

How to Rally Veteran Teachers Around a Personalized Learning Model



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By [Jin-Soo Huh \(Columnist\)](#) Jan 21, 2016

In my [previous column](#), I shared some tips on how to support new educators in a personalized learning environment. But getting veteran teachers on board is just as crucial in ensuring success.

To gather some insight, I spoke with teachers and administrators from a variety of traditional and charter public schools including: [Cesar Chavez Elementary](#) (grades K-8, Chicago), [CICS West Belden](#) (managed by Distinctive Schools; K-8, Chicago), [Intrinsic Schools](#) (7-12, Chicago), [Liberty Elementary](#) (Baltimore), and [USC East College Prep](#) (9; Los Angeles).

These schools have either transitioned to or were founded upon a personalized learning model in which the learning experience is tailored to the individual based on their strengths, needs, and/or interests. The schools all took various approaches ranging from radical open space designs that leverage team teaching and multi-grade, flexible grouping to more familiar station rotations that leverage technology. Here are ways to help your veteran teachers make the transition.

DISCLAIMER: The Model is Not a Silver Bullet

Before jumping in, a word of caution: personalized learning models have the potential to create environments where students learn more than ever before. However, implementing such a model is not going to solve underlying issues like poor instruction and toxic culture.

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In talking to the staff of these schools, it was clear they were building off of strong existing practices. Additionally, their answers suggest that they weren't pushing these models because "personalized learning" is the newest buzzword.

Personalized learning isn't a panacea that will solve all of your school's pain points; it's about providing students with the right instruction and environment to accelerate their learning.

1. Invest Veterans in the "Why"

Veteran teachers have years of lessons and practices that they have developed. Asking them to try something new can seem like a huge risky and a major time suck. Teachers have seen so many trends come and go that it is easy to dismiss personalized learning as another initiative that will have its time and then disappear.

Making the ask to change can be even more difficult when existing methods have been working. "I was so used to the methods and lessons I had used for years," recalled Kelly Pollack, a 14-year veteran teacher at CICS West Belden. "Also, the last couple of years before the transition were actually professionally going really well. My students were more successful than ever."

Expert's Tip: CICS West Belden's School Director Scott Frauenheim pushed his staff to collaboratively identify skills that their students would need to succeed.

To provide a proper context for making the shift to personalized learning, CICS West Belden's School Director Scott Frauenheim pushed his staff to collaboratively identify skills that their students would need to succeed. While the school had good test scores, the staff agreed that not all students were leaving with skills like strong problem-solving abilities, ownership of their learning, and the aptitude to collaborate with others. This recognition served as the foundation for a mindset shift towards personalized learning.

2. Leverage Strengths Developed from Veteran Experience

A shift to personalized learning does not mean throwing out all of the great skills developed from years of teaching. Message to teachers how their existing strengths will help them in the new models. For example, Frauenheim got buy-in from teachers by making the case that some elements of

personalization, like learning profiles and flexible groupings, can be combined with their existing instructional practices to take students to the next level.

When teachers are content experts, they possess a deeper understanding of how concepts relate to each other—and are thus more agile in addressing skill gaps with students. Principal Drew Goltermann of USC East College Prep points to veteran teachers' curriculum and planning skills as a huge key to supporting students working on content at their own pace:

“Really structured and thoughtful planning is a critical skill in a traditional model. I think that it’s even more important in this model because what we ask our teachers to do is lay out their curriculum for the entire quarter.”

School staff also said veterans are able to create strong systems and classroom management skills that can help facilitate independent work times on technology and much more student movement than many of the models utilize. Principal Joseph Manko of Liberty Elementary pointed out that “a lot of times when you’re trying something new and when kids get amped up and overly excited, I think that’s when things start to fall apart for rookie teachers. Veteran teachers know the tricks to channel that in a positive way.”

3. Involve Veteran Teachers in the Research and Design Process

Administrators can make impassioned pleas for personalized models with little traction from teachers. How about creating intentional spaces for teachers to give input into the design process and to see ideas in action? Frauenheim involved his staff at CICS West Belden in the design process from day one. This led to ideas aligned to the ultimate vision that teachers had ownership over. For example, the enrichment teachers developed an entire schedule based on student interests.

Expert's Tip: Liberty Elementary principal Joseph Manko cut down professional development silos by creating the hashtag [#liberty64](#) for teachers to share their innovations via Twitter.

A powerful way to do this is to organize visits to classrooms or schools already implementing personalized learning. Why? It makes abstract ideas tangible—something that is particularly powerful when it comes from veteran teachers' peers. Frauenheim paired visits with reflection sessions, which left his staff with clear next steps to implement. Over in Baltimore, Manko cut down silos even further by creating the hashtag [#liberty64](#) for teachers to share their innovations via Twitter. The Twitter feed is filled with projects, systems, and ideas (worksheets are conspicuously absent), which constantly pushes his staff's thinking.

4. Inspire Teachers to Hold Firm to Personalized Learning During Storms

It can be very tempting for teachers to return to their traditional practices when faced with frustrations. Math teacher Danielle Nathan had a strong record at a school that did not emphasize personalized learning. But when she joined USC East College Prep, she struggled in giving up control in the more student-centered classroom and saw poor student achievement results.

“I’ve faltered and had moments of failure and my initial reaction is to go back to what I know,” Nathan explained. “[My principal] is there to tell me not to throw the baby out with the bathwater. He’s pushing me to figure out how to integrate what I have done in my past experience into this model.”

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Danielle Nathan, Math Teacher at USC East College Prep

Goltermann recounts how a teacher was frustrated about students falling behind on their reading and proposed a comprehension quiz to hold students accountable. The teacher found that the students who were struggling were those who had lower level reading skills, so a reading group was created where a teacher read a chapter with the group two to three times a week to model strong reading habits and skills.

In these examples, the school leader is able to effectively validate teacher frustrations, give teachers the space to give input, implement a solution to the issue, and still hold firm to the school's tenets.

5. Give Teachers Space, Time, and Support

Just like our students have different needs, recognize that teachers need personalized paths. Barton Dassinger, principal at Chavez, remembers that one of his strongest teachers was daunted by the technology used to personalize learning. Her classroom now regularly has five independent groups working on different objectives simultaneously, including groups on computer stations. "She said it just clicked for her this year after seeing other classrooms and attending a few workshops," Dassinger said. "I don't think this would have happened without giving her the time."

Back over at CICS West Belden, teacher Kelly Pollack felt that support from her school team was crucial in helping her make the leap. "Members of the administration reminded us to take things slowly and it's not going to happen over night," she recalled. "Like students, teachers need that motivation as well. It really helped us feel like we're all in this together."

Let's continue the conversation. How do you support veteran teachers transition to personalized/blended learning models?

Jin-Soo Huh is an EdSurge columnist and currently the Personalized Learning Manager at Alpha Public Schools. Formerly, he served as the Director of Technology at [KIPP Chicago Schools](#) where he supported the amazing school leaders and teachers implementing instructional technology and personalized learning. Follow him on Twitter at [@JinSooDHuh](#).

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