

Ultimate Guide to Personalized Learning

FEATURING

3 3 REASONS SCHOOLS STRUGGLE TO INDIVIDUALIZE INSTRUCTION & WHAT THEY CAN DO ABOUT IT



Different students learn in different ways – and every student learns at his or her own pace.

For that reason, traditional classrooms, where teachers stand at the front of the room and deliver content, often fail to meet students where they’re at in their learning journey.

Prevailing wisdom suggests that personalized learning helps educators design flexible, student-centered instruction tailored to every learner’s needs. But while schools recognize the importance of individualized instruction, many struggle to implement it effectively.

Modern teachers feel squeezed by time, resources, and ever-changing standardized testing requirements, while administrators face logistical hurdles in scaling personalized instruction across classrooms.

These challenges have led to inconsistent results.

In a 2019 Education Week survey, more than 50 percent of educators describe personalized learning as a key part of their teaching toolbox. But just 21 percent viewed it as transformative to education, while 11 percent equated it to a “passing fad” in education.

Proponents of personalized learning suggest a big reason for this inconsistency isn’t a lack of benefits, but rather inconsistent implementation and a lack of professional training.

In the same EdWeek survey, 61 percent of teachers described their principals as “supportive” of personalized learning; 42 percent said the professional development they received on the job was “effective but inconsistent.” More than a third said training on personalized learning was “nonexistent” or “ineffective.”

“The key to meeting every learner’s needs isn’t more content – it’s smarter, more student-driven instruction.”



Robert Barnett, co-founder of the Modern Classrooms Project and author of *Meet Every Learner's Needs*

Teachers views on personalized learning Professional development

Source: Education Week, 2019



61%

Said building principals are “supportive”



42%

Said professional training was “inconsistent”



So how can we, as educators, provide stronger and more effective personalized learning in schools? And what’s stopping students from making real progress when we implement these changes?

This guide explores the three biggest obstacles to implementing personalized learning – and provides practical solutions educators can apply today.

READ-ON TO CONSIDER

- ① The biggest obstacles to personalized learning in schools
- ② The role of self-paced and mastery-based learning in classrooms
- ③ How to leverage blended instruction to personalize learning effectively

Ready to get started? Let’s get into it.

1 Schools Aren't Designed for Personalized Learning – But They Can Be

Traditional schools and classrooms weren't built with personalized learning in mind. The traditional sit-and-get model – where all students progress at the same pace – has always posed significant barriers to differentiation.

Key Fact: A Gallup poll found that only 47% of U.S. students feel engaged in school by the time they reach high school – a significant drop from elementary levels. (Source: Gallup, 2024)

Only 47% of U.S. students feel engaged
in school by the time they reach high school



Source: Gallup, 2024

For Robert Barnett, a former classroom teacher, co-founder of the Modern Classrooms Project and author of *Meet Every Learner's Needs*, what started as a personal challenge to engage more students in his own classroom, grew into a movement that became his life's mission.

"When I think about why I became a teacher, it's because I wanted to develop relationships with young people and help them grow," says Barnett on a recent episode of *The RocketPD Podcast*. "It's not because I wanted to stand at the front of the room and exercise power over them and have them be quiet and listen to me. But that's how it felt often as a teacher. Like I had to stand up at my board and control the classroom. I didn't like that. It was frustrating. And I just, I didn't feel like I was achieving what I wanted to achieve."



That's when Robert started to think – and teach differently.

The Modern Classrooms approach features a process for digitizing direct instruction through the use of short videos, the creation of self-paced lessons and series of short mastery checks designed to help teachers gauge academic progress. The nonprofit features a website with free resources, research and mentorship for teachers.

"When I was able to sit down with my students during class, it was fun," recalls Barnett of implementing the approach, now used by more than 80,000 educators. "I was getting to know the young people. I was watching them not know how to do something, watch a video, ask me questions, work with their classmates and then learn how to do it."

1 Schools Aren't Designed for Personalized Learning – But They Can Be (cont'd)

Modern Classrooms
Project

GETTING STARTED

Practical Steps for Schools

Use technology intentionally

Digital tools should support, not replace, personalized learning.

Integrate self-paced structures

Give students flexibility to engage with content at their own speed.

Adopt a mastery-based model

Allow students to move forward only when they've mastered concepts.

Learn more: ModernClassrooms.org

Elsewhere in education, K-12 instructional leaders and coaches echo the potential for individualized instruction in classrooms, but lament the glacial pace at which innovation often happens in K-12 schools.

In a recent TEDx talk on the topic, author and former Teacher of the Year Dr. Catlin Tucker described a world in which the most effective educators would effectively reimagine traditional instruction to meet the individual needs of learners.

"Despite having unprecedented control over their digital experiences, young people find themselves thrown back in time when it comes to school," adds Tucker. "We're essentially relegating a future generation to be passive recipients of learning."

Proponents of individualized instruction, including Barnett and the educators who support the work of the Modern Classrooms Project, are hoping to change all that.



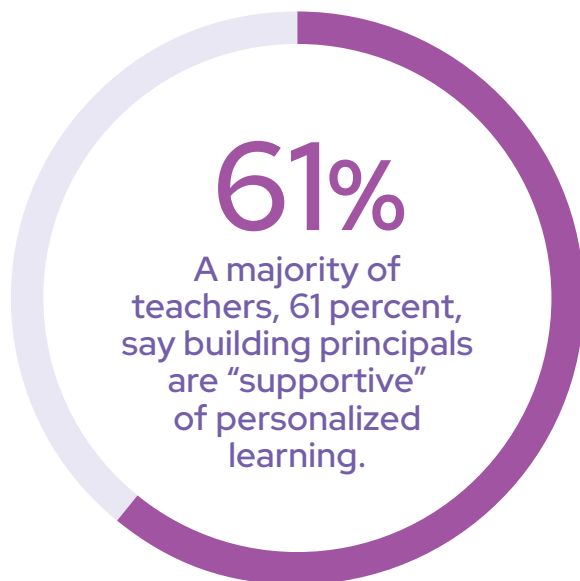
"Technology has radically changed how young people interact with information, connect with each other and navigate the world around them," posits Tucker from the TEDx Folsom stage. **"Given the ground-breaking technological developments happening in our world, education is at a frustrating standstill."**

Dr. Catlin Tucker,
author and former Teacher of the Year

2 Teachers Need More Support to Personalize Learning Effectively

One of the biggest barriers to personalized learning isn't a lack of interest among teachers and staff – experts say, it's a lack of professional development."

A 2019 Education Week Research Center report of K-12 teachers, reports the following:



In the same EdWeek research survey, 42 percent of teachers called the professional development received around personalized learning, "effective, but inconsistent." While a third of respondents said professional development for personalized learning was either "nonexistent" or otherwise "ineffective." On the flip side, just 23 percent of teachers called the professional development they received on personalized learning "effective" or "transformational."

Speaking from his experience as a classroom teacher, Barnett emphasizes that most front-line educators need (and often want) to challenge the status quo in their classrooms:

"What I realized is that standing in front of the room at my board explaining something to the students who happened to be there wasn't going to cut it. Some students were bored, some students were lost, some weren't there at all. It wasn't going to be good enough and it was frustrating for me."

In a short video course produced by RocketPD, called Redesigning Instruction to Meet Every Every Learner's Needs, Barnett calls on teachers to model effective personalized learning practices and suggests that schools become "lighthouses" for other communities to help spread the benefits of the approach.

2 Teachers Need More Support to Personalize Learning Effectively (cont'd)

Taking that notion a step further, Education Week highlights four central components of effective individualized instruction identified by RAND's research.

4 components of individualized instruction

- 1 Learner profiles** — record of each learner's strengths, weaknesses & goals
- 2 Personalized learning pathways** — need-based variability in content & instruction
- 3 Competency-based progressions** — progress determined by mastery of key concepts
- 4 Flexible learning environments** — need-based adaptable use of staff, space & time

(Source: Education Week, 2017)

Sounds good. But change is hard, right?

Despite significant investment from deep-pocketed backers — Gates Foundation and the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, to name two — ED-TECH Focus on K-12 reports that educators often lack sufficient time to develop personalized lessons and struggle to balance the desire for personalized learning alongside the need to teach to specific academic standards.

For Barnett and others, the key to success boils down to focusing, in large part, on the right approach.



3 Ways to Support Teachers in Personalized Learning

- 1 Provide PD on self-paced, mastery-based learning models**
- 2 Give teachers time and tools to create personalized lesson plans**
- 3 Foster collaboration so educators can share best practices**

In the end, it may come down to our ability to rethink (and redesign) traditional learning spaces in our schools.

Read on to learn more.

3 How the Right Environment Can Make or Break Personalized Learning

Technology is a double-edged sword in personalized learning. Used effectively, it can help teachers **differentiate instruction, track progress, and provide targeted interventions.**

Used poorly, it becomes just another distraction.

Experts say the mode of technology is less important than the learning environment that you intentionally create with it.

For example, the Modern Classrooms Project emphasizes helping teachers leverage the power of short, self-produced videos – Barnett calls this digitizing direct instruction – as a means to engage students and create self-paced learning experiences.

He encourages teachers to make their own videos, using Zoom or some other simple mode of recording to start. Tucker and others point to the evolution of emerging tools and learning models such as artificial intelligence and blended learning to further individualize instruction.

Once you know what type of technology or technologies you plan to individualize instruction with, you need to organize your classroom to work more effectively for you and your students.

For example, Barnett suggests dedicating specific learning zones, so that students know what to do where.



ZONE 1

dedicated area to watch and reflect on videos

ZONE 2

dedicated area to work through self-paced lessons

ZONE 3

dedicated area to take assessments & demonstrate mastery

“Traditional classes move at the teacher’s pace. This means that whether or not students understand, the class moves on,” explains Barnett in his RocketPD course. “This isn’t good for young people. If they already understand the content, they’re going to be bored. If they don’t understand one lesson and they move on to the next, they’re not set up for success.”

3 How the Right Environment Can Make or Break Personalized Learning (cont'd)

For that reason, he says, it's important to create a self-paced environment where students are encouraged to demonstrate mastery of one lesson before moving on to the next.

To help, Modern Classrooms Project developed a set of School Transformation criteria that educators can use "to make schools a model for responsive teaching and learning."



Modern Classrooms
Project

School Transformation Criteria

- | | | | | |
|-------------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|---|-----------------------------------|
| 1
Use of time | 2
Data-driven support | 3
Capacity of people | 4
Educator learning & development | 5
Community involvement |
|-------------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|---|-----------------------------------|

71% Percentage of educators say technology is a very effective tool for student engagement when used correctly.

(Source: Project Tomorrow, 2023)

"When you redesign your lessons in this way, every student can achieve mastery, and you, as a teacher, can meet every learner's needs." – Robert Barnett

Ready to make personalized learning work in your schools? We've got you covered.

Catch Robert Barnett on The RocketPD Podcast

Catch an in-depth conversation on **how individualized instruction can transform the look and feel of your classrooms.**

Subscribe to RocketPD on YouTube, or download wherever your favorite pods are found!



Enroll in our new course: Redesigning Instruction to Meet Every Learner's Needs

Join Robert Barnett in this video-based course **on RocketPD LaunchPad**—complete with downloadable workbooks and a Certificate of Completion.



Register for our Live-Virtual Cohort!

Don't miss your chance to learn alongside Robert Barnett and Modern Classrooms Project as part of our interactive, **multi-session cohort-based training.** Spots are limited! **Discounts available for teams.**

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