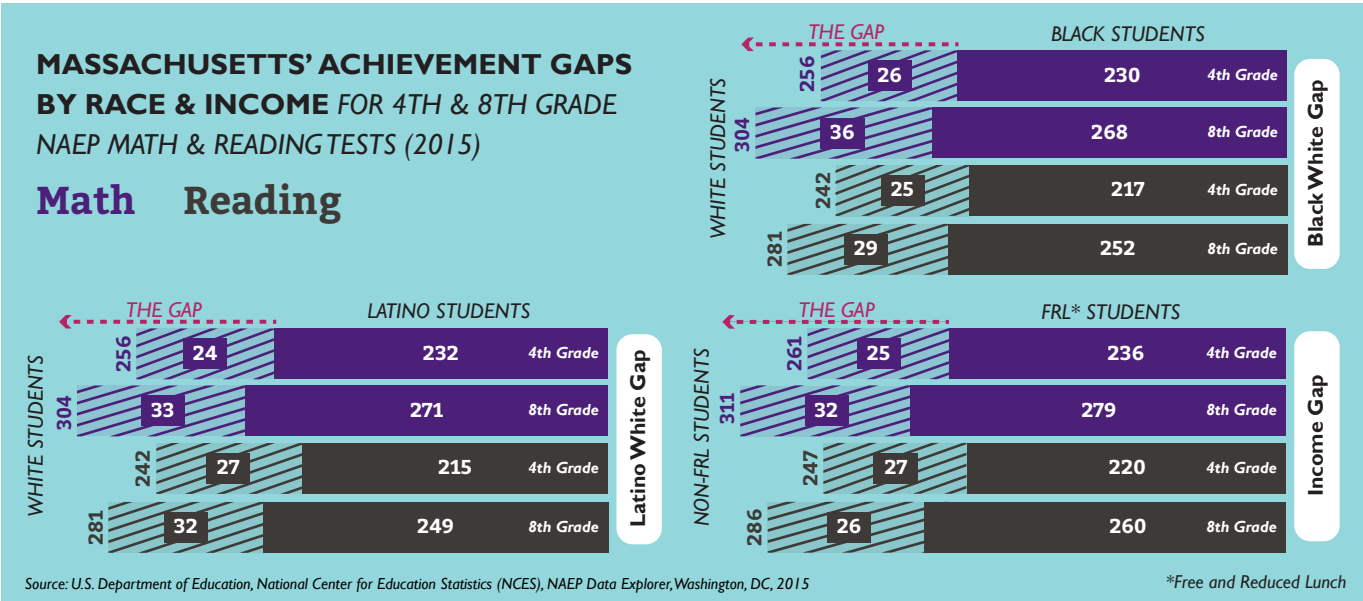
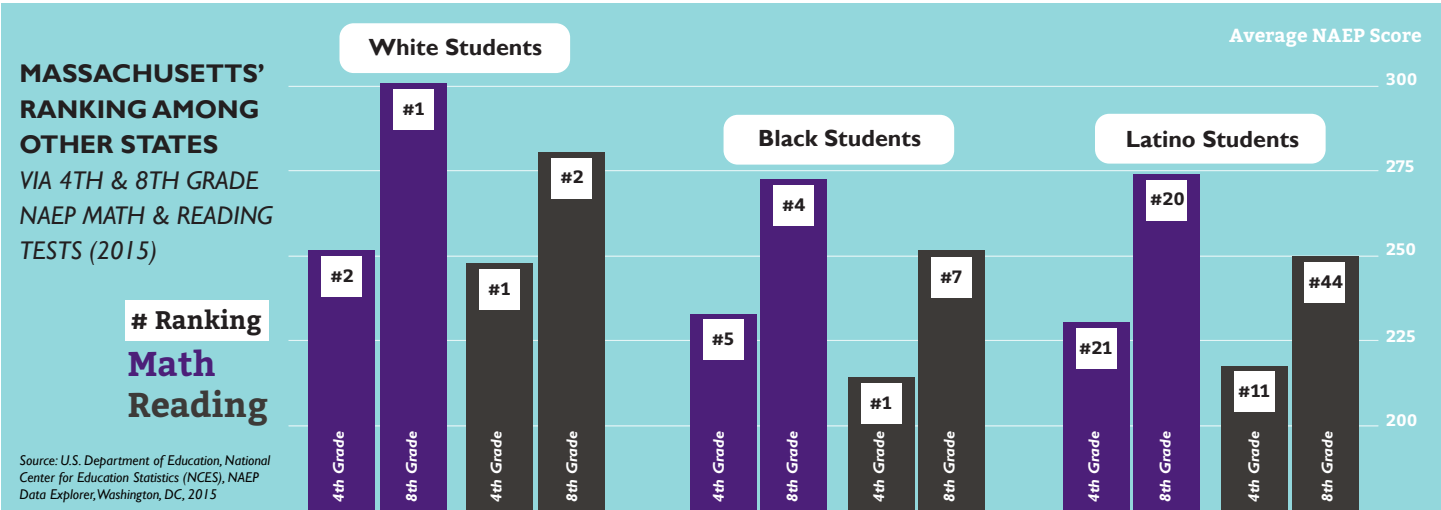
Key: #1 = state quartile with the smallest gaps; #4 = state quartile with the largest gaps

NAEP Test	Black-White Gap				Latino-White Gap				Income Gap				ELL Gaps			
	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
4th Grade Reading		+						+			+			+		
8th Grade Reading				+				+				+				+
4th Grade Math			+					+				+			+	
8th Grade Math				+				+				+			+	

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), NAEP Data Explorer, Washington, DC, 2015

If Massachusetts' students in general should be and are doing well on standardized tests, the essential question, then, is: Are all of our students doing well? The answer is definitive - not nearly as well as they should be.

As measured by 2015 NAEP tests, Massachusetts has some of the largest achievement gaps by race, income, and language in the nation. In almost two-thirds of achievement gap indicators (Black-White gap, Latino-White gap, Income gap, and ELL gap in Reading and Math at the fourth and eighth grades), Massachusetts ranked in the quartile (25%) of states with the highest achievement gaps in the nation; altogether the state ranked in the half of states with the highest achievement gaps in all but two of 16 indicators (see chart). Of particular concern is that Massachusetts fell in the quartile with the largest Latino-White gaps in all four indicators; in eighth grade Reading this gap was the largest of any state in the nation (out of 46 states with a large enough Latino population to measure), while the gap in eighth grade Math was the second largest of any state. Moreover, Massachusetts ranked in the quartile with the largest income gaps in three of four indicators, with the fourth indicator (4th grade Reading) in the half of states with the largest income gaps.

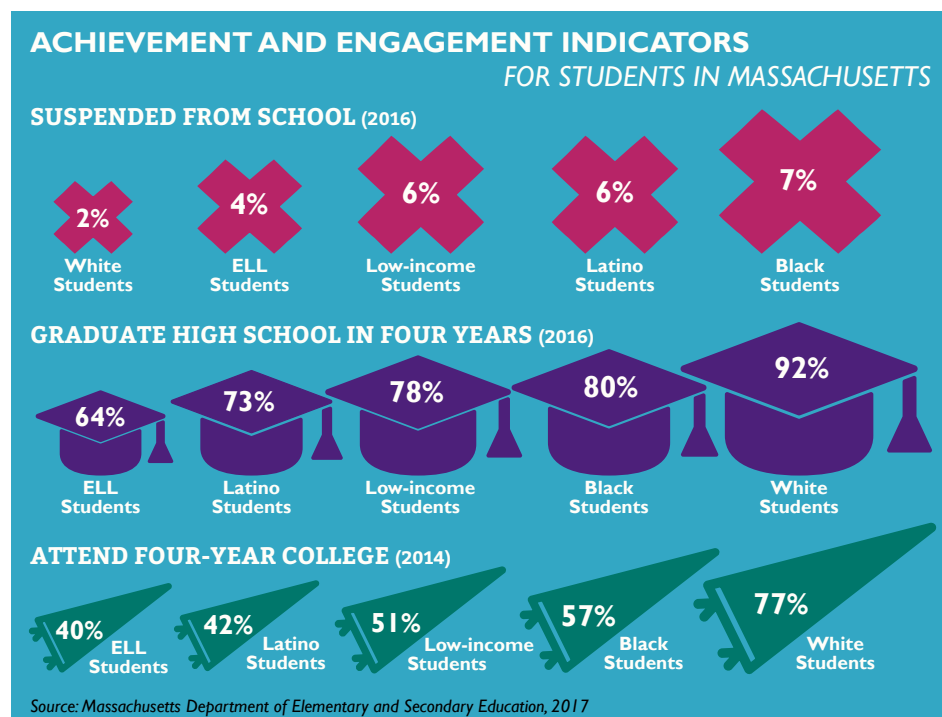


All told, the current educational system in Massachusetts is not succeeding at closing considerable achievement gaps.

Examining state data<sup>1</sup>, there are gaps by race, income, and English learner status are reflected in multiple other indicators of student achievement and engagement:

- English language learners have the lowest rates of four-year graduation, attending college, and Advanced/Proficient rates on 10th grade MCAS tests of White, Black, and low-income students.
- White students graduate high school in four years at a significantly greater rate than Black, Latino, low-income or ELL students.
- Black students are suspended from school at four times the rate and Latino students at three times the rate of White students, while low-income students are suspended at twice the state average. Suspensions are correlated with lowered academic achievement and increased rates of dropping out of school.<sup>2</sup>
- White students are almost 50% more likely to attend a four-year college than Black or Latino high school graduates, while Black and Latino students are nearly twice as likely to attend a two-year community college than their White student peers. Community college-goers are 71% more likely to be required to enroll in remedial courses than those attending public four-year colleges.<sup>3</sup>
- Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) test gaps between White students and all other subgroups are widest in Math and Science.

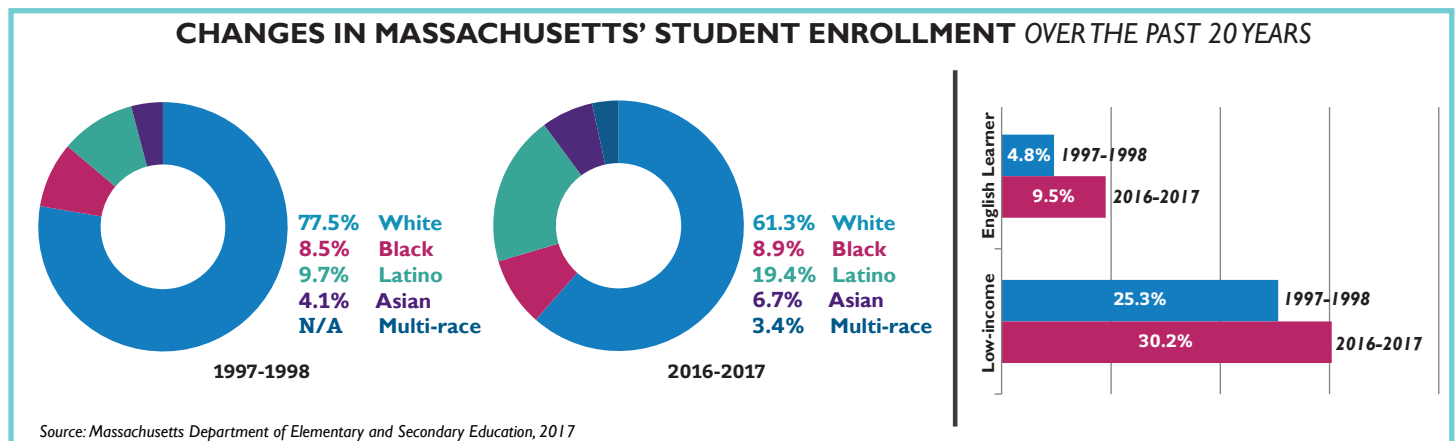
All told, the current educational system in Massachusetts is not succeeding at closing considerable achievement gaps. More concerted efforts to “double down” with the same education model will most likely produce the same disappointing results. We need to re-examine how we can better meet the needs of all of our students, and in particular the Black, Latino, low-income, and English learner students in our state.





## CHANGING STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS

While our current education system has produced glaring inequities in achievement by race, income, and language, our student body has simultaneously been changing, growing ever more diverse. Over the last 20 years, the percentage of White students of the total state student population has declined by 21% (or 16.2 percentage points) and the percentage of Black students has remained relatively stable, while the percentage of Latino students has doubled and the percentage of Asian students has grown by over 60%. Simultaneously, the percentage of low-income students has grown by approximately 20%. Essentially, our student population today represents more low-income students, English learners, immigrants, and students of color than any time in past decades.<sup>1</sup>



No longer can a one-size-fits-all education system, that currently does not adequately educate our diverse student body, educate every one of our students; in fact, it never has. Our increasing student diversity is unmasking the urgent need to differentiate our practices and how we organize our schools. Teaching now requires increased attention on using diverse methods of engaging our diverse student body so that all students have opportunities to learn and excel.

## EVOLVING NOTIONS OF WHAT IS IMPORTANT TO KNOW AND BE ABLE TO DO

At the same time that our student body is growing ever more diverse, what our future graduates will need to know and be able to do is also rapidly changing. With knowledge literally and figuratively at our fingertips through increased technology, our future graduates will be expected not merely to retain facts and formulas, but to think critically, problem-solve collaboratively, and innovate creatively. These skills and dispositions, or “habits of mind,” are increasingly the currency of value in today’s colleges, careers, and democracy. David Conley has found that, in addition to content knowledge, colleges are seeking high school graduates who have key cognitive strategies (the capacity to think, problem-solving, research skills), learning skills (ownership of learning, collaborative learning, strategic reading), and transition knowledge & skills (self-advocacy, postsecondary aspirations).<sup>4</sup> Likewise, greater than

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90% of surveyed employers in a 2013 poll cited ethical judgment and integrity, intercultural skills, and capacity to learn as critical qualities in candidates that factor into hiring decisions; greater than 75% felt that colleges should focus on skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, and communication.<sup>5</sup>

Simultaneously, recent research has determined that a school focus on social-emotional learning can boost student learning. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines social and emotional learning (SEL) as “the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.”<sup>6</sup> In a meta-analysis of over 200 social-emotional learning programs spanning kindergarten through grade twelve, students participating in SEL programs, as compared to peers who did not, “demonstrated significantly improved social and emotional skills, attitudes, behavior, and academic performance that reflected an 11 percentile point gain in achievement.”<sup>7</sup>

Most important is the place of education in ensuring a vibrant democracy. A 2016 Pew Research Center investigation found that today’s Millennials have consistently voted at significantly lower rates than those in older generations (Boomer, Silent, Generation X) at a time when democracy, civility, and values of inclusivity at home and abroad are teetering.<sup>8</sup> Villegas-Reimders reminds us that democratic abilities and skills including “moral values that reflect democratic ideals and principles... [and] motivation to get involved and act...” are learned rather than innate.<sup>9</sup> What better place to learn and practice these values, ideals, and principles than at school? Unfortunately, it is little wonder that our young people have such low voter rates and democratic engagement when our state and school systems place too little value and emphasis upon providing opportunities for students to exercise voice and choice, cultivate democratic values, and practice civic engagement inside and outside of school.

This mismatch continues, as we compare what we value as most important for our students to know and be able to do with how we assess progress and growth in these areas. Standardized tests, the primary means of assessing student learning in our current system, are best used for assessing lower cognitive levels of understanding and recall of bits of knowledge, a disparity with what will most benefit today’s students. As a result, in many schools the curriculum is narrowed considerably so as to focus primarily on those subjects tested; students end up taking double-block math and English classes to the exclusion of arts, health, world languages, social studies and history, and interdisciplinary curriculum. Importantly, standardized tests are less effective at what is increasingly most important in today’s world—skills such as the capacity to think critically, analyze, synthesize, evaluate, reason, problem solve, as well as dispositions such as persistence, collaboration, creativity, communication, and

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## THE NEED FOR PERSONALIZED LEARNING

In 2014, the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education released a report on The New Opportunity to Lead, providing recommendations for the future of MA education, in which they called for the state to “adopt new models of schooling which are student-centered and personalized: where students can learn anytime, anywhere; where teaching is more tailored to their needs and aspirations; where students play a much more active role in their own learning; and where they move ahead once they have mastery of relevant knowledge and skills.”<sup>10</sup>

Imagine a state education system, districts, and schools that are founded in these principles:

- Students learn to use their minds well by engaging in learning experiences that challenge them to think critically and interact with the world around them inside and outside the school.
- Students learn multidisciplinary skills by engaging deeply in fewer, more integrated learning experiences.
- Standards are replaced by competencies, or broad learning targets that apply to all students, yet the pathways students take to attain proficiency might very well be different—uncommon means to reach common ends.
- Schedules become more flexible to accommodate these different pathways. Learning at your seat or completing worksheets online are replaced with students assuming greater agency to engage in learning projects that involve research, field work, learning and practicing new skills, and grappling with real world dilemmas.
- Students progress when they show that they have attained proficiency over a set of competencies through demonstrations of their learning, new knowledge, and skills—research papers, multimedia presentations, completed labs, plays, videos, and other means that replicate what they will be asked to do in college, career, and civic life.

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## WHAT DOES PERSONALIZED LEARNING LOOK LIKE?

As defined by the Center for Collaborative Education (CCE):

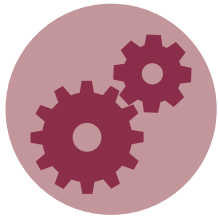
*Personalized learning tailors the educational experience for every student by embracing individual strengths, needs, interests, and culture, and elevating student voice and choice to raise engagement and achievement. Essential Personalized Learning (EPL) takes place within the context of educational equity, providing culturally responsive learning environments and equitable educational opportunities for all students.*

CCE's Essential Personalized Learning is framed by our Five Principles:



**Competency-based Learning** Competencies are broad targets for student learning that allow students to receive credit when they demonstrate mastery of competencies at each new level.

For example, New Hampshire's Board of Education approved a set of nine English language arts competencies that cover writing, reading, listening, and speaking rather than a voluminous set of standards, enabling more integrative curriculum and learning experiences.



**Authentic Learning** Students engage in standards-aligned workplace, project-, and community-based learning, with multiple opportunities to demonstrate what they know and are able to do through high quality performance assessments. Learning that is “authentic” is culturally relevant and focused on students’ interests and needs.

Many personalized learning schools require “capstone” projects, in which students demonstrate attainment of competencies through individually designed, extended interdisciplinary projects.



**Flexible Learning** Learning can happen inside or outside of the school and classroom walls, with extended projects often requiring longer blocks of uninterrupted time. Thus, schedules accommodate flexible learning, rather than being a fixed, “one size fits all” experience.

Curricula may include service-learning, internships, field research on actual community dilemmas, online learning, and oral history projects.



**Student-driven Learning** Students exercise voice and choice in their learning; they co-create personal academic profiles that are used to develop personal learning plans focused on student interests, aspirations, and learning challenges.

Students choose to pursue one of multiple pathways to attain proficiency over competencies and are empowered to be actively involved in school governance and community causes.

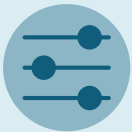


**Dispositions for Learning** With a focus on equity, identity, and concern for others, students develop the attitudes and habits necessary for academic growth and preparation for life in a global society.

Social-emotional learning curriculum programs build community through school advisories, mindfulness periods during the school day, and attentiveness to nurturing “growth mindsets” that foster dispositions such as persistence through difficult tasks.

These Five Principles find success when the goal of equity and excellence for every student remains front and center, and when reinforced by five key systems of support: family and community engagement, effective professional learning and substantial time devoted to it, autonomy to pursue innovation, inclusive leadership, and technology infrastructure. These ambitious expectations exist to ensure that the Five Principles prove to be more than mere abstraction when they manifest in schools undergoing transformation.

## SYSTEMS OF SUPPORT *FOR PERSONALIZED LEARNING*



**Autonomies** Administrators and teachers working collaboratively need maximum control over decisions and resources. School autonomies remove obstacles and empower teachers to lead the work of becoming a personalized learning community.



**Family & Community Engagement** Personalized Learning requires a school-wide approach that engages families and communities. When schools and families share frequent, open communication, educators are able to better understand their students and personalize learning to each learner's unique interests and needs.



**Leadership** Developing leaders and change agents with a focus on equity and social justice is a key element of coaching in personalized learning. Leaders at all levels must think systemically, manage change, and design policies and practices to close achievement gaps and ensure equity for all students.



**Professional Learning** Transitioning to personalized learning requires ample common planning time within professional learning teams as well as full faculty professional development and opportunities for teams to visit personalized learning schools in action.



**Technology** Technology is not the solution, but a vehicle for personalized learning. Technology and tech literacy can support the facilitation of learning through the use of learning management systems, blended instruction, and tools that support increased student engagement in higher order thinking projects.

When TechBoston Academy in Boston, MA augmented its innovative technology-focused model with a wider, more holistic focus on personalized learning principles, Principal Nora Vernazza noted, “We have always believed that student-centered learning should be at the core of how we ‘do school.’ By instituting widespread personalized learning, we seek to increase authentic student engagement and strengthen the academic and social support for all types of learners.” Her comments reflect the understanding that transformation requires whole-school adoption of all of the personalized learning principles, not just some.

These concepts and principles of personalized learning are not new. Back in the mid-1980s, they were embedded in Ted Sizer’s Coalition of Essential Schools, which promoted similar principles with different titles such as learn to use one’s mind well; less is more; goals apply to all students; personalize the learning experience; student-as-worker, teacher-as-coach; demonstration of mastery; and a tone of decency and trust. With the federal No Child Left Behind Act in our rear-view mirror, there is now a greater window of opportunity to return to these principles which have been at the heart of progressive education in years past.

**“By instituting widespread personalized learning, we seek to increase authentic student engagement and strengthen the academic and social support for all types of learners.”**

## SCALING PERSONALIZED LEARNING WHILE AVOIDING PITFALLS

**Scaffold full integration of all personalized learning principles school-wide.** While many schools transitioning toward personalized learning embrace one particular principle, the eventual confluence of all principles has the greatest potential to produce radical school-wide results, and in the end, they are all interwoven. Competency-based Learning enables students to progress at their own pace, focusing more deeply on fewer, broader learning targets. Flexible Learning encompasses learning anywhere (inside and outside of the classroom and school) and anytime (beyond school hours), as well as effective use of technology. Authentic Learning ensures that curriculum is culturally relevant, rigorous, real-world-embedded, and engaging to students, while assessment includes multiple means, notably Quality Performance Assessments. Dispositions for Learning build students' capacity to be equitably prepared to assume the habits of mind and social-emotional skills necessary to access next-generation curriculum. And finally, Student-driven Learning emphasizes student agency—beyond simple voice and choice—as a means of student empowerment, a linchpin for true personalization.

In many cases, it makes more sense to scaffold the principles strategically, introducing high-impact innovations in a progression over time. For example, several schools in CCE's Massachusetts Personalized Learning Network, including Garfield Middle School in Revere and Walsh Middle School in Framingham, marshalled immediate support behind strong Student Advisory programs, which can serve as gateways to personalized learning plans, social-emotional learning, and other student-centered approaches. Project-based learning and graduation capstone assessments can inject student-driven, personalized experiences into schools.

Alternatively, incrementalism, or the adoption of one or two personalized learning principles without setting an upfront vision of whole-school scaling of all the principles, or implementing the principles without attention to fidelity, can lead to stalled efforts and lackluster, disappointing outcomes, often resulting in abandonment of worthy efforts. Ultimately, a strong school-wide vision of the Five Principles in unison should serve as a beacon toward which schools should aim their innovations.

**Be attentive to equity and cultural competence.** Essential Personalized Learning strives to maintain a central focus on the essentials of evidence-supported personalized learning practices that ensure equity and excellence for all students. In fact, it is the focus on equity that allows the Five Principles to succeed for every student. In a true personalized learning school, equity in opportunity and access is paramount to attaining equity in learning; all students are provided high quality instruction, curriculum, and academic support. The entire curriculum is culturally responsive to the full cultural diversity of enrolled students. Personalization means that the adults

Personalization means that the adults know students well, including their cultures, languages, learning styles, neighborhoods, and families.

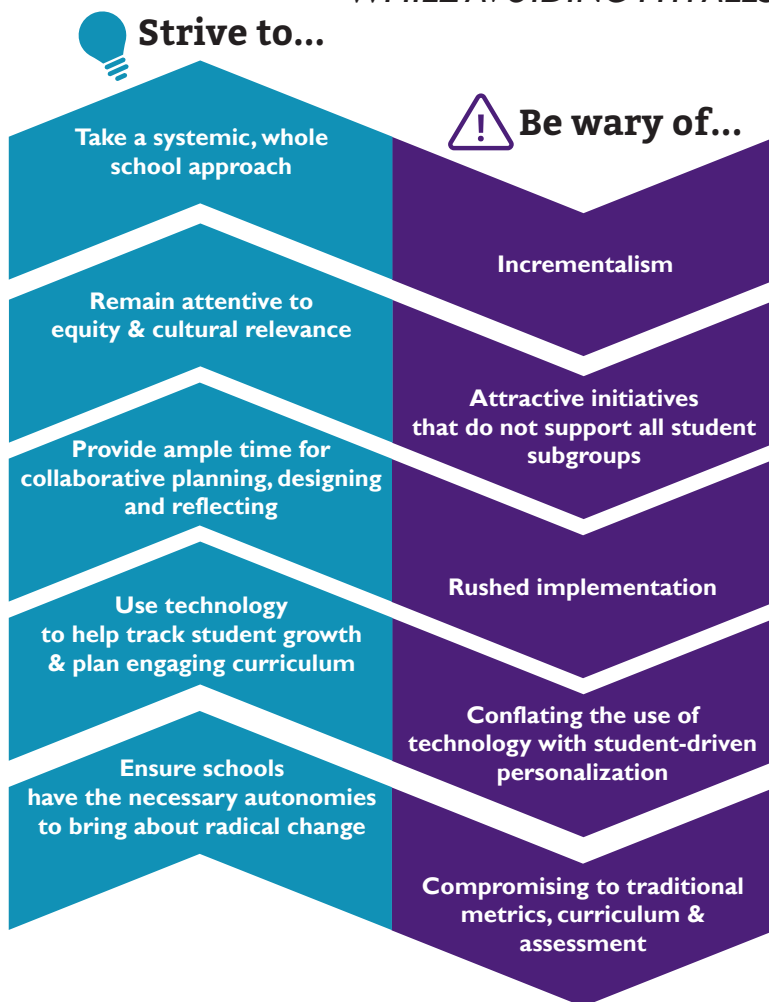


know students well, including their cultures, languages, learning styles, neighborhoods, and families. Faculty and staff members are well versed in cultural competence, understanding of and practicing culturally competent strategies in their classrooms and everyday practices with students. They pay close attention to how students by subgroups are progressing across multiple measures of learning and engagement, and take steps to identify and address causes when concerning gaps are uncovered.

Inattention to equity can lead to personalized learning pathways which resemble much-maligned tracking (sorting students into courses of varying rigor based on perceived ability) if they are not accessible or attractive to an equitable distribution of students. Students with social capital and initially stronger skills could forge ahead while others flounder without data-informed academic supports, student-led conferences, and intentional inclusion. Lack of attention to students' cultural backgrounds can lead to learning opportunities that are primarily geared to a particular cultural group, usually reflecting society's dominant culture and mores.

**Time to collaborate.** School cultures and practices don't change without substantial time freed up for the adults in a school, and particularly teachers, to engage in discourse, planning, designing, and reflecting on their craft and practices. Whether it be transitioning from standards to competency-based progression, adopting project-based learning, designing high quality performance assessments, embedding out-of-school learning experiences into the curriculum, taking on an advisory role and advisory curriculum, or rethinking grading and report cards, all of these discussions require ample time for discourse among school community members. Thus, schools taking on a transition to personalized learning need ample common planning time within teams (interdisciplinary or discipline-based), full faculty professional development, opportunity to send teams to visit personalized learning schools in action, and summer planning time. Transforming to a personalized learning culture without the requisite time for thoughtful planning and reflection usually results in poor implementation, frustrated adults and students, and discouraging results.

## SCALING PERSONALIZED LEARNING WHILE AVOIDING PITFALLS



In too many schools technology is the end goal, leading to few substantive changes in teaching and learning.

**Use technology in ways that promote authentic learning.** Technology is a tool that, when used thoughtfully, can enhance learning. Collaborative, online-based tools are useful when conducting surveys and recording data for analysis. Digital software and video applications are effective when preparing multi-media presentations of in-depth learning projects. Multiple software products enable virtual oral interviews and meetings for use when a student is gathering data about a topical investigation. In flipped classrooms, students might read online articles at home to enable increased project-based learning in the classroom. The commonality among these examples is that technology is used to promote deeper learning focused on skills such as research, evaluation, synthesis, analysis, investigation, communication, and collaboration. Technology can also be useful in building students' and teachers' capacity to track their progress in attaining competencies and progress toward graduation through a Learning Management System aligned with the school's goals.

However, it is important to remember that not all uses of technology reflect or embrace the true tenets of personalized learning. In too many schools technology is the end goal, leading to few substantive changes in teaching and learning. In many cases, technology-embedded instruction merely replicates traditional methods, such as replacing written quizzes with online ones or worksheet packets with online "playlists."

**Ensure that schools have needed autonomy with shared decision-making within public oversight to bring about radical change.**

Transforming to a true personalized learning model oftentimes requires substantial change in staffing, budget, curriculum, assessment, professional development, use of time, and governance. Whether it is staggered schedules to accommodate out-of-school learning, teachers taking on advisory roles, integrated curriculum across disciplines, or setting up school-based governing bodies with increased authority over resources and decision making, these changes can require greater flexibility over district policies and work conditions.

Too often, however, autonomy over these areas within traditional public schools is viewed, understandably, with mistrust and as a means of granting teachers less control. Yet, when carefully crafted, gaining autonomy can mean shifting greater resources and decision making to those adults who work most closely with the students and families—school administrators and teachers working collaboratively. Greater autonomy can and should result in greater inclusion of teachers in decision making (e.g., teacher inclusion in governance bodies, distributive leadership models, governing board authority in principal hiring). Guardrails can ensure that teachers are always alongside administrators in making important decisions, or even more outside the box, spawning new teacher-powered, personalized learning schools. Shared decision-making leads to more sound decisions, greater ownership, increased trust between

administration and faculty to innovate, and stronger fidelity of implementation.

## DRIVING GREATER IMPLEMENTATION OF PERSONALIZED LEARNING IN MASSACHUSETTS

As a movement, personalized learning holds great promise. But supporters of personalized learning must place it at the center of the public education system, instead of on its fringes. Public school districts need to embrace personalized learning and allow for it to flourish instead of being relegated as a boutique model on the periphery. Over 95% of public school students still attend traditional public school districts, as opposed to charter schools. These school districts have the opportunity and capacity to enable the scaling and replication of effective personalized learning practices, amplify success stories, and affect entire communities, from kindergarten through graduation. It is time to bring personalized learning, in its fullest definition, into public school districts in Massachusetts.

In order to promote implementation of personalized learning practices throughout the state, CCE has established a Massachusetts Personalized Learning Network and works closely with school and district leaders and educators to support the adoption of student-centered learning. However, if personalized learning is to become a sustained movement, it must be driven by policies and practices within the schools and districts themselves and supported by state policy that will not simply permit, but actively promote, these local developments.

### STATE POLICY

State policy-makers can promote personalized learning by ensuring alignment in the following major areas:

- **Competency Education:** Holding students accountable to broader learning targets, or “competencies,” will enable schools to focus on universal student proficiency and more integrative curriculum, while moving us away from a focus on multitudinous standards which leads to a fragmented curriculum.
- **Cross-Curricular Skills and Dispositions:** Adopt a set of important cross-curricular skills and dispositions that students need to learn and practice in order to be ready for college, career, and citizenship, such as communication, collaboration, creativity, and self-direction.
- **Accountability:** Assessment drives what is taught and how. If Massachusetts shifts away from a single measure of accountability—student MCAS scores—toward a multiple measures data dashboard and teacher-developed performance assessments (extended projects with real-world application accompanied by clear criteria), schools and districts will be encouraged to shift toward student-centered instruction based on learners’ needs and

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skills. The Massachusetts Consortium for Innovative Education Assessment, a consortium of six districts, is seeking to build such a system to demonstrate its power in improving student learning and school quality.

- **Graduation through Proficiency:** Massachusetts could require graduation by proficiency through locally derived performance assessments with state guidance and support; such policies and practices are already underway in most New England states, including Maine, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont.
- **Seat Time Requirements:** Massachusetts' regulations still imply seat time for courses; a shift to redefine learning time to be more inclusive of time outside the traditional classroom would support greater personalization.
- **Multiple Pathways:** An increasingly diverse student body calls for multiple pathways to demonstrate proficiency over a common set of knowledge, skills, and dispositions, including early college, internships and apprenticeships, field research, service learning, and other out-of-school learning opportunities.
- **Credentialing:** State teacher credentialing programs and credentialing renewal should promote using personalized learning methods. More immediately, the state can leverage certificate renewal as an opportunity to shift toward micro-credentialing. Micro-credentialing is a competency-based, personalized, approach to professional development, suited for anytime/anywhere learning, that enables teachers to demonstrate what they know and can do in particular areas of expertise in real-world ways.

### DISTRICT POLICY AND PRACTICE

Districts have impact both through local policy and through practices that support the progress of the schools under their control. In order for personalized learning to take hold, districts can foster personalized learning growth through the following strategies, many of which mirror the recommended state policies above, thus creating an aligned system:

- **Communication:** Districts need to embrace a vision of personalized learning with an explicit focus on closing achievement gaps by subgroup, and communicate this vision to the broader community through forums that invite parents and community members to participate in viewing students' performance assessment presentations, and engaging the community in learning projects.
- **District-wide Commitment and Investment:** District leaders should voice a commitment to create multiple personalized learning schools rather than creating a "boutique" school that sits on the fringe with little potential to impact other district schools or the overall district culture.
- **Competency Education:** A shift to a competency-based approach to learning enables students to progress as they demonstrate proficiency over a set of competencies. This approach has implications for different approaches to grading, report cards, promotion, and graduation.

Districts need to embrace a vision of personalized learning with an explicit focus on closing achievement gaps by subgroup, and communicate this vision to the broader community.



- **Systems of Academic and Social-Emotional Learning Support:** Competency-based education requires strong wrap-around academic and social-emotional learning services to ensure that students with lower skill levels receive the support and develop the skills they need to accelerate and take increased ownership over their learning.
- **Grade Bands:** With a move toward competency education and students progressing at varying paces, districts should consider adopting grade bands (multiple ages of students together), each with gateway performance assessments that enable students to move to the next band.
- **Learning Outside of the Classroom and School Walls:** Districts can school administrators and teachers to increase credit-bearing student opportunities to learn in real-world ways outside of the classroom and school walls, including internships, apprenticeships, service learning, field research, and community projects.
- **Graduation through Proficiency:** Leaders can require graduation by proficiency through locally derived performance assessments and portfolios of student work.
- **Freedom to Innovate:** By shifting from compliance to support, districts can foster distributed leadership while supporting best practices. Through setting broad targets of school and student performance, and then supporting schools to think innovatively in attaining them, teachers and administrators are provided with greater freedom to think expansively about how to engage students and their families.

## SCHOOL PRACTICES

Several practices that drive personalized learning remain, of necessity, at the individual school level; once again, some of these practices align with state and district recommendations above:

- **Readiness:** Schools considering transitioning to personalized learning should undertake a “temperature check” through a personalized learning readiness assessment to identify the strengths, challenges, needs, and desire of the school community to transition to a personalized learning model.
- **Vision:** The establishment of a comprehensive vision of a

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personalized learning school should be created and owned by the entire school community.

- **Leadership:** Any initiative to move toward personalized learning is best shepherded by a diverse, representative design team that values collaboration, cultural competence, and equity, and is prepared to use critical inquiry to explore current practice and lead school-wide transformation.
- **Thoughtful Planning:** An effective planning process leads to transformation of a vision of personalized learning to an implementation plan that incorporates the principles for personalized learning and focuses on school-wide equity and excellence.
- **Reallocation of Resources:** Moving to a personalized learning model often leads to redistribution of resources and roles—for example, adoption of the advisory role by teachers, creation of an internship coordinator, or creation of a “design lab” for students during project time.
- **Autonomy:** Schools should consider gaining increased autonomy over resources through adoption of an autonomy model—a local “thin contract” between the district and teachers union, Innovation, or Horace Mann I status, all of which embrace a district-local teacher union partnership.

## CONCLUSION

Today, there is a window of opportunity for the Commonwealth to embrace the personalized learning movement. Many individuals and teams of innovative teachers in schools statewide have already adopted personalized learning practices such as project-based learning, performance assessments, and advisory, to name a few. Massachusetts, as a hub for higher education and technology, attracts a great many bright minds eager to lend their expertise to students hoping to leverage real-world experience toward their education. Vanguard schools that move toward student-centered instruction, including Revere High School, several Boston district Pilot and Horace Mann I schools, and Leominster Center for Excellence have gained regional and/or national attention. The Massachusetts educational ecosystem includes many nonprofits and other agencies with the capacity to support professional growth and to advocate for policy changes. And recently established networks—including the Massachusetts Personalized Learning Network and the Massachusetts Personalized Learning EdTech Consortium (MAPLE)—show that educators and school leaders are eager to collaborate toward a personalized learning pedagogy.

However, as a state we still face deep-seeded inequities. Simply identifying achievement gaps is hardly tantamount to closing them. And the focus on teaching toward attaining adequate test scores actually detracts from the kind of student-centered, personalized pedagogy that would result in more self-actualized, engaged, competent young persons.

Today, there is a window of opportunity for the Commonwealth to embrace the personalized learning movement.

This more difficult, profound change requires a shift in paradigm. By ensuring that students achieve ambitious college, career, and civic-aligned competencies, we will graduate every student prepared for his or her next step. By providing an engaging, meaningful curriculum and assessing students' learning by multiple, authentic means, we will support a richer and more rigorous definition of student achievement. In supporting students as they develop skills and dispositions, we will help them be more nimble and prepared for a future we can scarcely envision with any accuracy. And in providing more flexible school structures, we will blur the previously-sharp distinction between school and life, enabling students to take charge of their learning and drive confidently into their respective futures.

In short, audacity need not be the enemy of the practical. By drastically reshaping our ideal schools to better resemble “educational hubs” that support personalization, we open more possibilities than we close. By following this roadmap, Massachusetts can more genuinely be a beacon of progressive education, ensuring equitable excellence for all its students.

By ensuring that students achieve ambitious college, career, and civic-aligned competencies, we will graduate every student prepared for his or her next step.

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## ENDNOTES

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<sup>8</sup>Fry, R. (2016). *Millennials match baby boomers as largest generation in U.S. electorate, but will they vote?*. Pew Research Center. Downloaded at <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/05/16/millennials-match-baby-boomers-as-largest-generation-in-u-s-electorate-but-will-they-vote/>.

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