



Case Study: Giving Students More Personalized Choices Takes 'Great Teaching'

By **Michelle R. Davis**

November 6, 2018

Eighth grader Mercedes Gay loves having choices at school.

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But those choices are more meaningful than deciding between a "fishwich" sandwich or an Asian chicken salad in the cafeteria at DeSesto Middle School in the **Providence, R.I., district**. Mercedes sets her own learning targets, works at her own pace, and in classes such as social studies, she has the power to do a podcast or a slide presentation as the finale of a project.

"I don't have to watch a teacher write stuff on the board and copy it down," she said. "I'm a fast learner, so I don't have to wait on everyone else's speed."

Giving students that level of control over their own learning is a high priority in the 24,000-student Providence school system.

Four years ago, the district began gradually adopting a personalized learning approach based on either a model from instructional providers **Summit Learning** or the **Highlander Institute**. Now, 25 of the district's 39 schools use one of the two models, said Superintendent Christopher Maher. And though the role of the teacher in those programs has moved from instructor to facilitator, and the curriculum is primarily digital, the success of personalized learning relies on the connection students and teachers forge, he said.

"A lot of this comes down to relationships," he said. "None of this works without great teaching."

'I Was Not a Huge Fan'

Before personalized instruction became a priority in the Providence district, classes were extremely scripted and focused mainly on direct instruction. Teachers of the same subject were expected to be on the same chapter in the same textbook on the same day, Maher said. And students had few choices about what they were learning and how they were learning it.

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But with stagnating test scores, the district was searching for a better way.

Maher, however, had to be persuaded to try personalized learning.

"I was not a huge fan," he said. "I thought it was a technology-based intervention that focused too little on standards and pedagogy and curriculum."

That is not how it has evolved in the district.

To be sure, technology plays a big role. The district has a 1-to-1 computing initiative, and many students use digital curricula provided by Summit.

But there are also important elements of the program that are not focused on digital devices or software. Probably the biggest one is that students have a lot more control over their learning than in the past. They move through coursework at their own pace and assessments allow them to skip material they already know. They set their own learning goals. A dashboard of sorts allows them to track their progress.

At Providence's E-Cubed Academy high school, 9th grade biology teacher Haley Smith has a lot of small-group or one-on-one interaction with students. She emphasizes the "why" behind goal-setting and creates different versions of assignments—one for the general group, a scaffolded version with supports for special education students, and a translated or simplified version for English-learners. This level of planning is more deliberate and sophisticated than it was before the district embraced personalized learning.

Through mentoring, Smith helps students consider the type of learner they are and choose educational options accordingly. Students often decide on their own when they think they've mastered content and are ready to take a test.

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At E-Cubed Academy in Providence, R.I., inclusion special education teacher Barbara Hoy helps 9th grade student Anthony Harrison with a biology lesson.
—Gretchen Ertl for Education Week

No Victory Laps Yet

On an October day in Smith's class, she met with a group of six students who were a bit behind on the concept of evidence for evolution. Smith had given students a choice between studying independently or opting into a "workshop" with her. During the meeting, she reviewed key objectives the students should have grasped, then the six took a content assessment. Four passed.

Freshman Sarah Keith was among those who passed. She said she prefers tracking her own progress and choosing her own path. "I like videos instead of reading the text," she said.

But this learning is linked to state and district standards, said Thomas Flanagan, the district's chief academic officer. "We emphasize standards first as the core around which we do our work," he said. "There are a lot of guardrails."

Superintendent Maher puts it simply: "Autonomy does not mean anarchy."

But too much student autonomy, however, may do them a disservice, said Benjamin Riley, the executive director of Deans for Impact. "Cognitive thinking is hard. Learning is hard—it's like a muscle you're exercising," he said. "Not everyone is self-driven."

But Flanagan says teacher input and strict adherence to standards can mitigate that issue. "Students still need to be able to write, and they must meet that standard," he said. "But they can choose what they write about."

While differentiation is possible without technology, personalizing the learning experience the way Providence does would be impossible without ed tech, Maher said. It allows teachers to group students differently on a daily basis, to pinpoint deficits, to respond quickly. It's a big change for teachers, which

has increased the need for targeted training, he said.

DelSesto Principal Arzinia Gill said she sees those efforts working. Because the school adopted a personalized learning model in its three different academies gradually, she can compare test scores of students using personalized learning and students in traditional programs. Attendance is higher in the academy which dove into personalized learning first, and suspensions there are the lowest of the three. But arguably more important is that reading and math scores doubled compared with the other two academies. "That was huge for us," she said.

Still, it's harder to see across the district as a whole, Maher said.

"We're building the foundation, we believe in it, and we're seeing some signs of improvement," he said. "But we're not taking any victory laps yet."

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Student Voices



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"With my projects I get to make a lot of choices [about how to present information]. I like being self-directed. I don't have to watch a teacher write stuff on the board and copy it down."

—**Mercedes Gay**, 8th Grade, DelSesto Middle School



—Gretchen Ertl for Education Week

"When we set our own goal and we reach it, it makes you feel awesome. I'm pushing myself more to do better and to master it. I know if I set that goal, I have to get it done on time."

—**Sarah Keith**, 9th Grade, E-Cubed Academy

Vol. 38, Issue 12, Pages 20, 22

Published in Print: November 7, 2018, as **In Providence, R.I., 'None of This Works Without Great Teaching'**