



7 Approaches

to Fund the Transition to Personalized, Competency-Based Education

Just as there's no one way to personalize learning, there's no one way to fund personalized learning. Funding streams vary from state-to-state and between communities, as well, but concerns over how to pay for necessary professional development or technologies to support the move to personalized, competency-based education are top of mind for district leaders from coast to coast. Based on our experiences in schools and our work helping districts begin to make their vision for personalized learning a reality, we've isolated seven areas where you might spend differently.

1 **PRIORITIZE CULTURE-BUILDING.**

Investing in the professional development and resources that build the foundation for a strong school and district-wide culture is an essential first step in funding the transition to competency education. Whether it's ensuring your teachers can understand and articulate the necessary changes they'll need to make in their classrooms to promote student agency and ownership of learning, or allocating dollars to create the kinds of physical environments where learners can thrive, a strong culture is essential to your long-term success and more than worthy of the investment.

“When people think about expenses in making the shift to personalized learning, initially they think about technology costs,” said Lauren McCauley, formerly the assistant director of the department of personalized learning in Charleston County School District, now with the South Carolina Department of Education. “But that’s the last place you want to start. Where people really need to invest is professional development – if you don’t have the professional development to support the mindset and pedagogical shift towards personalized learning among your district and school leaders, teachers and staff, then all of the technology in the world is not going to help you.”

2 DON'T BE AFRAID TO ASK FOR HELP.

State and federal funds are often already spent or must be applied in very specific ways, and while grants and levies are a common alternative, there are others to consider. When New Hampshire's Oyster River Cooperative School District wanted to bring in a high-profile speaker to support staff growth in personalized learning but couldn't support the full cost out of their existing budget, they reached out to the district's big vendors: the companies they turned to for assessments, textbooks, software and others. Because the district was transparent about their mission and what they wanted for learners, and made it clear just how this opportunity would support that, their industry and community partners knew exactly what they were investing in and the district was able to fund two days of professional development that would not otherwise have been possible.

3 SHARE THE LOAD WITH NEARBY DISTRICTS.

Every district funds professional development every year – if you have like-minded neighbors, consider pooling your resources to pay for the speaker, the workshop or the design lab that will help with progress toward common goals. And the rewards don't just lie in a decreased cost per district: when you have regular lines of communication between districts, you also have the benefit of outside perspectives and knowledge-sharing around common challenges.

4 DOESN'T ALIGN? DON'T SIGN.

If you want systems-level, sustainable impact, every district initiative must be aligned to your community-wide vision for students – and that includes every funding decision. The districts who experience the most success in implementation are those that return to their mission with every decision. In addition to asking how individual investments will support the district's mission, leaders should take the time to explore the evidence of past investments. Ask yourself, how is your professional development working? For whom is it working? Are students seeing improvement in learning or learning opportunities? Are changes permeating across schools, or only in a handful of classrooms? If you can't answer or don't get the answer you want to support your mission, consider investing your dollars elsewhere. Just because there's a service you've paid for in the past, if it doesn't meet the needs of your learners now, it's time to make a change.

*"You have to be diligent about how you're spending money," said Bill Zima, superintendent of RSU2 in central Maine. "We limit ourselves to just going to workshops and investing in professional development opportunities that align with RSU2's vision for student-centered, personalized learning. **If it's not in line with what we're trying to do, we don't pay for it.**"*

5 DON'T WAIT UNTIL THE END OF THE YEAR TO REVISIT YOUR BUDGET.

Even though you submit in the summer, you can adjust your Title II and other federal funding streams over the course of the school year – your budget's not one and done. Because Title II dollars have to be spent on educators and their professional development, it's one of a district's more flexible sources of funding and another critical

area where aligning spending to your vision is key. Waiting until the end of the year to revisit your budget may reveal dollars that will be lost if they aren't spent right away, and it can be challenging to make a carefully considered choice that way. Districts may end up spending money on something they don't need. But keeping a pulse on your budget and planning to adjust mid-year will provide more time to make decisions that align to your district's vision for personalized learning.

“Like most districts, we receive Title II funds,” said Mike Burde, assistant superintendent of Kenowa Hills Public Schools in Grand Rapids, Michigan. “Because we knew we’d need more money to scale up contracted services in years three and four of our implementation of personalized learning, we intentionally didn’t spend down our Title II money in year two and rolled almost all of it over. You can roll over 100 percent of your Title II funds from one year to the next. While we still needed to use some local resources to support the work, we had flexibility with our federal funding because we’d planned for the cost.”

6 KNOW WHAT YOUR REAL LIMITS ARE.

Many districts may be operating under a false impression of what they can and cannot do regarding personalized learning, and may have more flexibility than they know. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) provides states with significant flexibility to advance personalized learning and improve equitable outcomes for their students. We're keeping tabs on [what states are doing under ESSA](#), and if you want to take advantage of the latest opportunities, you should, too.

7 YOUR PEOPLE ARE YOUR GREATEST RESOURCE.

A great teacher, nurse, staff member or bus driver can make all the difference in a school and in the lives of learners. Consider an annual strengths-based assessment of the skills currently represented in schools and think about how shifting or reprioritizing personnel could better support students and the learning community. Educators care deeply about their schools and invest a lot of themselves in the learners that they work with, but sometimes, there are students in other schools who may need them more. Stress that the shift in role or responsibility is a reflection of their performance in the most positive way – because it is.

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