





A Winning Equation

Personalized education + parent engagement = student success

By Kristin Novy

I t's no secret that countless children in underserved communities across the country do not have access to high-quality early education. As a result, the opportunity gap starts well before elementary school begins. By age 3, children from low-income households know fewer than half as many words as their more affluent peers. This disparity, along with similar gaps in math and emotional development, persists and widens as children get older. For example, just 14 percent of low-income high school students go on to earn a college degree. This lack of educational achievement limits their career options and perpetuates the cycle of poverty, which has a lasting, negative effect on the individual, their family, and their community.

Elementary educators who serve low-income populations understand the challenges posed by these issues; at-risk students frequently enter kindergarten significantly behind their peers and require extensive catch-up. And, historically speaking, traditional models have proven ineffective in leveling the playing field.

As education evolves and innovative approaches emerge, schools are starting to see success in closing the opportunity gap through a strategic combination of collaboration with early childhood development leaders, personalized learning,

and parent engagement. For example, at Christopher House Elementary School, our continuum of schools combines personalized learning—at the elementary level and in our infant, toddler, and preschool education—with immersive family support that starts at birth.

Using data to track the progress of these efforts and inform instruction increases effectiveness and extends the impact within a single school and throughout the entire education community.

Engage Students on a Personal Level

As principal of the Christopher House Elementary School, I believe that personalized learning, in collaboration with our infant, toddler, preschool, and parent school, is an innovative model that is changing the trajectory of the scholars and families in our schools.

Today's schools are increasingly multicultural and multilingual, with students from diverse social and economic backgrounds. At my school, for example, 100 percent of students are eligible for free lunch, and 51 percent are English-language learners. As a result, there



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is not a cookie-cutter approach that works for every child. By tailoring each student's education based on their strengths, challenges, and interests, educators can help them learn at their own level in a way that works for them.

In addition, as a growing number of schools adopt social and emotional learning (SEL) as part of their curricula, a personalized approach helps to maximize the impact of SEL on the individual student. By focusing on students' unique needs when it comes to academic growth, as well as social and emotional development, we enhance their ability to succeed in school as well as life.

Here are some effective practices that we have used to build our personalized learning at Christopher House Elementary School:

Dig Deeper. Personalized learning is not the same as differentiation. For a personalized approach to be truly effective, the educator must take into consideration each child's interests and background. Understanding who the child is,

where they come from, and where their interests lie allows for impactful instruction by making the student feel welcomed and supported. It's also important to emphasize cultural awareness in education. From being culturally sensitive to each student to strategically selecting textbooks that will resonate most, educators who take a deeper dive and are more mindful of the individual student can have the greatest impact.

Create a Common Language. When it comes to personalized learning, a lot of people immediately think of technology; but that's not what it's about. Instead, it's about encouraging and enhancing independence and problem-solving skills. Build a language for collaboration to help students communicate effectively and strengthen self-efficacy and self-advocacy. Encourage them to practice that language throughout their day, whether it's at recess or working on a group project. Students who practice and reinforce those critical communication skills will carry them throughout their lives.

Establish a Safe Space for Sharing. Taking that common language and responsive classroom approach even further, regularly create times for students and teachers to come together and share what's on their minds. Kids can share a problem they're facing and work with the group to solve it. For example, if there's a fight at recess, create a safe space where they can resolve the issue. Work toward creating a school experience that encourages students to practice their ability to express themselves and their emotions, self-regulate, communicate well, and collaborate effectively.

Ensure That No Student Gets Lost. Implement a process for teachers to regularly check in with students; this process will also ensure that the school has a strong relationship with each child. For example, our approach is to track and confirm that each student has two adults they trust at the school. Whether it's a teacher, a nurse, or the principal, the child needs to have someone they feel comfortable talking to and confiding in to ultimately feel safe at school. This is an important, and oftentimes overlooked, aspect of personalized learning.

Integrate the Arts. Evidence shows that art programs facilitate the acquisition of critical-thinking skills that support higher learning and understanding across disciplines. By integrating art into all core subjects, educators can offer scholars the opportunity to learn in multiple ways. And, taking that to the next level, arts can be integrated into assessing as well as teaching.

For example, if a student is struggling with writing, give them an option to perform their findings instead. This approach allows them to show what they know in their own way.

Go Beyond Grit. As educators, we all understand the importance of instilling perseverance and grit into today's students, but grit shouldn't be an emphasis for every student. In all school communities, from urban to rural, education professionals encounter children from traumatic backgrounds. And oftentimes kids who have experienced trauma have proven that they have more than their fair share of grit; rather, what they need is compassion and support. In a trauma-informed school, the adults in the school community are prepared to recognize and respond to those who have been impacted by traumatic stress. As educators, it's our responsibility to be aware, to be sensitive, and to be supportive of each student's needs.

Foster a Culture of Respect and Support. While all the above will help to build trust, respect, and support between students and staff, it's equally important for administrators to support educators every step of the way. Don't be afraid to set high expectations, but know that in turn you'll have to provide the support and resources staff members need to reach those goals. It's also important to give all educators the space they need to share the challenges they're facing, the emotions they're feeling, and their successes. They also need encouragement to share what's *not* working.

Be Data-Informed Instead of Data-Driven. While data is invaluable in education, it should not drive everything. When determining what information to track, think through what will impact your students' learning, and focus on the areas that could have a strong influence. With any new approach, you're taking a risk. By tracking and reviewing data that shows the results of these efforts, you can evaluate progress and make improvements to personalized learning plans.

Give Parents and Families the Support They Need

As educators, we control what happens within the walls of our schools. For about seven hours a day, we have an incredible opportunity to impact a child's growth, academically as well as through social and emotional development. However, students' success also hinges on their home life. If they are not receiving the support they need to succeed from parents and caregivers during

out-of-school time, their progress is at risk. Such circumstances can threaten the child's well-being, attendance, learning, and attention.

With that in mind, Christopher House's model includes a commitment to engaging parents in their child's learning. This commitment involves getting to know each family and partnering with parents to set individual goals toward self-sufficiency, then regularly checking in to make sure no obstacles are getting in the way of progress. We also provide a wealth of resources—from a food pantry to counseling services—to make sure our children go home to healthy, supportive environments.

Here are some ways we engage parents to optimize student success:

Educate the Parent. Provide information and ideas to help parents and caregivers guide healthy growth, development, and academic success. Arm them with the tools they need to help their child succeed, including take-home materials, tips for homework help, informative workshops, and support groups.

Set Goals. Start simple. Set three specific goals for parents to work toward—and track their progress. If there are specific areas a parent would like their child to work on at school, allow them to suggest goals that teachers can work on with their student. This two-way approach builds connection and fosters a partnership that can go a long way in supporting the success of the student.

Communicate Frequently. Provide regular updates to parents on how their child is performing. Discuss challenges and concerns early on, bringing parents into the fold to help tackle the issue. Encourage parents to share feedback regarding changes they've noticed in their child or questions about how their child is doing socially, emotionally, and academically.

As educators, we share a common goal of providing every child the opportunity to succeed. By increasing the level of personalized learning within the classroom, focusing on collaboration of learning starting at birth, and partnering with parents to enhance engagement at home, we are making strides toward achieving this goal. Tracking that strategic combination through data not only allows us to measure its success, but also provides tangible outcomes that can be shared to extend its impact for the greater good. 

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