



Getting to Why

Three ways principals can use personalized learning to lead whole-school transformation

By Jeneen Y. Hatoum

As an assistant principal in Chicago, I confronted a concern: that despite the best efforts of our talented and dedicated educators, we might not be preparing our students adequately for careers after graduation. Our classrooms still relied on the systems that were used to teach students a century before, and we worried that our actions—or inactions—would be consequential in determining the future success of an underserved student body.



In response, our leadership team began to imagine a new future for our school that would give students more avenues for success after graduation. And although graduation and career are far off for elementary and middle school students, curriculum and classroom practice still need to prepare them for life. You, too, might be looking to redesign these aspects of your school to ensure their future success.

As we started to rethink teaching and learning, we wanted to understand the “whys” behind our ambitions. And when we started to look deeper into the decisions our educators and leaders made every day—from texts taught, to grading techniques, to master schedule—it became clear that the biggest “why” was “because we’ve always done it that way.”

We had to refocus our answers around a different question. We asked who we wanted our graduates to be, and what we wanted them to be able to show or do, upon leaving the school. We owed it to them to foster the confidence and skills they would need to successfully navigate life, and we had to design a learning environment that would build the social, cultural, and academic capital necessary to compete with more privileged counterparts.

Transforming a school requires bending mindsets and building culture. It requires a communal appreciation of why you are making changes that are sometimes difficult or uncomfortable. And by starting with the “why,” we were able to transform the school into a collaborative learning community that focused on disciplined inquiry of all our practices. This led to a boost in test scores, increased the number of students enrolling and succeeding in our most rigorous

courses, and earned us Chicago Public Schools’ highest achievement rating.

Change Agent

It’s a challenge I now see play out regularly in my role as director of programs at LEAP Innovations, a nonprofit that has worked with more than 2,400 educators and 140 schools to achieve transformation through personalized learning. It’s a style of teaching that empowers learners to set their own goals, lead their own instruction, and advance when they demonstrate competency.

Personalized learning creates multiple pathways to guide students toward the same rigorous standards for achievement, without making the assumption that students below grade level can’t access tasks that require higher-order thinking. It asks educators to consider the connections between classwork and a student’s identity, culture, and context—and it often hinges on the “why.”

Translating the why into whole-school transformation isn’t easy. But our partner schools have shown that, when done thoughtfully, they can transform student outcomes. In our most recent analysis, students in personalized classrooms advanced 13 percentile points in literacy over students in traditional classrooms.

Inform to Transform

Over the past three years, we worked with Perkins Bass, an elementary school on Chicago’s South Side that once struggled but was recently awarded the district’s highest performance ranking and has seen math and reading scores *triple* since it began its journey toward

whole-school transformation. Bass started implementation with teacher retention levels at just 76 percent, but it has improved to exceed state and district levels at 89 percent.

Every day, Bass' teachers and students show how a powerful "why" can transform outcomes. Here are three ways in which savvy school leaders can introduce the "why" behind a whole-school transformation to personalized learning:


1. **Bend the mindset.** Whole-school transformation begins when you engage educators to reconsider their own mindset around student potential. Principals—especially those with students who enter below grade level and have external barriers to success—might believe that their school will descend into chaos if they grant students more autonomy in instruction, or they might question whether students struggling to meet standards are capable of higher-order thinking. Similarly, educators might have a tendency to teach the way they were taught, and personalized learning challenges us to upend years' worth of ingrained practices.

Shifting mindsets requires more than simply examining and challenging old ways of thinking, though. It asks that we guide educators toward experiences that reveal the necessity of change and enable them to translate their own vision into a set of implementable practices. Challenge educators to imagine what their schools would look like if every decision focused on desired student outcomes. There are always reasons not to change, but if you place students at the center of every decision, they will show you what they're capable of.

2. **Build buy-in.** A whole-school redesign won't succeed if you foist a set of mandates on educators. Before transformation can take hold, the full community must reach a consensus that every child deserves a tailored learning environment that harnesses their talents and addresses their unique needs and strengths.

Principals can help educators understand the skills that personalization can foster, raise expectations for student performance, and trust students to exercise autonomy—as well as establish a set of practices that provide steps toward that guiding vision. They can create consensus by acting as aggregators of the community's wisdom, conducting listening sessions, surveys, and one-on-one interviews to understand

**We are piloting a
new paradigm that
prepares every
child to thrive.**



teachers' pain points, students' needs, and opportunities for growth.

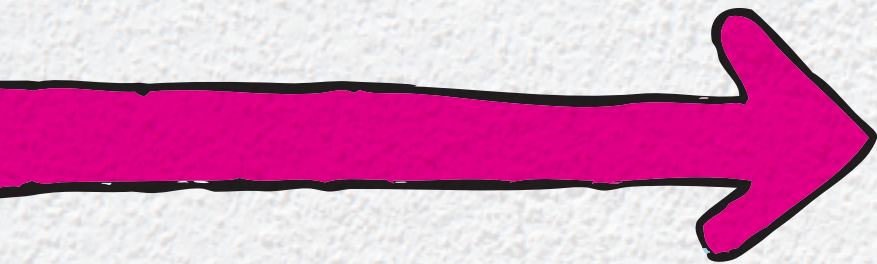
This is where you should begin rigorous data collection, because what doesn't get measured often doesn't get done. This might include reviews of student work samples, assessments, grades, and attendance. Develop a deep understanding of the student body; you have a bird's eye view of your school and can spot patterns that other individuals might miss.

3. **Prioritize practice.** Changing practice starts with identifying the barriers standing in the way of your school's target outcomes, focusing on areas that help the school overcome those barriers, and setting a clear path for teachers.

My belief is that personalized learning must be individualized for teachers and for students, and that practices should draw on educators' strengths and backgrounds. Teachers perform best when school leadership builds them safe spaces in which to innovate, supports them as they try new things, and provides them with the resources and training that they need to get the results they want.

Teachers should work with each student to build a profile of his or her goals following in-depth conferencing or perhaps an "empathy walk," in which they walk in their students' footsteps for a day. Practice can be informed by rigorous qualitative and quantitative data collection examining student attendance, engagement, interests, and academic performance.

Then, working from a deeper understanding of each student's needs,



SUCCESS ASSESSED

LEAP's Breakthrough Schools: Chicago (BSC) sites increased in their schools' first year of participation in BSC overall and relative to other sites, according to The Wisconsin Evaluation Collaborative at University of Wisconsin.

About 63 percent of elementary students met growth targets on universal math assessments after a year in the BSC cohort—up from 58 percent and well above non-BSC schools' 55 percent.


In reading assessments, BSC and non-BSC schools started with 58 percent of elementary students meeting growth targets; BSC schools increased to 61 percent after one year, while non-BSC schools' decreased to 56 percent.

teachers and principals can co-design classrooms to foster the varied learning experiences students need to reach their goals. In any given classroom, you might see small-group instruction, kids working together on projects or problems, or young learners working independently. Some schools I work with in Chicago use colloquia that allow students to pursue independent projects in the community. We work to get all students to the point where they can articulate why they are completing an activity, and how it serves their broader goals.

Shifts in practice can't be expected overnight. Schools begin the journey to transformation with a few early adopters—enthusiastic educators who understand the value of personalized learning and forge ahead. Principals often find these trailblazers easy to support, and they can spread their practices from a few model classrooms to the whole school by setting stakeholder expectations and articulating clear goals.

A Personalized Pedagogy

Today's schools are at a crossroads: After a century of one-size-fits-all schooling that often left students from underrepresented cultures, high-poverty backgrounds, and nonwhite races behind, we are piloting a new paradigm that prepares every child to thrive. We can't just teach content; we must foster creativity and independence. We can't isolate the classroom from the real world, and we must help students connect their studies to their cultures, interests, and strengths.

To prepare every child to succeed today, we need to let go of an educational model built to prepare them for yesterday's jobs. We need to foster and empower learners to think critically, thrive through ambiguity, and guide their own futures. Principals are uniquely suited to support this innovative new model. They can help build consensus behind the "why"—and ultimately help teachers and students engage in the "how." 

Jeneen Y. Hatoum is director of programs at LEAP Innovations and a former assistant principal at Kenwood Academy of Chicago.



There are pitfalls to personalized learning that can derail its successful implementation. Teachers and administrators may not understand what the approach should look like, and their visions for success might not be aligned. While adjusted to each individual student, instruction must continue to be standards-based and align with state and district learning goals.

Teachers must have strong classroom management skills and not get overwhelmed by the variety of activities needed. Teachers must also use informal assessments to learn about their students' strengths, needs, and preferences. Teachers—and especially new teachers—can find these tasks difficult.

Another challenge is that schools often focus more on the purchasing and implementation of new devices than on instructional goals and classroom setup. There are a variety of ways educators can incorporate personalized learning into their instructional practices by designing meaningful, authentic activities that give students a reason to be engaged.

This kind of personalization doesn't have to include technology. Ask students how they want to learn and how they would like to show mastery of what they