

A photograph of a diverse group of graduates in black gowns and mortarboards, celebrating with their caps raised in the air. The scene is outdoors with green trees in the background.

What's Possible with Personalized Learning?

An Overview of Personalized Learning
for Schools, Families & Communities

WRITTEN BY:
Bruce Friend
Susan Patrick
Carri Schneider
Tom Vander Ark

PRODUCED BY:
iNACOL

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The mission of the International Association for K–12 Online Learning (iNACOL) is to catalyze the transformation of K-12 education policy and practice to advance powerful, personalized, learner-centered experiences through competency-based, blended and online learning. iNACOL is a non-profit organization focusing on research, developing policy for student-centered education to ensure equity and access, developing quality standards for emerging learning models using competency-based, blended and online education, and supporting the ongoing professional development of school and district leaders for new learning models. Learn more at www.inacol.org.



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The World Has Changed, But What About Schools?

Consider how the world has changed since you were in school. In what ways does your job or career differ from that of your parents and grandparents? How has technology changed your daily life? What global issues and challenges have surfaced? How has communication changed? What about entertainment? Travel? Health and medicine?

While it is easy to list many of the ways the world has changed in just the last 10 years, most classrooms look and operate exactly like they did 100 years ago. It's not surprising that many of the problems that have plagued our education system over time—like educational inequality and lack of universal access to high-quality educational opportunities—also still exist.

Not all kids have the same access to opportunity. Many high school graduates enter college or the workforce without the skills they need to succeed.

Teachers, leaders, students and families in classrooms and communities across the country are coming together to explore how schools can better meet the needs of students in today's society. They're exploring big questions such as:

- » **What must students know and do to be able to thrive in the modern world?**
- » **What learning experiences are necessary to ensure students graduate with these skills and traits?**
- » **How must schools transform in order to create these new learning experiences?**

When schools and districts engage their communities in conversations about these questions, the answers they reach often have much in common. From urban districts to rural schools and from preschools to universities, teachers and leaders are reaching the conclusion that personalized learning is a promising solution. They see the tremendous potential of personalized learning to better educate all students and to better equip them to thrive in college, career and life.

The goal of this report is to inform schools, families and communities about the potential of personalized learning and empower them with ways to support the shift to student-centered learning.

In the pages that follow, we define personalized learning and describe why it matters. We highlight examples of personalized learning in action to show how personalized learning differs from traditional learning and to show what personalized learning means for students and teachers. We provide recommendations for the ways in which parents, families and communities can support the transformation of their schools.

What If...?

What if students were able to work on a skill or concept until they had mastered it, instead of getting a bad grade, or not fully understanding, only to move on to the next skill or concept because a traditional school classroom dictates that all, or most, students progress at the same pace?

What if teachers had better access to detailed information about each student, their strengths and weaknesses and how they learn best?

What if students could move on to the next skill or concept or dive more deeply into a topic when they were ready, instead of sitting through lessons and taking tests over material that they already know?

What if students had more say in the way they learned and how they demonstrated that they had learned something?

What if students who required extra support from the teacher could get this support individually or in a small group immediately when it is needed, instead of waiting until they are failing a class?

What if students spent less time preparing for high-stakes testing and more time on problem-solving, critical thinking, meaningful projects and collaboration?

What if teachers were able to spend more of their time working with individual students on specific needs instead of moving the whole class together through a standard curriculum?

What if students and their families had a more accurate picture of what each student knew and was about to do instead of just a report card with an A-F letter grade in each subject at the end of the quarter?

What if all students had access to the high-quality learning opportunities, regardless of their zip code?

What if students were able to learn out in their communities and not just in the confines of the classroom walls?

Personalized learning makes all of this possible.

Personalized learning tailors learning to each student's strengths, needs and interests. Students have "voice and choice" in determining what, how, when and where the learning occurs. Teachers provide the flexibility and supports to ensure mastery of the highest standards possible.

EXHIBIT: VIDEOS | WHY DOES PERSONALIZED LEARNING MATTER?

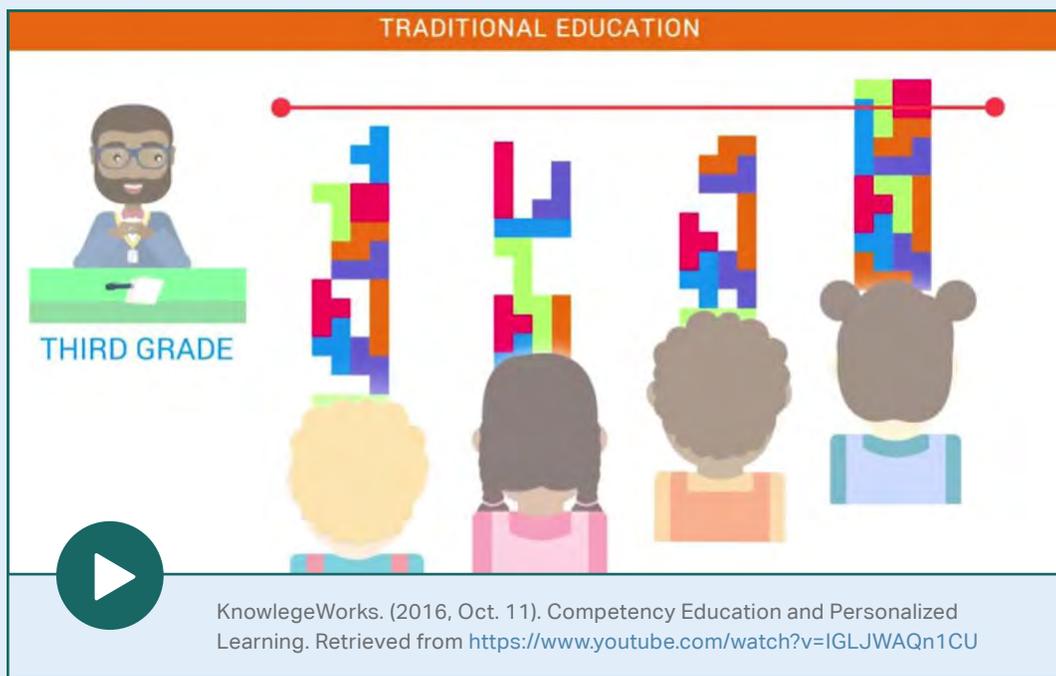
These powerful videos offer two different perspectives on the current way we educate students, the problems this creates and why personalized learning offers a promising solution. Both videos reveal the benefits of personalized learning and why it matters if we want all kids to graduate with the knowledge, skills and mindsets they need to lead happy, prosperous lives.



Khan, S. (2016, Sept. 26). TED Talks. Let's teach for mastery—not test scores. [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-MTRxRO5SRA&feature=youtu.be>

In the TED Talk [Let's Teach for Mastery—Not Test Scores](#), Sal Khan calls for a new approach to learning. It all starts with realizing every child can learn 100% of math or other subjects. He describes the way traditional schools group students together by age and perceived ability, teach and test the material, then move on. He makes the analogy between the way kids build knowledge in schools and the way a contractor builds a house with a shaky foundation. What if, he asks, we built houses the same way that schools work? What if we gave contractors pre-determined time limits and said, "do what you can in this time" and then moved along in the process regardless of if the contractor was ready or if the house wasn't completely up to code? Would passing a building inspection with a 70% be enough to justify building the next story of a house on a foundation that wasn't 100% sound? What would eventually

happen if you just kept building? Khan goes on to explain mastery-based learning as an alternative in schools ensuring students have the time to master the material—pointing to successful examples that date back decades. “They said it wouldn’t scale [then] because it was logistically difficult...you would need to personalize learning. But now today it’s no longer impractical. We have the tools to do it.”



A video from KnowledgeWorks features students, parents and teachers from the Regional School Unit 2 (RSU 2) school district in Maine. The video describes how, in traditional classrooms, students complete each grade level with A-F letter grades that suggest they have or have not learned all of the material for that grade. However, because letter grades are based on averages, students can move on to the next grade level and still have “holes” or “gaps” in specific skills. Since learning is cumulative, with each skill building on the previous one, these “skill gaps” continue to grow over time and become increasingly problematic as students move into more challenging concepts. For example, consider how difficult it would be to multiply fractions if you never mastered multiplication of single digits. The video goes on to highlight competency-based learning as an alternative to the traditional model. In a competency-based or mastery-based system, students do not move on until they have demonstrated mastery of the material.

What Does Personalized Learning Look Like in Schools?

In a classroom, school or district built on a personalized learning model, teachers design and structure learning to meet the needs of every student. This means that each learner works toward achieving the same set of college- and career-ready standards with the support that they need along the way. Put another way, each student receives the help they need, every day, to reach the same high standards and to develop the competencies they need for future success.

While there are many different approaches, these characteristics are common across most personalized learning classrooms.

Student-centered learning. Students have more ownership of their learning; that means they get to have a voice and make choices with their teachers about how they learn best and how they show what they know. Students are able to learn in the ways that are best suited to how they acquire knowledge and according to their needs and interests.

More than just a test score. Teachers are more concerned with what students are learning and how they acquire knowledge than they are with preparing for a big end-of-year test. Student activities and lessons are aligned to rigorous college- and career-ready standards, but that's not all that happens during the school day. Teachers create opportunities for kids to develop important skills like the ability to collaborate, solve problems and think critically. Teachers are intentional about helping kids understand their strengths and weaknesses as well as the mindsets they need to succeed in school and in life. Students communicate goals and work towards achieving their goals through personalized pathways that lead to important knowledge and skills.

Students move on when they're ready. Students have clear learning goals and objectives each day. Once a student has mastered these learning objectives, they "show what they know and can do." This is assessment for learning. Once a student shows they have learned the specified knowledge and skills, they can move on to their next goal. Students don't move ahead until they have shown that they've mastered a skill. When teachers recognize a student already knows a skill or concept, the information on skills mastered is recorded, and the student can move on to the next skill or dive more deeply into the learning topics. Tests and assessments serve an ongoing purpose—to give teachers and students information about each learner. These assessments are integrated into the student's day so that teachers and students have ongoing and specific information about what students know and what they still need to learn. The assessments let teachers know when students need more practice so they can provide the additional support to those students.

Anytime, anywhere learning. Teachers create opportunities for students to learn outside of the traditional classroom and school day. Students are able to learn in many different ways—from internships to museums and place-based learning experiences in the community as well as through digital learning opportunities. This empowers teachers to personalize instruction using technology and to expand access to resources for student learning.

The bottom line is that we are moving away from the industrial, factory age. As we advance further into the information revolution, we need to prepare our students to participate and fulfil their full potential to be successful in a future society that is more entrepreneurial, creative, innovative.

HOW ARE REAL SCHOOLS PERSONALIZING LEARNING?

There are many ways to implement personalized learning. In the examples that follow, you'll notice classroom-level differences in the way teachers teach and in the way learners learn. You'll also notice school-level differences in topics like grading. Even though there are differences at both the classroom level and school level, you'll notice there are many things about personalized learning environments that are the same as they've always been. These include things like kids learning individually and together, a combination of small group and whole group activities, demonstrations and instruction from the teacher, meaningful projects, extracurricular activities and more. Look for evidence of these characteristics in the school examples that follow.

LINDSAY UNIFIED PUBLIC SCHOOLS

[Lindsay Unified Public Schools](#) is a 4,200 student K-12 district in California's Central Valley. Several years ago, Lindsay Unified School District (LUSD) transformed its system into one that can and should become the model for K-12 education of the future. Lindsay focused on the needs of preparing an ever-increasing diverse population of students for future success in college and the 21st century workforce. They set to meet the challenge by shifting from a traditional time-based system, in which students are expected to conform to a one-size-fits-all pace, to a performance-based model, where learners progress only when they have demonstrated mastery. In order to better serve all students, they raised the bar and improved teaching and learning for all students, increasing equity and ensuring excellence.

In the LUSD, more than 1,000 students (called "Learners") at [Lindsay High School](#) have a great deal of voice and choice in meeting their learning goals. Their days are split between self-directed learning time and teacher-led instruction (Lindsay teachers are

called “Learning Facilitators”). During self-directed learning, Learners follow playlists that are custom-created for them based on their learning needs. They are given multiple opportunities throughout the day and week to work on these, and are able to choose what to work on from the learning activities aligned to each objective. Even during Facilitator-led instruction, Learners are often able to choose from a variety of assignments as the Facilitators spend most of their time on small group and individual instruction.

The flexibility for the Learner that these choices provide creates a powerful learning experience. Learners who are behind are able to catch up, and those who are ready to move forward can. All Learners are more active participants in their learning, leading to greater ownership and engagement. Lindsay High’s Learners are not only able to attain mastery, but also gain life skills that will help them be successful beyond school.

Learning Facilitators at LUSD are focused on building lifelong learners. Within academic content areas, Facilitators are constantly seeking to provide Learners choice and voice in self-directed learning. In addition to academic content areas, LUSD provides instruction for lifelong learning skills. Lindsay Facilitators also modify Learners’ learning so it can be mastery based, allowing Learners more choice over the pace of their learning.

Learner choice in content and pacing provides a unique challenge to LUSD Facilitators, as they have to cater to each individual Learner’s learning needs. Facilitators use an online system called [Empower](#) to analyze Learner data to make sure each student is caught up, and the system shows a map of each Learner’s personalized learning pathway. The system also provides resource choices to Learners in their academic content area. Facilitators help meet Learners’ needs by providing feedback, small groupings, one-on-one instruction, remediation, direct instruction, and other instructional practices.



Blended & Personalized Learning Practices at Work. (n.d.) Lindsay High School. Retrieved from <http://practices.learningaccelerator.org/schools/lindsay-high-school>

NORTH QUEENS COMMUNITY HIGH SCHOOL

Spanish teacher Martin Howfield describes making sure every student is successful at North Queens High School: "We don't frame learning in terms of passing and failing. We do growth. So mastery-based grading makes sense for our school and our students."

Winston McCarthy is a principal at North Queens Community High School in New York. After piloting a more personalized approach in 2011, the whole school now uses a system that is organized around what each student needs. This is especially important for the student population that the school serves—learners who have been failed by traditional classroom models.

Principal McCarthy explains: "Our students are coming from years and years of getting [grades of] 55 or 65 percent. That's why at North Queens, we focus on growth. We change the conversation. I'm not passing or failing you. I'm giving you opportunities and support to learn. This shifts the responsibility to the students. It's their education. We talk about growth and next steps. These conversations help us to understand how students are growing and developing."

North Queens High School uses a framework of examining when a student starts to work on a new goal as emerging, developing, and when they are able to demonstrate mastery, then they are "capable." Students earn credits when they reach capable on seven out of ten learning outcomes in a course. They use a trajectory of learning based on Bloom's to move kids to higher-order thinking skills.

Sturgis, C. (2016, Aug. 2). *CompetencyWorks*. North Queens Community High School: Blooming the Outcomes. Retrieved from <http://www.competencyworks.org/case-study/north-queens-community-high-school-blooming-the-outcomes/>

TAYLOR COUNTY SCHOOL DISTRICT

Taylor County School District in Campbellsville, Kentucky, is listed among the Education Reimagined “Pioneers” for good reason. As their [Pioneer Profile](#) explains, the district’s transformation began with a key realization: “One size definitely does not fit all.” The district moved to a personalized, learner-centered model. Teachers and students work together to create unique Individualized Learning Plans (ILPs) based on each student’s needs, interests and goals for the future. The district has a multi-faceted approach that includes project-based learning, self-paced learning, online learning, peer-led instruction, traditional learning and more.

The exciting thing is the district is seeing really impressive results:

- » In the last three years, the district has had a 100% graduation rate.
- » Students are also completing their traditional high school requirements during their sophomore or junior year and going on to earn college credits before they graduate high school.

As Superintendent Roger Cook says, “Bottom line: we don’t give up on our kids—not a single one!”

Education Reimagined. (2015, Sept.). Pioneer Profiles. Retrieved from http://education-reimagined.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/PP_Booklet1.pdf

JFK EAGLE ACADEMY

Cleveland's [JFK Eagle Academy](#) is an example of a school providing learning with opportunities to participate in and contribute to change in their communities. The educational approach is personalized for young people to see how positive change happens and how students can be both catalysts and leaders in creating change. Teachers and leaders believe that students benefit from inquiry, critical thinking and problem solving, so they developed a program focused around Socratic seminars and leadership development. Students, called "Scholars" at JFK Eagle Academy, work at their own pace using state-of-the-art technology and participate in real-world learning aimed at college and career readiness.

The focus is on:

- » **Envisioning** a productive future for yourself and your community.
- » **Engaging** in real-world learning that is relevant and responsive.
- » **Excelling** on a personalized path to college and career readiness.

Key Scholar growth concentrations at JFK Eagle:

- » **Engaging** in lessons on Socratic Method and leadership development using critical inquiry and problem solving.
- » **Creating** opportunities for scholars' voice to be heard.
- » **Scholars** work at their own pace with state-of-the-art technology to master skills needed for success in the 21st century colleges and careers that await them.
- » **Participating** in real-world learning designed to develop the mind, body and spirit through creative expression and active engagement.

The JFK Eagle Academy focuses on social justice, which is defined as "recognizing and acting upon power that we have for making change in our society."

Srinivasan, L. E., & Thompson, S. L. (2016, Sept. 13). Designing High Schools for the 21st Century. Retrieved from <https://www.carnegie.org/news/articles/throw-cookie-cutters-away-designing-high-schools-21st-century/>

LINC HIGH SCHOOL

At [Learning in New Contexts \(LINC\) High School](#) in Philadelphia, the focus is on building student agency, leadership and character education with the philosophy that every student can be a leader. At the Learning In New Contexts (LINC) High School, students learn to act responsibly through the daily practice of decision-making and project-based learning. Instead of traditional classes organized into subjects, there are 30-day “learning modules” that integrate different subjects and allow students to explore local, national and international issues through research and critical thinking. Students get to do interactive projects like making their own films and writing their own songs. Justin Deutsch, a media teacher at LINC, participated in a [recent interview](#) with the *Philadelphia Tribune*. “This year one of the big things the students are doing is being able to tell stories through film,” Deutsch said. “We started out doing graphic design, and now the students are making movie trailers. The next lesson the students will be doing is the Hero project where they have to interview a hero in the community and tell their story.” LINC is a great example of preparing learners for the types of projects they’re likely to work on in college and in their careers.

Hill, C. (2016, June 21). The LINC school leads by example. Retrieved from http://www.phillytrib.com/the_learning_key/the-linc-school-leads-by-example/article_555a32f1-3234-5f65-97b0-2dead7b1a353.html



Opportunity by Design was launched in 2013 in seven urban school districts and has created 12 innovative high schools that reflect these principles.

Adapted from the Opportunity by Design 10 Integrated School Design Principles. (n.d.) Springpoint. Retrieved from: <http://www.springpointschools.org/design-principles/>



INTEGRATE POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

Caring, consistent student-adult relationships that communicate high expectations for student learning and behavior

Clear expectations for student competencies and standards of performance

Opportunities for students to contribute to the school environment and have a voice in decisions

Encouragement of student responsibility for meeting learning and personal goals

Openness to and encouragement of family participation

Integration of community participation, assets and culture



PRIORITIZE MASTERY OF RIGOROUS STANDARDS ALIGNED TO COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS

Curriculum that enables all students to meet rigorous standards

Multiple opportunities for students to show mastery through performance-based assessments

Student advancement based on demonstration of mastery of knowledge and skills



PERSONALIZE STUDENT LEARNING TO MEET STUDENT NEEDS

Instruction in a variety of learning modalities, linked to students' strengths and learning goals

Data-driven, real-time feedback for students and teachers

Embedded, performance-based formative assessments

Effective use of technology for anytime, anywhere learning



EMPOWER AND SUPPORT STUDENTS

Links between future academic and career paths and current learning

Transparency about where students stand on their academic progress

WHAT DOES PERSONALIZED LEARNING MEAN FOR STUDENTS?

To put it simply, personalized learning means that each student will have his/her learning needs met. Personalized learning classrooms may look and feel different for today's students than they did when their parents were in school, but students are likely to understand the changes. In fact, many schools shift to personalized learning because of community conversations with students and their families who share their frustrations with the current system and want to see a new approach put into place. In other words, because students stand to gain the most from the shift to personalized learning, they are typically the biggest advocates for these changes.

Students are excited about personalized learning for these reasons:

- » Students have a say in their learning.
- » The individual needs of each student are met, so each student is successful.
- » Students have a clear understanding of their learning goals and know how to achieve them.
- » Students get to make choices about how they "show what they know."
- » Students get the support they need when they are challenged by a concept.
- » Students get the encouragement they need when they are ready to move forward.

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“I don’t think that what children want from school has fundamentally changed. I think they want to be inspired, engaged and motivated. They want to learn new things, to be challenged and to do things differently. Whereas we were happy to sit at school and have information given to us and copy that down, learning by rote, children now don’t want this and won’t accept this at school. They like working with each other and finding things out for themselves. I think this is also what we need to be doing as responsive teachers. We need to be giving children the skills to think for themselves and be active learners who take responsibility for their own learning.”

– REBECCA, TEACHER

What does it look like for students? Here are some examples.

MICHAEL'S STORY

Michael is a 10th-grade student at Lindsay Unified High School. His perspective is shared in a new book featuring insights from teachers and leaders in the Lindsay Unified School District, published by Marzano Research.¹

"To Michael, it felt like he had always had trouble in school. He struggled to comply with expectations and had little confidence in his own ability to succeed. He tried to fly under the radar, avoiding interactions with his teachers as they were negative more often than not. As Lindsay schools transitioned to a new system, Michael began to notice that not only his teachers but also other staff were talking to him about his performance at school. What were once trips to the office due to misbehavior became discussions with his learning facilitator about what he needed to be learning. When calls came home to his family, they were laced with reports of positive growth and behaviors. Even at lunch, the food services staff member asked how his classes were going as she filled his plate. It seemed everywhere Michael turned, school staff were demonstrating concern and consideration for his well-being. Within the first two years of Lindsay's school district performance-based system, Michael changed his behaviors in class, moved ahead of pace in his strongest subjects and even voluntarily stayed after school to work with peers. Whereas he felt alienated and rejected by school staff in a traditional setting, in the new system he was motivated and supported. By graduation, he had a network of staff members that celebrated his success and encouraged him in his next steps and career goals."

¹ Rooney, T., Brown, L., Sommer, B., & Lopez, A. (2017, Feb.). *Beyond Reform: Systemic Shifts Toward Personalized Learning*. Lindsay Unified School District. Contributing researchers: Leslie Pynor, Katie Strom, Eric Haas, and Robert J. Marzano.

JACK'S STORY

Jack is a junior at Dupont Manual High School in Louisville, Kentucky. He spoke to about 3,000 teachers and leaders at the iNACOL Symposium as a part of a student panel on personalized learning. This is an excerpt from Jack's speech, which you can also hear on the podcast "[The Voices of Tomorrow's Leaders](#)."

Jack's speech is an impassioned plea for schools to better serve the unique needs of every single student.²

"Like everything in my life, it's complicated. I spend half my days in accelerated classes and the other half in special ed. I didn't start talking until I was almost 3, but it was worth the wait because my first word was "wow." I didn't learn to read until I was almost 10, but two years later, I won an award for my ACT score in reading — a 34. When I was 14, I actually got a perfect score...I have autism, ADHD and Tourette's — which make my life pretty challenging. Sometimes it seems like people think that I have consciously chosen to have a brain that is physically different from others. Nope — I do not have a designer brain! When it takes me longer to finish a test or when I need to get up and pace, believe me, that's not what I would have designed. Would you? A lot of the time I feel like I am on trial — that I have to prove that I need help. That's how it is with hidden disabilities, which by the way, 70 percent of all disabilities are.

Mostly I was homeschooled because we couldn't find a school that wanted me or that was a good fit. I did go to a school for kids with learning differences for third grade. At the end of the year, they said we needed to find a new school because I scored too high on standardized math tests. The funny part is that they had put me in a remedial math class because I couldn't read the story problems. It took several months and my mom pushing before they realized that not being able to read didn't mean I couldn't do the math...."

My teachers are really nice. They try hard and care a lot. But my general ed teachers have to teach to the AP and other tests, which makes for mostly boring classes, and my special ed teachers are not trained to teach what I really need to learn or to help me with subjects like Calc B/C. I feel like a lot of my time in school is wasted. Instead of motivating or inspiring me, it just leaves me feeling exhausted. Homework would be mostly unnecessary if what we did in classes was exciting and if those classes were organized by skill levels instead of grades — more like homeschooling, actually.

² Bradley, J. (2016, Nov. 1). The Hechinger Report. "I spend half my days in accelerated classes and the other half in special ed." Retrieved from <http://hechingerreport.org/spend-half-days-accelerated-classes-half-special-ed/>

What if classes were as long (or short) as they needed to be instead of a fixed amount of time? What if instead of taking tests, the students created them? That would be so much more interesting and useful.

Please don't listen to my story and think, 'oh, he's just an outlier,' because while that is true in some ways, it's not true when it comes to what is most important. I am just like each of you when it comes to wanting friends, wanting to do interesting work, wanting to feel like I am heard, and wanting to enjoy my life. Although I do not believe our election process is rigged, I do believe that in many ways, our education system is. In two years, I'll be able to vote, but I shouldn't have to wait until I am 18 to be heard."

Personalizing learning is about focusing on each student's needs. This means instruction is offered at a level appropriate to a student's learning goals and strengths, instruction may be offered in a variety of learning modalities, and there is real-time feedback for students and teachers on a student's progress. Teachers can personalize instruction for each student with help from the effective use of technology.

WINDSOR LOCKS PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Windsor Locks Public Schools, located outside Hartford, Connecticut, is personalizing learning through what is known as a "mastery-based grading system." Conversations around rethinking the role of traditional grading versus ways to ensure all students can achieve at high levels with supports (A, B or try again until you get the help you need) are a big shift—but focus on getting learners what they need every day. This means classes may no longer use traditional A-F letter grades but ensure every student meets proficiency or mastery instead. As Superintendent of Windsor Locks Public Schools Susan Bell puts it, "We did it because it makes sense to us. A student who passes with a D-minus and graduates with twenty-four credits is just not good enough. We drew the line in the sand. We are done working in ways that don't make sense for our students." (See Windsor Locks' [description of their mastery-based learning system](#).) The big idea is centered on ensuring all students are prepared for future successes. District leaders knew that the change in the grading system would be confusing for students and families, so they prioritized community engagement on this issue and turned to local media for a four-part newspaper insert on "What is a Grade?" (See [Part 1](#), [Part 2](#), [Part 3](#), [Part 4](#).)

Sturgis, C. (2016, March 5). *CompetencyWorks*. Windsor Locks: Starting with Pedagogy. Retrieved from <http://www.competencyworks.org/case-study/windsor-locks-starting-with-pedagogy/>

WHAT DOES PERSONALIZED LEARNING MEAN FOR TEACHERS?

Good teachers have always attempted to match their teaching to the unique needs of each student—by offering options to dig deeper into an assignment for advanced learners or by offering additional support or a modified assignment to struggling learners. Yet, doing so for a full classroom of 20 to 30 students has been simply impossible for every student in every lesson, every day. Until now. Thanks to new school designs, teachers can now provide every learner with powerful, personalized learning experiences. Teachers find this empowering and motivating. In personalized learning models, their professional expertise is valued and respected. In fact, many teachers explain that one of the biggest benefits of personalized learning is that they can “get back to the reason I became a teacher.”

Teachers are excited about personalized learning for these reasons:

- » Teachers form stronger relationships with students, because they get to spend more time getting to know them and their strengths, goals and interests.
- » Teachers focus on research around how students learn best.
- » Teachers have more time each day where they can communicate and collaborate with one another, asking questions and figuring out what's working and not working.
- » Teachers get to be more creative in how they design curriculum and instruction.
- » Teachers get more time working individually and in small groups with students.
- » Teachers spend less time preparing students for high-stakes tests and more time acting as guides and mentors to students as they are learning.
- » Teachers get to help students to better understand themselves and their goals for the future.
- » Teachers have more opportunities to develop their own skills as teachers and to work in collaboration with other teachers.

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“In a personalized learning environment, teachers are no longer the keepers of knowledge, basing instruction on standardized curriculum at one level. Instead, a teacher’s role is to manage the resources and supports that students need, when they need them, in order to reach mastery. In personalized learning classrooms, teachers adjust instruction daily—sometimes even more frequently—based on identified individual needs instead of creating highly structured lesson plans days in advance.”

Jenkins, S., Williams, M., Moyer, J., George, M., & Foster, E. (2016, July). KnowledgeWorks. The Shifting Paradigm of Teaching: Personalized Learning According to Teachers. Retrieved from <http://www.knowledgeworks.org/sites/default/files/u1/teacher-conditions.pdf>



What does it look like for teachers? Here are some examples.

Empowering students.³ Jamie Pekras-Braun is a first-grade teacher at Thrive. Thrive is a personalized and blended learning school in central San Diego, California. At the end of each grading period, students from grades Kindergarten through high school lead collaborative meetings in which they review their individualized goals around literacy, numeracy and social emotional growth, examine their work as indicators of progress toward goals, and set

next steps. The usual parent-teacher conferences have been replaced by “Student Led Conferences” or SLC. The teachers prepare framing documents: agenda, goal setting tools and reflection, and they work with students who will lead the conversations with their parents and teachers. In allowing students to lead the conversation about learning, and equipping them to lead those conversations successfully, Jamie describes her students’ progress as they begin to self-monitor and reflect on their progress using the language of owning their own learning. In an SLC, students lead the discussions with parents and teachers and share with their parents about how they choose their own goals and have a chance to be thoughtful about their strengths and weaknesses. Jamie talks about one of her shyest students at the beginning of the year in his first parent-teacher student led conference: “It was clear that he was extremely nervous and uncomfortable. He mumbled and read without clarity. He needed teacher support in order to complete the conference. By his third SLC a few short months later, he ran the meeting completely independently. His parents teared up when listening to his confident speaking. Every student is capable of acquiring the skills to speak about their own learning.”

Connecting with and appreciating students.⁴ James Rickabaugh highlights the potential of personalized learning to dramatically improve student outcomes in his book *Tapping the Power of Personalized Learning*. The book shares teacher perspectives like this one: “By teaching in a personalized learning community, we realize that our shift in teaching has greatly helped our students. We provide students with choice and voice while they work to achieve their personalized goals. We have moved education ‘beyond textbooks’ by taking necessary steps into 21st century learning personalized using technology. Through professional collaboration and planning, teachers work together in teams to focus on using technology in our everyday teaching and learning. Students are introduced to concepts that are current, relevant and interesting to each individual learner. These opportunities allow us as teachers to connect with and

3 Assisi, N. (2016, Aug. 26). *CompetencyWorks*. Supporting Student Agency Through Student Led Conferences <http://www.competencyworks.org/resources/supporting-student-agency-through-student-led-conferences/#more-14150>

4 Rickabaugh, J. (2016, Feb. 29). *Tapping the Power of Personalized Learning*. Retrieved from <http://www.ascd.org/Publications/Books/Overview/Tapping-the-Power-of-Personalized-Learning.aspx>

appreciate our students not only on an academic level, but on a social and emotional level as well. From there, we are able to individualize to their academic and social needs, such as public speaking, organization and self-motivation. Learning these skills helps students to become self-confident, productive and aware of what it takes to be successful."

Reflecting on new approaches to teaching and learning.⁵ At iNACOL's 2016 Symposium, four teachers and Springpoint—a national organization that supports educators creating new and innovative high school models—shared lessons learned from teaching in personalized schools. Personalized learning requires teachers to really shift the way they think about teaching and learning in a way that allows teachers to learn and grow as professionals alongside their students. In reflecting on many high schools across America, the teachers explained, "The way we've been 'doing high schools' has not been working very well" and asked, "What can we do differently?"

Teachers explored questions like "How can I meet the needs of each of my kids? How can I adjust and learn and continue learning myself to better approach the needs of my kids? How will I give students voice and choice in how they learn and what they learn? How will I know what is mastery, and how will they be able to show it? How will I take into account my students' input in the process of learning?"

One teacher recounted his initial struggles of letting go of control and allowing his students to set their own course. Another shared a strategy for communicating with parents who may be unfamiliar with this kind of system. Throughout the discussion, teachers reflected honestly on how they've grown alongside their students in these new and innovative models.

"For teachers, personalized learning helps us learn how to evolve, listen to students' input on the process of learning, and focus on moving to a competency-based model." A competency-based approach challenges every member of a school community to develop trusting relationships focused on learning.



Video from the iNACOL 2016 Symposium shows teachers reflecting on the powerful changes in their classrooms.

5 Crispin, V. (2016, Nov. 22). "This Isn't What I Learned In School": Teachers Share Learnings from New, Competency-Based High Schools. Retrieved from <http://www.competencyworks.org/understanding-competency-education/this-isnt-what-i-learned-in-school-teachers-share-learnings-from-new-competency-based-high-schools/>

How Can Families and Communities Support Personalized Learning?

Families are excited about personalized learning because:

- » The unique needs of their children are being met.
- » Families and teachers have a shared understanding of the learning goals for students and can work together to determine how they will get there. Personalized learning provides new educational resources, new learning opportunities and new ways to use knowledge while students engage with the world around them.
- » Families will have better information and more details about what and how their children are learning instead of waiting for end-of-quarter letter grades. This allows families to be more involved in supporting their children and helping them at home.
- » Students can work at a pace that is right for them, and school work is tailored to their interests.
- » Families have the opportunity to really help teachers to understand what they know about their own children and their strengths, weaknesses, goals and passions.
- » Families have more opportunities to form relationships with the teachers and leaders in the school.

“

“Transparency is key. We need to not only educate the youth that come into our classrooms each and every day, but we also need to educate the families, communities, and district partnerships tied to the school. True growth and success in education requires a relationship built with a solid foundation of mutual support, trust, and collaboration. This happens best when classrooms are opened up, shared, and celebrated.”

– ANGELA PATTERSON, ELMBROOK SCHOOL DISTRICT

Jenkins, S., Williams, M., Moyer, J., George, M., & Foster, E. (2016, July). KnowledgeWorks. The Shifting Paradigm of Teaching: Personalized Learning According to Teachers. Retrieved from <http://www.knowledgeworks.org/sites/default/files/u1/teacher-conditions.pdf>



The “[Smart Parents](#)” project studied the ways parents can find and create powerful, personalized learning experiences for their children. The authors concluded that parents must be involved, informed, intentional and inspired.



Involved. Parents are involved in their children’s lives. They promote student-centered learning exploring options for how, where and when their children learn. They encourage college and career preparation by ensuring that they are progressing at a pace that is right for them, not bored or overwhelmed. They learn alongside their child and involve them in the world of adult work.



Informed. Parents are informed about their children as learners. They are advocates for their learning. They use trips and technologies to activate learner interests. They share information with teachers, mentors, and other providers involved in the son/daughter’s learning. They do the research and look for schools that support student-centered and competency-based learning.



Intentional. Parents are intentional about creating powerful learning experiences. They cultivate mindsets and habits that support lifelong learning. They share intellectual curiosities and model the struggles and joy of learning. They spot opportunities to learn and demonstrate learning in the community through internships and service projects. They promote ownership and involve learners in determining when they feel ready to try something new or on their own. They eat dinner together and talk about the world.



Inspirational. Parents are inspirational as learning guides and role models. They find ways to encourage learners to try, to persist, to present and to progress. They watch, listen, empathize, connect and activate.

There are many ways that families and communities can support personalized learning, whether your school or district is just getting started with exploring the “big questions” at the start of this report or whether they are many years into implementing these new practices. One of the best ways to support personalized learning is to consider your own beliefs and behaviors. Just as personalized learning will require some changes for students and teachers, it will also require some new ways of thinking about how schooling works from families.

- » Families and community members will need to stay open minded to the changes happening in their schools instead of assuming that the way they learned is the only way or the best way.
- » Families will need to change the way they talk about learning with their kids. For example, instead of emphasizing getting “All A’s,” parents should engage their children in conversations about what they are curious about, how they like to learn best, what their interests are, how they have learned from a recent failure, and so on. In other words, the emphasis should be on the process of learning and not just the end grade.
- » Families and community members should take advantage of opportunities to inform changes in the school by attending parent information nights, filling out online surveys, sending emails, mentioning concerns to teachers or leaders and sharing their ideas. Ideally, families and communities will have opportunities to be involved in the early phases of the shift to personalized learning and as new ways to teach and learn are put into practice.



ENGAGING THE COMMUNITY IN KEY CONVERSATIONS

Community engagement can help to generate important conversations about what students in their community should know and be able to do as a high school graduate. Community conversations build the mutual respect that is needed to create a culture of learning between communities, families and schools with broader needs in mind. It is important to have real conversations around the broader goals of education for our youth. In most districts, there are people and communities that either have had bad experiences in school or have historically been underserved and disrespected by school systems. Building trust takes time and requires the development of shared goals.

Districts must create a safe space for people to talk about what they want for their children, have honest conversations about the past, focus vision on future goals, discuss the current academic achievement levels and graduation rates, and share their fears as well as their hopes.

Pittsfield School District in New Hampshire is a great example of a school district that engaged the community and continues to host important conversations often. They learned that it was better to start by asking the community to share their insights and perspectives, rather than holding a meeting and telling the community what the school administration has already decided to do. Parents and families should think about how they would answer questions like “what do you want for your children upon graduation?” They should also take advantage of opportunities to join school-community groups like Pittsfield’s Community Advisory Council.

The Council (renamed the “Good to Great Team”) continues to meet once a month as a full group and once a month in sub-teams that include talent management, community engagement, parent engagement and student engagement. Tobi Chassie, one of the people helping to personalize learning at Pittsfield explains, “Community engagement is the key to sustainability. If the district and school leaders fell off the face of the earth, the community would keep it going. They are creating the public demand.” It’s time to re-engage the community in goals and aspirations for the future of education and have ongoing conversations to help keep progress moving forward.

Sturgis, C. (2016, Dec. 7). iNACOL. Engaging the Community. Retrieved from <http://www.inacol.org/news/engaging-the-community/>

Conclusion

There are a lot of reasons that schools and districts are changing from the traditional way of doing things to more personalized learning models. These changes are underway as a response to local, regional and global challenges as well as the big opportunities that now exist to do for students what teachers have always wanted to do—give learners the support and encouragement that they need to truly excel and thrive.



Across the country—in fact, across the globe—communities are coming together to explore crucial questions about the purpose of education and to have deep conversations about how they can better ensure that graduates are getting what they need to become productive, happy contributors to society.

It is time for parents and community leaders to engage in more intentional community conversations around the purpose and goals of our public schools. One size-fits-all schools that rank and sort our kids (read: “my kid is better than yours”) do not work to meet every child’s needs or to move toward a more just society.

This is the time to engage in conversations around what we think graduates should know and be able to do to be successful in a rapidly changing world. There are conversations happening around the world to rethink education for the 21st century toward a more open and free society that respects all people. What do each of us want for our own children? What does each and every learner need for their future?

Then, from sharing those goals for meeting the needs of the whole child, we can empower communities and education systems to articulate what it means more broadly for student success with the knowledge and skills that will ensure each and every child’s future is bright.

It’s an exciting time to be a learner!

While there is much promise in the potential of personalized learning, we are a long way from ensuring that every student’s experience is a personalized one. We must each do our part to make the vision for powerful, personalized learning a reality for every student.



FURTHER READING

Building Powerful Learning Environments: From Schools to Communities by Arina Bokas

How to Personalize Learning: A Practical Guide to Getting Started and Going Deeper by Barbara Bray and Kathleen McClaskey

The Innovator's Mindset: Empower Learning, Unleash Talent, and Lead a Culture of Creativity by Greg Couros

Blended: Using Disruptive Innovation to Improve Schools by Michael B. Horn and Heather Staker

One World Schoolhouse: Education Reimagined by Salman Khan

Smart Parents: Parenting for Powerful Learning by Bonnie Lathram, Carri Schneider, Tom Vander Ark

Beyond Reform: Systemic Shifts Toward Personalized Learning. By Leslie Pynor, Katie Strom, Eric Haas, and Robert J. Marzano.

Tapping the Power of Personalized Learning by James Rickabaugh

End of Average by Todd Rose

FOR MORE INFORMATION

iNACOL.org

CompetencyWorks.org

GettingSmart.com

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- » Justin Deutsch
- » KnowledgeWorks
- » Learning in New Contexts (LINC) High School
- » Lindsay Unified School District
- » Martin Howfield
- » North Queens Community High School
- » Pittsfield School District
- » Regional School Unit 2
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Appendix: Checklist for Families

In partnership with [The Nellie Mae Education Foundation](#), [Getting Smart](#) cultivated a popular parents' blog series and released a culminating book called [Smart Parents](#). The book is a resource to guide parents in creating, choosing and advocating for personalized, student-centered learning experiences for their children. It is designed to facilitate conversation about important educational decisions parents face today and serves as a resource for families so they can be informed, involved, inspirational and intentional.

One of the most popular resources from the project is [The "Is Your Child's School Student-Centered?" Checklist](#). It provides a set of personalized learning "look fors" that parents and families can use when visiting schools, attending parent nights, meeting for parent/teacher conferences and more. Here are some examples.

Look for:

- » Students are working at [their own pace](#); for example, one student may be much further ahead than another student in math. The teacher has classroom management strategies for handling the differentiation.
- » Student work is visible in the classroom and the hallways—
- » and all students are represented.
- » Students are working on various projects; they are doing hands-on, real work.
- » Students are working at their own stations, choosing where to learn based on what works best for them.
- » There is a high degree of student engagement which looks like enthusiasm, excitement and passion.
- » There is a strong sense of school community. The students are helping one another, and respectful and caring towards each other.

Here's a handy list of questions that families can ask to learn more about the school and their approaches:

- » **Pace.** Do students move through content at their [own pace](#) and according to their own needs?
- » **Passion.** Do students have opportunities to choose work that speaks to their own passions and interests and opportunities to learn [outside of the traditional school day](#)?
- » **Path.** Is each child [on a unique learning path](#) or is s/he marching through content with the rest of the pack? Do students have "[voice and choice](#)" when it comes to their learning?
- » **Meaningful Assessment.** Do teachers know where your student currently is academically, where they've been and where they are going? Ongoing, meaningful assessment of knowledge and skills is essential to obtain insights needed to personalize learning. This knowledge generated from these assessments should inform your child's learning experience.
- » **Progress.** Does your child's teacher have a system for tracking individual student progress toward

Click to enlarge

IS YOUR CHILD'S SCHOOL STUDENT-CENTERED?

The Smart Parents project contains stories, insights and tips from dozens of parents, along with expert commentary, all about creating powerful learning experiences for and with children. The checklist is for parents who want to ensure their child's school is student-centered. Student-centered learning is personalized and competency-based. It acknowledges that learning happens anytime, anywhere and encourages students to take ownership over their own learning. A student-centered classroom and school helps create deeper levels of engagement through a more personalized learning environment and allows for learners to thrive.

1 Students are working at their own pace. For example, one student may finish ahead from another student in math. The teacher has classroom management strategies for handling the differences.

2 Assessment or other feedback is visible to the student in a way that prompts and guides them at the school.

3 There is a high degree of teacher engagement which looks like enthusiasm, investment and passion. If you see a list of bored students, it's probably a good sign to be wary.

4 Students are taking and using the skills of the work and the skills, don't let afraid of a hard classroom.

5 Kids are asking and using their own questions and all students are represented.

6 There is a strong sense of community. The students are helping one another and respectful and caring towards one another.

7 Students are working on projects. They are doing research, read, write.

8 Observers or loved ones are visible. Many students are on the classroom to see what students are doing and working on.

9 Students are working at their own paces. Learning seems to be based on what works best for them.

10 Adults are helping to learn and learning from one another. Adults are modeling the ways students behave. If the adults are having fun, curiosity, and learning from one another, the students will too.

HOW CAN YOU TELL IF THE SCHOOL YOU ARE VISITING OR THE SCHOOL YOUR CHILD CURRENTLY ATTENDS IS A STUDENT-CENTERED SCHOOL? LOOK FOR:

After doing your observation, you will hopefully have a chance to ask some questions. Here's a handy list of questions that can guide you to learn more about the school and their student-centered approaches.

1 **PACE.** Do students move through content at their own pace and according to their own needs?

2 **PASSION.** Do students face (often) content of work that speaks to their interests and represents the outside of the traditional content pool?

3 **PATH.** Is each child on a unique path (even if it's the same) through content (the rest of the pack)? Do students have what "PARC's Susan" would call "voice and choice" when it comes to their learning?

4 **MEANINGFUL ASSESSMENT.** Do teachers know where your student currently is academically when they've been and where they are going? Do they use meaningful assessment of knowledge and skills to provide feedback to students? Is this knowledge shared with the student? Do these assessments actually inform your child's learning experience.

5 **PARENT INVOLVEMENT.** Do you have a chance to meet and connect with the teacher and your child regularly (at minimum, 3-4 times a year)? Do you have a way to discuss your child's academic and behavioral progress?

6 **BEHAVIOR.** How does your school handle behavior? Is there a link to the student's academic progress? Do the school actively teach conflict resolution and emotional regulation? Do students feel safe to share their struggles with their teachers and ultimately stay in school?

7 **NONCOGNITIVE SKILLS.** In what ways are students also gaining noncognitive skills at the school such as resilience and habits of mind that will help reading, writing, and math? Is your child being encouraged in a way that helps improve their learning?

8 **FEEDBACK AND GROWTH.** Does assessment and feedback go beyond test scores? How does the school ensure that all students are aware of their own strengths and progress? How does the school talk to students about their strengths and growth areas? How often do school involve parents in this conversation? Is there a way that is non-threatening and builds on strengths instead of derailing confidence?

9 **PROGRESS.** Does the school have a system for tracking individual student progress? Do students' academic growth areas versus content areas? What is your child's progress? Are they setting their own goals? Are they setting their own goals? Are they setting their own goals? Are they setting their own goals?

10 **TECHNOLOGY.** How does the school incorporate technology in order to allow students to learn at their own pace?

11 **REAL WORLD LEARNING.** How well does the school incorporate the real world and encourage meaningful real world experiences?

12 **MENTORSHIPS.** Are there opportunities for your child to both be mentored by older students and to mentor younger students?

13 **COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT.** How often do the school and organizations after school that they are passionate about? How does the school help students build connections to one another?

Whether you are currently choosing a school for your child or whether you are just curious to know more about their current learning environment, this list can help generate powerful insights about their learning. Don't be surprised if you do not find evidence of all three of these components in your child's current school setting. For many schools that are in the earlier phases of shifting to more personalized and student-centered learning environments, this list is more aspirational than it is currently in practice. Parents can be powerful advocates for shifts like these as schools and districts increasingly acknowledge the importance of parent and community support. If your child's current school feels far off from the student-centered learning, determine what factors matter most to you and to your child and start there. Seek informal and formal learning opportunities for your child outside of the school day that are based on their interests and needs.

For more see the original sources of these ideas from the Smart Parents blog series: [10 Keys to a Student-Centered Learning](#) and [10 Keys to a Student-Centered Learning](#). A Checklist for School Visits.

The Smart Parents book is a resource to help parents in creating, observing and documenting for parents, students and the community. It's a guide to help parents and other interested educational discussion partners. It includes tips and strategies for getting from picking preschool to accessing educational opportunities. It's the resource for parents so they can be informed, involved, intentional and successful.

For more information, to order or to learn more about our FREE digital copy of *Smart Parents: A Checklist for School Visits*, please visit [www.smartparents.org](#).

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overall academic goals across various content areas? What is your child's involvement in tracking their progress and setting their own goals? Does your child have a strong sense of their strengths, weaknesses and overall progress? Can parents easily access information about their student and get an accurate picture of how their student is progressing?

- » **Parent Involvement.** Are you as a **parent involved** and meeting with the teacher and your child regularly (at minimum, 3- 4 times a year) to discuss your child's academic and social-emotional growth?
- » **Mentorships.** Are there opportunities for your child to be both mentored by older students and/or mentor younger students?
- » **Real-World Learning.** How well does the school incorporate the real world and encourage meaningful real-world experiences?
- » **Community Involvement.** Are students involved in clubs and organizations after school that they are passionate about? How does the school help students build connections to one another?
- » **Technology.** How does the school incorporate technology in order to allow students to learn at their own pace?
- » **Feedback and Growth.** Does assessment and feedback go beyond test scores? How does the school ensure that all students are aware of their own strengths and struggles? How does the school talk to students about their strengths and growth areas? How does the school involve parents in those conversations? Is this done in a way that is non-threatening and builds on strengths instead of derailing confidence?
- » **Noncognitive Skills.** In what ways are students also gaining **noncognitive skills** at the school—skills, attributes and habits of mind that go beyond reading, writing and math? Is your child motivated, engaged and encouraged in a way that feels supportive of learning?
- » **Discipline.** How does the school handle discipline? Is there a rush to suspend students, or does the school actively teach conflict resolution and **restorative justice**, so students can learn how to resolve conflicts, own up for their mistakes and ultimately stay in school.

www.inacol.org



1934 Old Gallows Road, Suite 350
Vienna, VA 22182

888.95.NACOL (888.956.2265)
ph. 703.752.6216 / fx. 703.752.6201
info@inacol.org