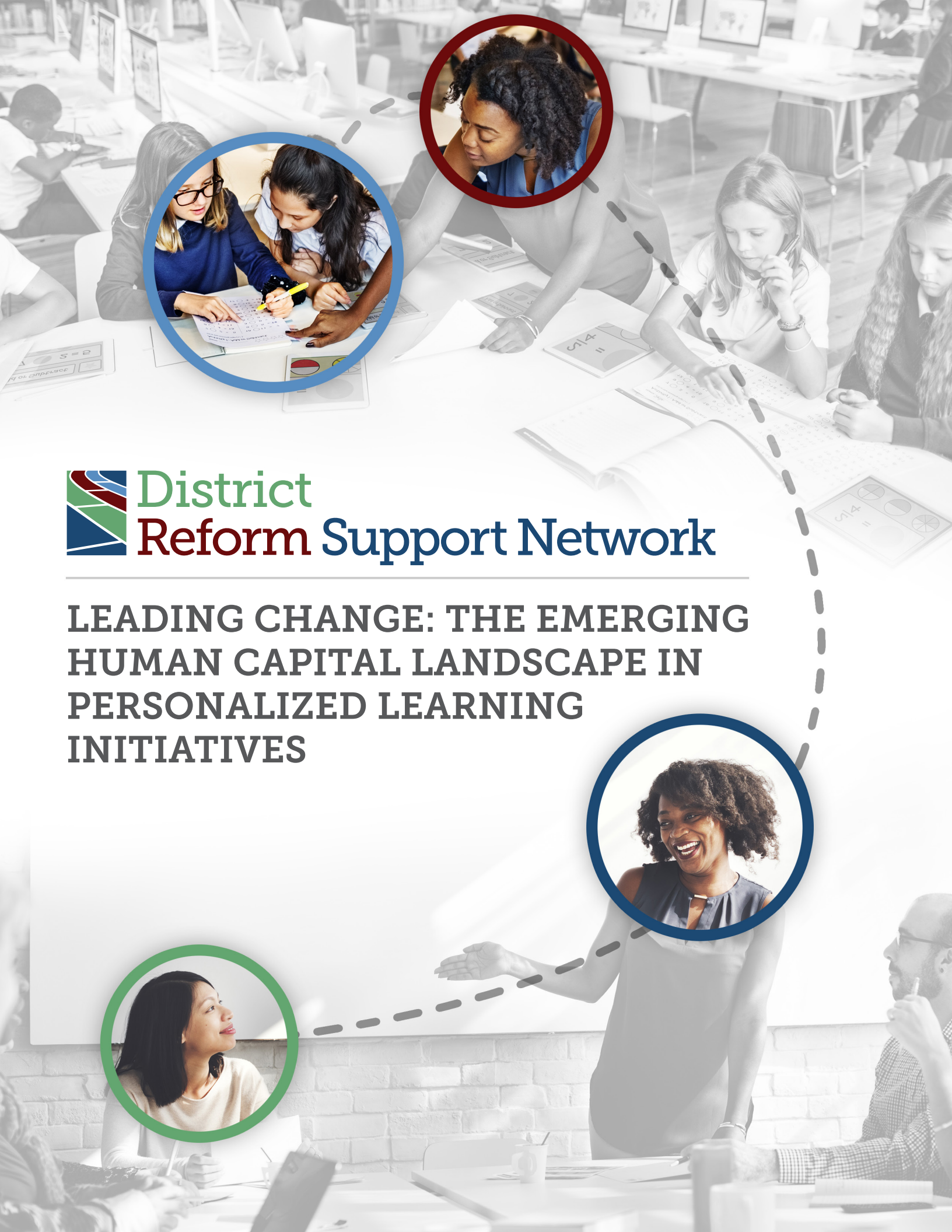

District Reform Support Network

# LEADING CHANGE: THE EMERGING HUMAN CAPITAL LANDSCAPE IN PERSONALIZED LEARNING INITIATIVES

The District Reform Support Network (District RSN) offers technical assistance and resources to grantees of the Race to the Top–District education reform initiative funded by the U.S. Department of Education. The District RSN's purpose is to support the Race to the Top–District grantees as they implement reforms in education policy and practice, learn from each other, and build their capacity to sustain these reforms.

The District RSN is also committed to sharing lessons learned and promising practices from the Race to the Top–District program with all districts, especially those implementing similar education reform initiatives.

For more information, please visit us online at https://rttd.grads360.org.

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# INTRODUCTION

Personalized learning initiatives are gaining ground in schools and districts throughout the country, in part due to the U.S. Department of Education's Race to the Top–District, or RTT–D, grant program launched in 2012. A key priority of the RTT–D program is to support districts in implementing "personalized learning" approaches — a promising student-centered education model that empowers teachers and school leaders to tailor instruction to each student's individual strengths and needs.

The central purpose of the RTT–D grantees' personalized learning initiatives is to create dynamic environments where teachers and school leaders have information at their fingertips that allows them to understand and address each and every student's strengths, needs, and interests in real time. Fundamentally, adopting personalized learning calls for a holistic approach to planning implementation—requiring strategic supports in all areas of district operations, including human capital. [1] Proponents argue that personalized learning may offer schools the opportunity for innovation in human capital structures. Although the body of research is still growing, personalized learning approaches could change instructional roles and expand educators' career options in a number of ways by:

- Placing teachers in the role of learning facilitators rather than providers of content
- Freeing time for educators to collaborate
- Allowing teacher teams to allocate instructional responsibilities based on teachers' specialized skills
- Enabling excellent teachers and principals to serve as coaches or supervise multiple classrooms or schools
- Providing the opportunity for expanded reach and flexibility through remote teaching

A system-wide shift to personalized learning could also have an impact on teacher pay; increased efficiency and flexibility may result in savings that could be redirected to increase pay for all teachers or add to the earnings of excellent teachers who take on new roles.

There is limited evidence on whether these theoretical benefits actually emerge in practice, however. The RTT–D grant program offers a valuable opportunity to learn more about the human capital landscape in districts that have adopted personalized learning approaches. As such, the U.S. Department of Education (the Department) contracted an independent study investigating how the shift to personalized learning has affected educator roles and career pathways in the RTT–D districts to date.

This study explores the various professional roles that RTT–D sites designed to help support the

[1] Highlander Institute, "School District 2.0: Redesigning Districts to Support Blended Learning," accessed August 3, 2016, https://www.highlanderinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Redesigning-Districts-to-Support-Blended-Learning.pdf.

implementation of personalized learning models, and examines questions about hiring practices, professional development, salary, and career pathways related to those roles. This study adds to the body of knowledge of how personalized learning affects human capital in schools and districts, and offers key lessons for other districts planning and implementing personalized learning in schools.

# OVERVIEW OF STUDY

## PERSONALIZED LEARNING IN RTT–D GRANTEE SITES

The RTT–D grant program awarded approximately $500 million in federal funds to 21 school districts and charter management organizations across two competitions in 2012 and in 2013, respectively (Table 1). Included among the grantees are four consortia that collectively represent 51 school districts out of a total of 68 districts.

The overall goal of RTT–D is to support districts in serving as innovation laboratories, advancing new ways to educate students across a range of contexts through a personalized approach.[2] Applicants were required to design personalized learning environments that used collaborative, data-based strategies to deliver tailored instruction and supports to ensure that students of all backgrounds graduate with the knowledge and skills to excel in today's competitive global economy.[3]

Grantees use a variety of approaches to improve student learning through the personalization of education. According to the Department's Race to the Top–District Program Overview from December 2014, these approaches can be grouped into six categories.

- *Student-Directed Learning* — gives students options and control over their own educational experiences, often reflected in individual personalization plans that students helped to create.
- *Competency-Based/Mastery Learning* — allows students to advance based on their ability to master a skill or competency at their own pace.
- *Blended Learning* — combines traditional teacher-led instruction with online content delivery.
- *Career Exposure* — provides opportunities for applied learning by exposing students to real-world workforce experiences, such as career academies or apprenticeship training.
- *Project-Based Learning* — "learning by doing" experiences that help to develop students' analytical, communications, and investigative skills.
- *College Access and Success* — exposes students to the admissions process and college-going experience through activities such as college counseling and campus visits.

Most sites designed initiatives that combined elements of multiple approaches, as shown in Table 1. (See a summary in the Appendix for more detailed information on the RTT–D grantees.)

[2] US Department of Education, "Programs: Race to the Top–District (RTT–D)," accessed August 3, 2016, http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop-district/index.html.
[3] RTT–D Overview from the U.S. Department of Education.

Table 1. Personalized Learning Approaches Implemented by RTT–D Grantees

| GRANTEE INFORMATION | | | PERSONALIZED LEARNING APPROACH | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| GRANTEE NAME | STATE | GRANT YEAR | MASTERY/COMPETENCY-BASED LEARNING | CAREER EXPOSURE | STUDENT-DIRECTED LEARNING | COLLEGE ACCESS AND SUCCESS | PROJECT-BASED LEARNING | BLENDED LEARNING |
| Carson City School District | NV. | 2012 | • | • | | | | • |
| Charleston County School District | SC | 2012 | • | | • | | | |
| Galt Joint Union Elementary School District | CA | 2012 | | | • | | | • |
| Green River Regional Educational Cooperative | KY | 2012 | | | • | | | |
| Guilford County Schools | NC | 2012 | | | • | | | • |
| Harmony Science Academy | TX | 2012 | • | | | | • | • |
| IDEA Public Schools | TX | 2012 | | | • | • | | • |
| Iredell-Statesville Schools | NC | 2012 | • | | | | | • |
| KIPP DC | DC | 2012 | | | | | | • |
| Lindsay Unified School District | CA | 2012 | • | | | | | • |
| Miami-Dade County Public Schools | FL | 2012 | • | | | | | • |
| Enlarged City School District of Middletown | NY | 2012 | | • | | • | | • |
| New Haven Unified School District | CT | 2012 | | | | | | • |
| Puget Sound Educational Service District | WA | 2012 | • | • | | | | • |
| St. Vrain Valley School District | CO | 2012 | | • | | | • | |
| Metropolitan School District of Warren Township | IN | 2012 | | | • | | | • |
| Carolina Consortium for Enterprise Learning | SC | 2013 | | • | | • | | |
| Clarksdale Municipal School District | MS | 2013 | | | • | | • | |
| Houston Independent School District | TX | 2013 | | • | • | • | • | |
| Kentucky Valley Educational Cooperative | KY | 2013 | • | | | | | • |
| Springdale School District | AZ | 2013 | | • | • | | | |
| TOTAL | | | 8 | 7 | 9 | 4 | 4 | 14 |

## STUDY PURPOSE AND DATA COLLECTION

The purpose of this study is to explore the human capital decisions that RTT–D grantees made to implement personalized learning initiatives and to document what can be learned from those decisions for future personalized learning work. The study describes the educator roles that grantees created or modified as they adopted personalized learning and examines lessons learned about compensation, hiring and selection, professional development, and career pathways. Finally, the report provides recommendations for effectively launching and supporting educator roles related to personalized learning.

For this investigation, researchers collected information about educator roles in RTT–D sites through a variety of methods.

- **Application Review.** Researchers reviewed RTT–D grant applications to understand the range of educator roles that were proposed.
- **Interviews With Project Directors.** Researchers conducted interviews with the RTT–D project director — or equivalent key district administrator — in each of the 21 sites. The project directors discussed the implementation of the personalized learning initiative at each site and how staff roles and responsibilities changed to support the new learning environments.
- **Staff Survey.** Concurrently with the project director interviews, researchers developed and distributed an online survey for building and instructional leaders. A total of 607 school staff participated in the survey, from 19 of the 21 RTT–D sites. Of the respondents, 38 percent were building leaders, 34 percent were instructional leaders, and 18 percent classified themselves as "other."
- **"Spotlight" Interviews.** After initial analysis of the interviews and surveys, three RTT–D sites were selected for more in-depth focus to showcase particularly important themes. Multiple interviews were conducted with district administrators, principals, and instructional leaders to gain additional insight at each spotlight site.

# FINDINGS

## ESTABLISHING ROLES TO SUPPORT PERSONALIZED LEARNING

One of the central tasks of launching a personalized learning initiative is defining the roles and responsibilities of staff who will implement the program. Most of the RTT–D grantees focused more on creating leadership roles outside of the classroom than on fundamentally changing classroom teachers' roles.

Table 2 shows the most common types of roles that grantees defined as integral to their personalized learning initiatives. These roles will be collectively referred to as "personalized learning roles" throughout this report. Each category in the table describes a type of personalized learning role that was implemented in at least three sites.

Table 2. Common Types of Roles in RTT–D Personalized Learning Initiatives

| TYPE OF ROLE | DESCRIPTION |
|---|---|
| **STUDENT-FOCUSED ROLES** | |
| Learning Facilitator | A classroom teacher whose role has shifted from imparting knowledge in a traditional teacher-centered context to facilitating student learning in a learner-centered environment. |
| Academic Counselor | A counselor who helps students articulate their learning and career goals and align them with a personalized course of study. |
| Social Worker/Counselor | A counselor who provides personalized support services for students, including restorative justice services, mental health services, family outreach, or access to wraparound services. |
| **INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP ROLES** | |
| Instructional Strategies Coach (including Personalized Learning Coach, Data Coach) | A coach who helps teachers learn strategies for customizing daily instruction to students' needs; may help with analyzing student data, lesson planning, and/or differentiating instruction. |
| Technology or Blended Learning Coach | A coach whose specific focus is on incorporating technology and digital resources into instruction. Responsibilities may include developing technology-related curriculum. |
| Content-Focused Instructional Coach | A content expert who works directly with teachers to help them learn strategies to personalize instruction or incorporate digital resources in specific content areas — usually math or literacy. |
| Teacher-Leader | A full-time classroom teacher who is charged with additional leadership responsibilities such as piloting and modeling personalized learning techniques in their classrooms, helping train other teachers, and/or serving as an advisor to district leadership and liaison between teachers and administrators. |
| **ADMINISTRATIVE ROLES** | |
| Career-Technical Education (CTE)/Career Pathway Leader | A high school administrator who is head of a specific career pathway or academy. There may be several career pathway leaders within a single school. |
| Curriculum Development Leaders | Teachers who work additional hours or in release time to develop curriculum that reflects a school's or district's personalized learning vision and aligns with common core, assessment, and/or career pathway goals. |
| District Coordinator | A central office administrator (distinct from positions created solely to administer the RTT–D grant program) who ensures that implementation of a specific aspect of the site's personalized learning vision is coordinated across schools. Specific areas of focus and titles in different sites include director of instructional technology, personalized learning coordinator, CTE administrator, and professional development coordinator. |

Aside from the common role types described in the table, some grantees created unique roles found only at their site. For example, because the Harmony Public Schools initiative emphasizes using data dashboards to personalize learning, leaders there created a statistician position at the central office and data analyst positions at the school level. To support their sites' Career Exposure initiatives, Houston ISD created a "career cowboy" to introduce elementary students to various career options, and St. Vrain Valley SD hired teachers to spend additional time after school mentoring students who are at risk of failing. Galt Joint Union SD expanded principals' traditional roles to give them the responsibility of ensuring that students' personalized learning plans were carried out effectively.

Overall, in launching their personalized learning initiatives, the RTT–D grantees invested more heavily in developing instructional and administrative leadership positions than in redefining the classroom teacher role. Every site implemented at least one type of **instructional leader role** focused on supporting teachers, and more than half designed a specialized **district administrator role** to support a key aspect of personalized learning. Most of these were full-time positions that had not previously existed, established either by hiring new staff or by placing a teacher or administrator on special assignment. Grantees relied heavily on these coaching and coordinator roles to build buy-in among teachers and principals, train teachers in personalized learning strategies and digital tools, and ensure consistency of implementation across schools.

Although **classroom teachers** in all sites were expected to start implementing instructional strategies aligned with the designated personalized learning approach, the majority of sites did not substantially redefine teacher roles or staffing structures. However, a third of the grantees did reframe the responsibilities of classroom teachers — particularly sites that emphasized competency-based or blended learning. In these models, teachers were designated as facilitators of learning who guide students using a variety of resources rather than serve as the dispenser of knowledge; in some cases, this also involved revisiting traditional staffing structures. Some examples of these reframed or redefined teacher roles include the following:

- **Lindsay Unified School District:** Instead of the traditional teacher-and-student model, classrooms in Lindsay USD are now designed around "learners" who are guided by "learning facilitators." The learning facilitators have a deep knowledge of instructional content, standards, and learning resources, and use data to analyze learners' needs and track their progress on an ongoing basis. Using this information, learning facilitators guide students through levels of mastery "along a standards-based continuum of learning," offering whole-group, small-group, and individualized lessons as needed.
- **Miami-Dade County Public Schools:** Miami-Dade focused its RTT–D grant on middle school mathematics to implement the district's personalized learning model, iPrep Math. iPrep Math learning centers change the role

of the teacher from being the leader of the class to being a facilitator of instruction. Each learning center is staffed with two full-time certified mathematics teachers and one part-time hourly certified mathematics teacher to serve 60 students. This staffing model allows the teachers to rotate the students through different stations, including individualized technology-enabled instruction, independent work, and small-group or one-on-one work with a teacher.

» **Enlarged City School District of Middletown:** The centerpiece of Middletown's personalized learning initiative is a redefinition of the traditional classroom teacher role. All elementary school teachers are now certified as "blended learning specialists," with a specific focus on either ELA or math. Rather than teaching one group of students all day, each ELA specialist shares two classes of students with a math specialist; each specialist works with one class in the morning and the other in the afternoon. The unusual staffing structure and specialized focus allow each teacher to develop deep expertise in delivering personalized instruction in a single content area.

A number of grantees also used RTT–D resources to create additional **non-instructional positions** that, like classroom teachers, provided student-focused supports. These staff provide services such as academic counseling, social work, family outreach, and mentoring. In some locations, staff were recruited to lead curriculum development; these responsibilities were generally added to an existing teaching position.

Figure 1 summarizes how the key roles central to the RTT–D initiatives were distributed from classroom level to district level. The figure illustrates the strong emphasis across sites on instructional leadership roles that directly support teachers.

As Figure 1 shows, few sites innovated upon **school administrator roles** as part of the RTT–D programs. Generally, principals and assistant principals were expected to support and sometimes lead personalized learning, but their responsibilities were not significantly redefined. In fact, sites varied widely in the degree to which they purposely engaged principals and assistant principals in the personalized learning effort. Districts that neglected to articulate the role that these school administrators would play often encountered difficulties, as many grantees noted that principal leadership is a critical factor in the success of implementation at the school level.

## INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP ROLES

As described above, instructional leader roles figured prominently in all of the personalized learning initiatives. The instructional leadership positions that grantees created can be divided into four main types: instructional strategies coaches (implemented by 14 sites), technology/blended learning coaches (10 sites), content-focused instructional coaches (five sites), and teacher leaders (five sites).

Although the **instructional strategies coach** is used to support every type of personalized learning approach, it is most commonly found in sites implementing blended learning, student-

directed learning, and/or competency-based learning approaches. Whether the coach's specific area of expertise is pedagogy or data, staff in this role are tasked with helping classroom teachers understand personalized learning in practice and design instruction customized to individual student needs, across all subjects and all types of resources. Staff in this role may also work in coordination with other types of coaches to ensure that teachers are effectively combining data, content, and instructional strategies to personalize instruction.

> "The data coaches … meet with teachers. They go into the instructional coaching period with the literacy coaches and talk teachers through how to interpret and to actually use their data."[4]

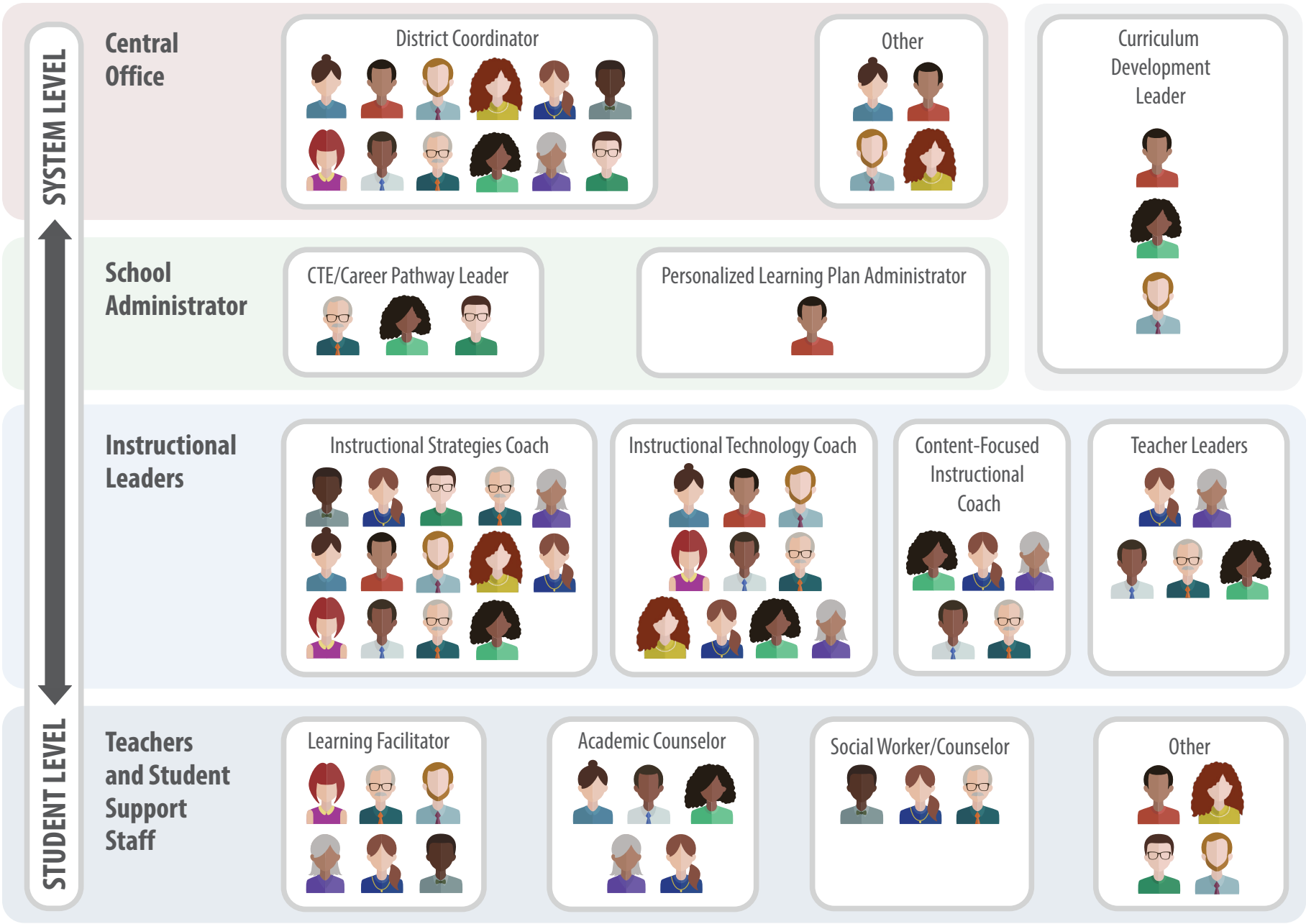
The **technology/blended learning coaches** are most likely to be part of a blended learning approach. Unlike instructional strategies coaches, who build capacity in all areas of instruction, technology/blended learning coaches specifically focus on the use of technology and digital resources. As one project director explained, the blended learning coach's job is "teaching teachers and teaching students what digital tools are out there, how to evaluate their use, and how to use them." In sites that adopted blended learning, these coaches were a critical part of the plan to maximize the effective use of technology as a tool to personalize instruction for students.

Several grantees included **content-focused instructional coaches** in their programs — mainly focused on literacy or math but also supporting preschool and STEM instruction. In all cases, these coaches work in tandem with strategy- or technology-focused coaches. The content-focused coaches help to deepen teachers' understanding of curriculum and best practices in a specific content area, while the other coaches demonstrate how to integrate technology or specific personalization strategies into that content area instruction.

In sites that implemented **teacher-leader roles**, designated teachers serve as the vanguard of the personalized learning initiative in the classroom. These leaders are classroom teachers identified as high performers open to experimentation, and who agree to pilot personalized learning practices and serve as demonstration classrooms for other teachers. One project director described how the district gradually built teacher-leaders' capacity over several years — first by providing them with grants to obtain technology and resources, then asking them to choose one personalized learning strategy to pilot, and finally offering them ongoing coaching to hone their approach. Like content-focused coaches, the teacher-leader role is generally designed to work in combination with other instructional leaders.

[4] Unless otherwise specified, all quotes are from the RTT–D site administrators interviewed for this study. Quotes are edited for clarity.

Figure 1: Types of Personalized Learning Roles Created by RTT-D Sites, by Category (N = 21)




Note: Each represents a site that created at least one of this type of role.

## COMPENSATION STRATEGIES

Decisions about compensation are an essential part of designing new roles. Survey findings showed that across all sites, most principals and instructional leaders feel that additional compensation helps attract teachers to personalized learning roles, and nearly the same proportion agree that the added compensation provides an incentive to stay in the roles (Figure 2).

Although many sites offered additional compensation to staff in key personalized learning roles, none of the grantees did so by making substantive changes to district salary schedules or structures; rather, most sites opted to simply add to the base teacher or administrator salary by either providing a stipend or extending the length of the contract.

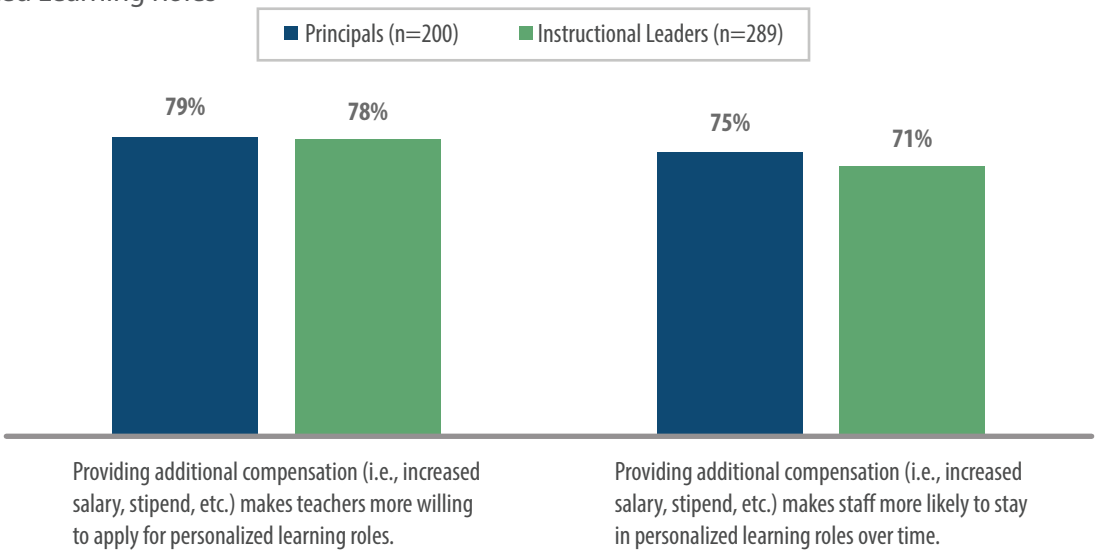
Eight of the 21 sites reported providing a stipend to staff in at least one of the personalized learning support roles during the school year. Generally, the stipends were provided to classroom teachers who took on additional duties outside of the classroom and were designed to recognize or compensate for the time that they would need to spend undertaking those extra responsibilities.

Staff in these positions were paid on a regular teacher salary schedule, and the **stipend was added to their base salary**. The annual stipend amounts that districts offered varied considerably, ranging from approximately $800 to $15,000. A few sites also offered stipends for work that is completed in the summer, such as attending trainings or developing curriculum.

Four sites increased compensation for key roles by **extending the length of the basic teacher or administrator contract**; for example, from 10 months to 11 months. The additional months compensate the people in that role for continued work beyond the regular school year.

> "[T]he technology coaches actually make a little bit more because they work 11 months. So they have an additional month that they get paid for, which gives them more salary."

Figure 2: Perceptions of Whether Additional Compensations Help Attract and Retain Teachers to Personalized Learning Roles



Two consortium sites used slightly different arrangements. In Carolina Consortium for Enterprise Learning, all coaches were paid through the consortium's central administration structure and were not employees of any single district. In the Green River Regional Educational Cooperative, the teacher pay scale was used as a base, but all coaches were paid at a salary level that was an average of the schedules in different districts.

Despite the support for increased compensation expressed by survey respondents, several sites chose **not to offer any additional compensation** for staff taking on personalized learning roles. In these sites, coaches and other special roles received the same salary as they would if they were a teacher (or administrator, for central office roles). In many cases, they were designated as a teacher on special assignment (TOSA). In those sites, the personalized learning roles offered teachers and administrators a change of responsibilities but represented a lateral move in terms of salary.

As the RTT–D grant program comes to an end, sites are considering how to continue funding the personalized learning roles that they believe are most critical. One strategy grantees are considering is to continue offering staff in these roles an extended contract but reduce the amount of time added to the contract to make it more sustainable. For example, one site mentioned that it would likely scale back its blended learning coaches' contracts from 11 months to 10.5 months (compared to the traditional 10-month contract for teachers). Another site mentioned that the district had already committed to funding the coaching role after the grant ended. Many sites are investing in transferring knowledge and capacity to teachers and traditional coaches to ensure the long-term sustainability of their approach.

## TAKEAWAYS

These findings indicate that to drive the shift to personalized learning, grantees heavily invested in growing the cadre of instructional leaders who provide coaching and modeling to teachers. These instructional leaders served as the primary levers of change in the district.

Few sites made substantial innovations to the classroom teacher role; rather, the grantees tended to retain traditional staffing structures while encouraging teachers to integrate personalized learning strategies into traditional instruction. This is consistent with the gradual approach many of the grantees took, phasing in their personalized learning approach over time by starting with small pilots or demonstration classrooms and growing from there. Only a few RTT–D grantees launched initiatives that included immediately redefining the role of classroom teachers — and even some of these focused the changes within a targeted grade band or subject area.

Although few changes were made to school administrator roles, a common theme was that strong principal leadership is essential to successful implementation of the personalized learning approach in any given school. Project directors suggested that to maximize effective implementation, principals should be included in all aspects of the personalized learning initiative, from developing common goals and objectives to interviewing candidates for new roles to participating in professional development activities.

Similarly, few modifications were made to traditional salary structures. Most sites added stipends or additional weeks to the existing teacher pay scale to provide some increased compensation for new roles. Other sites conceptualized the personalized learning roles as lateral moves, paying staff equal to what they were already making as a teacher or administrator. The survey findings suggest that sites will be most successful in attracting talent to the new roles if they offer some increased compensation and determine viable strategies to sustain that compensation level over time.

## FINDING THE RIGHT FIT FOR PERSONALIZED LEARNING ROLES

Particularly when an initiative requires system-wide change, finding the right people to lead the initiative can determine its success or failure. There was strong agreement across RTT–D sites that the best candidates for the personalized learning roles are people who are strong communicators, open to innovation, and comfortable with ambiguity. As Figure 3 shows, building and instructional leaders consistently identified communication skills and flexibility as critical qualities for staff in all types of personalized learning roles — above other skills such as content knowledge, organizational skills, and instructional experience.

A key point here is that the most experienced teachers are not always the best candidates to lead the way on personalized learning. As many project directors emphasized, being a successful teacher of children does not necessarily translate to being successful with adults; those in coaching roles must be able to deftly deliver critical feedback and coax teachers to change their habits. In addition, staff successful in new roles must be comfortable with a fluid process and be able to problem solve, often on the spot. They must be willing to "build the plane as it's flying" as district and school leaders forge into uncharted territory.

> "Here's what I can't teach [...] I cannot teach the natural side of working with adults. If you can't get along with adults and if you can't bring hope to those teachers that this really is going to make a difference in their classroom and in the children's lives and in our districts and in our state and our nation, then you're not qualified.

> I think we have learned probably the most critical element of our successful coaches is that flexibility and the understanding that they are also writing the script while they're doing it."

A strong belief in learner-centered instruction is another quality that project directors identified as important in the instructional leaders — again, perhaps more important than content knowledge or experience. Because personalized learning is about giving up control and guiding students through their own learning processes, the staff most suited to lead the initiative are those who embrace the philosophy that students learn best when they have ownership over their own learning. Furthermore, one project director noted that staff with this philosophy also tend to be more open to learning new things themselves, believing that there is always room to grow professionally.

Project directors, principals, and instructional leaders identified other qualities important for staff leading personalized learning initiatives, including organizational skills, content knowledge, and the ability to collaborate and build relationships within school buildings. Project directors also noted that prior teaching and coaching experience is helpful for professionals filling these roles — particularly for strategy-based instructional coaching positions.

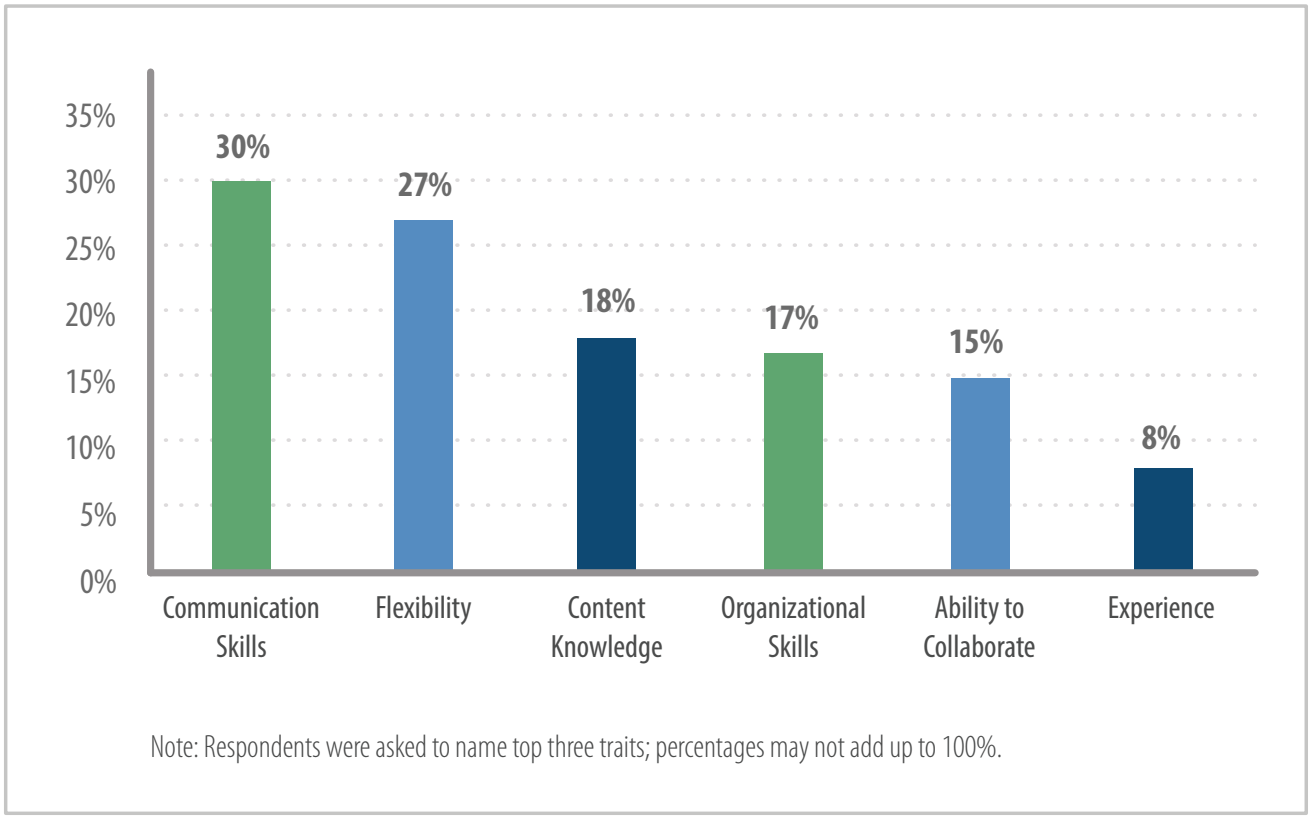
## HIRING SOURCE

To fill the personalized learning roles, grantees advertised both internally and externally but drew largely on current staff. Project directors noted that internal applicants had the benefit of understanding the culture of their site and having the trust of other professionals in the district.

At the same time, in some schools, new hires for instructional leadership roles faced challenges moving from a peer role to an authoritative role. To mitigate this challenge, some leaders placed internally hired coaches in schools where they had not previously taught.

Most sites also hired at least one or two external candidates over the course of the grant. Leaders often looked to external sources — such as universities or the private sector — for specialist positions like statisticians, robotics instructors, and information technology experts. These positions called for expertise not easily found among existing staff. One drawback of external hires, however, was that turnover was sometimes higher in these roles because districts could not pay specialists what they could earn at outside organizations.

Figure 3: Traits and Skills Necessary to Effectively Support Personalized Learning, According to Survey Respondents (N = 203)




Note: Respondents were asked to name top three traits; percentages may not add up to 100%.

## HIRING PROCESS

Many grantees had to tinker with their hiring processes to ensure they were finding the best matches for new personalized learning roles. One challenge was getting the job description right. The responsibilities of newly hired instructional leaders were not always clearly defined or articulated at the outset of the program, which meant that some sites had a hard time attracting talent to those roles, or that newly hired staff were confused about their duties in the early stages of implementation.

The makeup of the hiring committee was another factor that affected the success of new hires. Several project directors noted that it is important to include a team of people — including principals and/or assistant principals — on the hiring committee, especially for school-based instructional leaders. Principals contribute a deep understanding of how candidates will fit into school communities, and several sites that did not involve principals in hiring regretted missing that opportunity to build buy-in and vet school-based staff.

> **"I think one of the things that I would have done would be to allow the principals on the panel to interview the coaches. I think principals have an insight as to what their vision is for their school and that may have been overlooked in this case."**

To better identify the unique characteristics required in staff who will fill personalized learning roles, several grantees have revamped their hiring processes. These sites are experimenting with interviews that include demonstration lessons and performance tasks to showcase aspects of candidates' personalities not easily ascertained through traditional question-and-answer sessions.

## TAKEAWAYS

To be successful in new personalized learning roles, educators/staff need a unique set of leadership and change management skills. Districts should seek candidates who have an innovative mindset and a learner-centered approach to education; they must also communicate and sell the enterprise of personalized learning. In addition, they need to have the ability to be flexible and take initiative in uncertain circumstances.

Districts tended to look within their own schools to fill their human capital needs for the personalized learning roles. Most of the hiring came from internal sources, while external sources were more often tapped for specialist positions. Districts should consider which roles demand special areas of expertise and focus external outreach efforts on those roles.

To screen for the right people to fill these roles, districts must develop aligned job descriptions and hiring processes. The job descriptions should be detailed and accurately portray the day-to-day work expected of the role. The hiring process should be designed to screen for those specific qualities and involve staff who will work directly with the new hire. In particular, involving principals in the writing of job descriptions and hiring process helps ensure that school leaders embrace the contribution of staff in personalized learning roles.

# SPOTLIGHT: CARSON CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT

## ALIGNED, INCLUSIVE INTERVIEW PROCESS

As new staff positions emerge to support personalized learning initiatives, district leaders are challenged with the task of identifying personnel with the right combination of skills and knowledge for a previously undefined role. Based on the hiring experiences of the past several years, there is considerable agreement among Race to the Top–District (RTT–D) project directors that individuals who are most successful in personalized roles possess a strong ability to communicate with adults and a flexible attitude. Typical hiring processes that include steps such as a paper application, résumé submission, and question-and-answer session often do not reveal these more abstract qualities.

Several RTT–D grantees have begun rethinking hiring processes for personalized learning roles. While each site and district is unique, the new hiring processes often include performance tasks and demonstration activities. District leaders in Carson City, Nevada, use a comprehensive hiring process to fill vacancies throughout the district, including those directly related to personalized learning. This section spotlights that hiring process in Carson City School District.

### BACKGROUND

Leaders in Carson City began rethinking the district's traditional hiring process before receiving the RTT–D grant. They began the process with staff applying for administrator roles and quickly expanded it, with modifications, to most of the roles throughout the district. Over time, the components of the hiring process became more streamlined as leaders in the district discovered activities and protocols that would unveil characteristics, skills, and knowledge professionals need to possess for various roles throughout the district.

### THE ROLE OF IMPLEMENTATION SPECIALIST

With the RTT–D grant funds, leaders in Carson City created the role of "implementation specialist" to aid teachers in the rollout of personalized learning instruction. The implementation specialists are assigned to support teachers by grade band and content area. In the beginning of the grant cycle, the implementation specialists helped teachers transition to a new student data tracking system and worked to create new curriculum to align with the needs of personalized learning instruction. Over time, they focused more on helping teachers use data to inform instruction, create learner-centered cultures, and integrate technology into instruction.

### AN INTERVIEW PROCESS ALIGNED TO JOB DESCRIPTION

There are six components to the implementation specialist performance interview process, each of which aligns to the aforementioned responsibilities of the role. Leaders in Carson City believe the components reveal candidates' leadership capabilities when role-playing a reflective conversation with a struggling teacher, flexibility when presenting a sample lesson to panel members acting as students, and listening skills when working in a group to identify trends in student data. These tasks, in addition to more traditional hiring components, such as a paper application and question-and-answer session, give Carson City district leaders a well-rounded glimpse into implementation specialist candidates' qualities. Each component of the hiring process is weighted equally with a possible total of 300 points.

| HIRING PROCESS COMPONENTS | DESCRIPTION |
|---|---|
| 1. Paper screening | The candidate's application packet is rated based on the following criteria: overall experience; cognitive coaching background; professional learning communities experience; instructional leadership positions held; curriculum, assessment, instructional development, and design experience; and other professional or education experience that would support the work that implementation specialists would complete. |
| 2. Reviewing Mastery Connect results | The candidate is asked to review and describe common data and results from a Mastery Connect teacher tracker (an assessment and data tracking system used in Carson City). |
| 3. Facilitate a reflective conversation | The candidate is given a role-play scenario in which they are asked to facilitate a coaching conversation with a panel member serving as the classroom teacher that the candidate is providing feedback to after an observation. |
| 4. Traditional question-and-answer session | The candidate is asked knowledge and performance questions. The candidate's responses are rated on content, accuracy, and response appropriateness. |
| 5. Present a quality lesson to panel members | The candidate provides a model lesson that will serve as an example of work performed in a classroom setting. The lesson should be no longer than 15 minutes. It is measured on learning targets, information presented, organization, materials, and outcomes. |
| 6. Complete a candidate problem-solving session | Candidates come together to review a student data set. After reviewing the data, they identify high and low points in the data and plan for ways to approach teachers. The panel members watch the candidates problem solve together. |

## AN INCLUSIVE INTERVIEW TEAM

Rather than only placing central office staff in charge of interviewing candidates, Carson City deploys a mixed team of school-level and district-level staff to participate in the performance interview process. For implementation specialists, the interview team usually includes:

- A district-level employee
- The principal of the school
- An implementation specialist
- A teacher-leader

Carson City leaders place emphasis on an inclusive approach so that the staff at the school where the new implementation specialist will be placed feel bought into the process. Involving multiple stakeholders also allows candidates to understand who they will work with if accepted for the role. This comprehensive approach allows candidates and interviewers the opportunity to get to know each other before working together.

## INTERVIEW PROCESS INTRODUCES CANDIDATES TO THE ROLE

Leaders in Carson City admit that the four- to five-hour performance interview process can seem grueling to many candidates. Some of the interview tasks require thoughtful preparation, while others require candidates to react on the spot. The process, however, gives candidates a valuable window into the role and the skills needed to perform the job successfully. One implementation specialist explained that the process is helpful because "those steps are very representative of the work we do here, so it's an authentic match of what you'll be asked to do and what you're capable of doing." The intensive process also helps ensure that only truly interested applicants apply.

Carson City staff agree that the process has been successful in identifying professionals who will succeed in the implementation specialist role. Since creating the role, Carson City has seen very little turnover. The small amount of turnover that has taken place was largely due to implementation specialists moving on to district administration positions. District leaders consider this type of upward transition to be a positive outcome.

## USING THE INTERVIEW PROCESS TO IDENTIFY PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT NEEDS

While the interviews are designed to find the best match for the role, Carson City district leaders acknowledge that each new hire will have areas for growth. In fact, candidates entering the interview process are sometimes told they are not expected to excel at all tasks but that the process reveals areas for professional development focus. One implementation specialist noted that this attitude put her at ease because "if there were gaps in training, part of the interview process was knowing what training would be needed [after she was hired]."

After a candidate for an implementation specialist is offered the role, they have a follow-up meeting with district staff to talk about the interview process and areas for improvement. They work with the professional development director to set goals to be incorporated into their evaluation process. In this way, the interview process not only successfully identifies candidates with the right skills but also reflects the district's goal to personalize learning for all members of the school community.

## INITIAL TRAINING FOR THE PERSONALIZED LEARNING ROLES

Finding staff with the right skills and traits for the job is necessary but not sufficient for success; districts also must ensure that staff in personalized learning roles are appropriately trained to effectively launch the initiative. One potential pitfall cited by several project directors was underestimating the scope and variety of training necessary to set up instructional leaders for success. For example, the initial training in some sites was focused solely on the use of devices, with little attention to developing coaches' capacity to effectively train others. Other sites offered training in coaching but struggled to establish consistency across schools because coaches did not have a shared understanding of how the instructional approach should be implemented. Based on these experiences, it appears that staff in new personalized learning roles are best prepared when their initial training includes all of the following elements:

- Building a shared understanding of what personalized learning "looks like"
- Training in coaching skills
- Training in skills and tools specific to the role (e.g., training in content areas, project-based learning, specific software)

### BUILDING A SHARED UNDERSTANDING OF WHAT PERSONALIZED LEARNING "LOOKS LIKE"

A recurring theme across sites was that, before the launch of their initiatives, many teachers and leaders simply did not know what personalized learning "looks like" in practice. Creating a shared, practical vision of the district's personalized learning approach among those leading the initiative was, therefore, a critical foundation for the work.

Many sites found that it was important for the central office to take the lead in articulating a clear mission and vision, and communicating it throughout the district. This process of developing and communicating a district vision is instrumental to engaging multiple stakeholders, clarifying the responsibilities of staff in key roles, and ensuring consistent implementation and focus across schools.

At the outset of the RTT–D program, some sites were further along than others in defining personalized learning in their schools. At least one-third of the project directors reported that their sites had already started pieces of this work before the grant award — for example, they may have introduced learner-centered practices or curriculum into several classrooms, or started integrating technology into instruction in specific schools. Such pilots helped these sites define the role that instructional leaders would play in the broader initiative and understand what kind of training was necessary.

For sites that had not already piloted pieces of the work, however, project directors found it difficult to launch the work without first building a shared definition among key staff. Together, staff drew on multiple sources to deepen their understanding of the designated personalized learning approach, including trainings by vendors, reading literature, and visiting other districts that were more advanced in implementation. This learning process helped newly hired instructional leaders identify goals and communicate the vision to teachers, principals, and other staff.

> We had to do a lot of that work ourselves in building the understanding and working with groups of teachers that were really willing to learn more, basically building up teacher advocates, and then those are the teachers that are now in the roles that have been created for them.

### TRAINING IN COACHING SKILLS

As discussed earlier, the ability to work effectively with adults is a critical requirement for staff charged with helping teachers transform their approach to instruction. Many sites invested in providing training specifically focused on coaching skills and strategies. Although internal central office staff led some of these trainings, many grantees hired external providers for the initial trainings and periodic follow-ups.

> We brought in a person that we knew of, a consultant who teaches teachers how to work with adults. So that whole concept of working with adults as a coach, we felt like they needed, and they had two weeks of training around that piece.

Because creating culture change among adults is such a central component of the instructional leader role, sites that did not provide initial training for coaches identified this omission as a challenge to effective implementation. In several sites, early implementation was more focused on obtaining technology and training teachers on how to use specific devices and software. Coaches were left to essentially define their own role by drawing on prior experience, doing their own research on personalized learning, and experimenting with trial and error. This resulted in less coherence in implementation across schools and a longer start-up period.

### TRAINING IN SPECIFIC SKILLS AND TOOLS

All sites provided some type of training for key staff on specific skills related to the sites' personalized learning approach. Grantees drew on a variety of resources to build capacity.

- **Bringing in professional development providers.** External professional development sources were used more frequently in the initial years of the grant, with a transition to more internal sources and systems over time. Many sites brought in providers to train staff on specific instructional strategies — such as blended learning or project-based learning — or specific content areas. Some sites using instructional software, digital devices, or platforms, such as Google Drive, brought in vendors to train coaches and teachers on how to incorporate these resources into instruction.
- **Drawing on internal expertise.** To varying degrees, all sites drew on the expertise of existing staff to design and lead professional development. A central office administrator, such as a director of instructional technology or chief academic officer, was often tasked with providing training to coaches and others in personalized learning roles.

» **Conducting site visits and attending conferences.** Several project directors talked about the importance of exposing staff to how people in other districts were implementing the targeted personalized learning approach, particularly for those staff who had not had experience with the approach themselves. Coaches and administrators were sent on site visits and to conferences so that they could observe instruction in action and learn best practices.

» **University partnerships.** Some sites have built relationships with local universities to assist with training. For example, the Metropolitan School District of Warren Township hired a professor to train coaches and advise them on professional development. Carson City School District made an arrangement for half of their implementation specialists to attend a doctoral program at a local university, and Springdale School District sent their Teachers on Special Assignment to a technology-focused training program at a nearby university.

## TAKEAWAYS

It is important that districts recognize that staff in personalized learning roles need to build multiple areas of expertise to be effective in leading change. Most sites planned for key staff to receive training in targeted skills, such as project-based learning or use of instructional technology. What is less obvious is that, because the practice of personalizing learning is new to many educators, districts must first and foremost ensure that all instructional and administrative leaders share a common vision. Furthermore, these key staff benefit from formal training in working with adults so they can effectively convey that vision.

In other words, training plans should be guided by the view that transforming instructional practice is central to personalized learning, not marginal to the technology. If instructional leaders are the drivers of that transformation, investing in their capacity to communicate and manage change should be a top priority.

# SPOTLIGHT: PUGET SOUND EDUCATIONAL SERVICE DISTRICT

## RACE TO THE TOP CONSORTIUM: A TASKFORCE MODEL TO DEFINE PERSONALIZED LEARNING

One of the central challenges of launching a district-wide personalized learning initiative is creating a shared vision and communicating to all teachers, principals, and central office staff what that vision looks like in implementation. Leaders in the Puget Sound Road Map Region in Washington State realized this challenge and used a distributed leadership approach to engage stakeholders at all levels. The following spotlight details how the taskforce structure developed by Highline Public Schools, one of the seven Puget Sound districts, created a collaborative process for developing a personalized learning vision and communicating that vision to schools throughout the district.

### BACKGROUND

The Race to the Top–District (RTT–D) site in the Puget Sound Road Map Region in Washington State is known as the Road Map District Consortium, made up of seven school districts in King County, Washington. As in many of the other RTT–D grantee sites, the concept of a personalized learning classroom was new to most of the schools and districts involved at the program's outset. Seeing that the work had to begin with creating a district definition of personalized learning, leaders in Highline Public Schools created a district taskforce that works in collaboration with school leadership teams. Over time, the Highline educators refined and strengthened the taskforce structure, and the model initiated in Highline has spread to other consortium districts. One of the founding members of the Highline taskforce is now the director of personalized learning for the consortium and continues to apply lessons learned from Highline across the consortium.

### BUILDING BUY-IN THROUGH A COLLABORATIVE PROCESS

Leaders in Highline emphasize that the district taskforce and school-based personalized learning leadership teams were important tools in building buy-in for the initiative across schools. As one taskforce member explained, school and district staff needed to understand what they were working toward and why. Rather than imposing a directive on schools, Highline brought stakeholders together to share learning and generate their own ideas, resulting in a "collective vision based on what we know our students need." The individuals on these teams could then share what they learned with colleagues at the school or district, spreading the district vision through peer-to-peer communication.

### INCORPORATING MULTIPLE VOICES

The membership of the Highline district taskforce has always included multiple stakeholders and has evolved over time. Initially, it was made up of several district staff along with representatives from one or two schools that were advanced in the process of integrating technology into instruction. Eventually, leaders from all of the RTT–D schools in Highline were incorporated. Currently, the district taskforce team includes:

- District chief technology officer
- District director of student advancement
- One or two teacher-leaders from each RTT–D school
- Principal of each RTT–D school

The district taskforce meets approximately every six weeks in the afternoon after school hours. The logistics of getting all of the members together at the same time is an ongoing challenge. District leaders continue to discuss strategies to make the sessions easier for staff to build into their schedules, including the possibility of holding virtual meetings.

At the school level, most of the RTT–D schools have a personalized learning leadership team that mirrors the purpose of the district taskforce. All of the leadership teams include building leaders and a variety of instructional leaders; the exact makeup varies across schools. Some schools include content coaches and librarians; others involve literacy and math interventionists and teachers from each grade band. The principal and designated teacher-leader provide a direct line of communication between the district taskforce and the school team.

## A SHARED INVESTIGATION OF PERSONALIZED LEARNING

The first goal of the Highline taskforce was to develop a definition of personalized learning that could guide implementation in schools. The members identified a variety of resources to help them build an in-depth understanding of personalized learning in practice.

One of the taskforce members noted that there were not many in-state examples of districts implementing personalized learning, so many taskforce members conducted site visits to model schools in other states. They visited schools in San Francisco and Los Angeles to observe classrooms and talk with central office leaders. These visits served as inspiration for members of the taskforce who could then develop the vision for what personalized learning should look like in Highline.

Taskforce members turned to other external resources as well. They attended conferences on personalized learning. They studied and discussed literature on blended learning. The team also received training from personalized learning vendors who sent representatives to taskforce meetings to work with staff on understanding digital tools and how to use them to personalize instruction.

Internally, taskforce members could also draw on the experiences of educators within the district who were already experimenting with incorporating personalized learning strategies and devices into instruction. One building principal in particular had been building her school's blended learning practice for some time. This leader shared valuable learning experiences and demonstrated strategies to inform the taskforce's work.

Several taskforce members shared that a key learning from their work was not to lead with technology; instruction must be at the center of any personalized learning effort. As one member put it, if the instructional model is not put first, then "you're just putting devices in front of students." This insight helped the instructional leaders on the taskforce understand how to coach teachers and build consensus at the classroom level.

## COMMUNICATING A DISTRICT VISION

Through the work of the taskforce in the first year of implementation, Highline developed a district-wide definition of personalized learning:

> *Using all tools, digital and otherwise, and guided by data, we will create learning environments that are student-centered, personalized, and gap-closing. The classroom teacher is the facilitator of blended learning. The key is in the blend of instructional practices, data, and tools.*

*Blended learning will lead to equitable instruction through …*

- ***Data** and **feedback** for all students to push their learning*
- ***Differentiation** to address low skills, gaps, challenge and **personalization***
- *Rigorous **standards-based instruction***
- ***Engagement** and **agency** for all students*

*… in order to improve achievement and success for every student.*

The district definition drives implementation decisions at the central office level and offers a guide for individual schools. Some schools in the district have adopted the district vision as is, while others have tailored it to fit the needs of specific school communities. The district's definition continues to evolve as understanding of and readiness for personalized learning matures.

In subsequent years, the taskforce's focus has expanded. It continues to serve as a venue for instructional leaders from different schools to share effective practices, problem solve implementation challenges, and continue developing knowledge about personalized learning.

Several of the original taskforce members have accepted leadership positions in other consortium districts and have taken the concept of a distributed leadership structure with them. Although there are many other elements to systemic change, these leaders view the taskforce process as a valuable mechanism for providing direction to the effort and for building buy-in and alignment across staff at multiple sites. Describing the foundational function of the taskforce, one district leader explained, "We are the trellis that the tomato plant is growing on."

## RETAINING AND DEVELOPING STAFF IN PERSONALIZED LEARNING ROLES

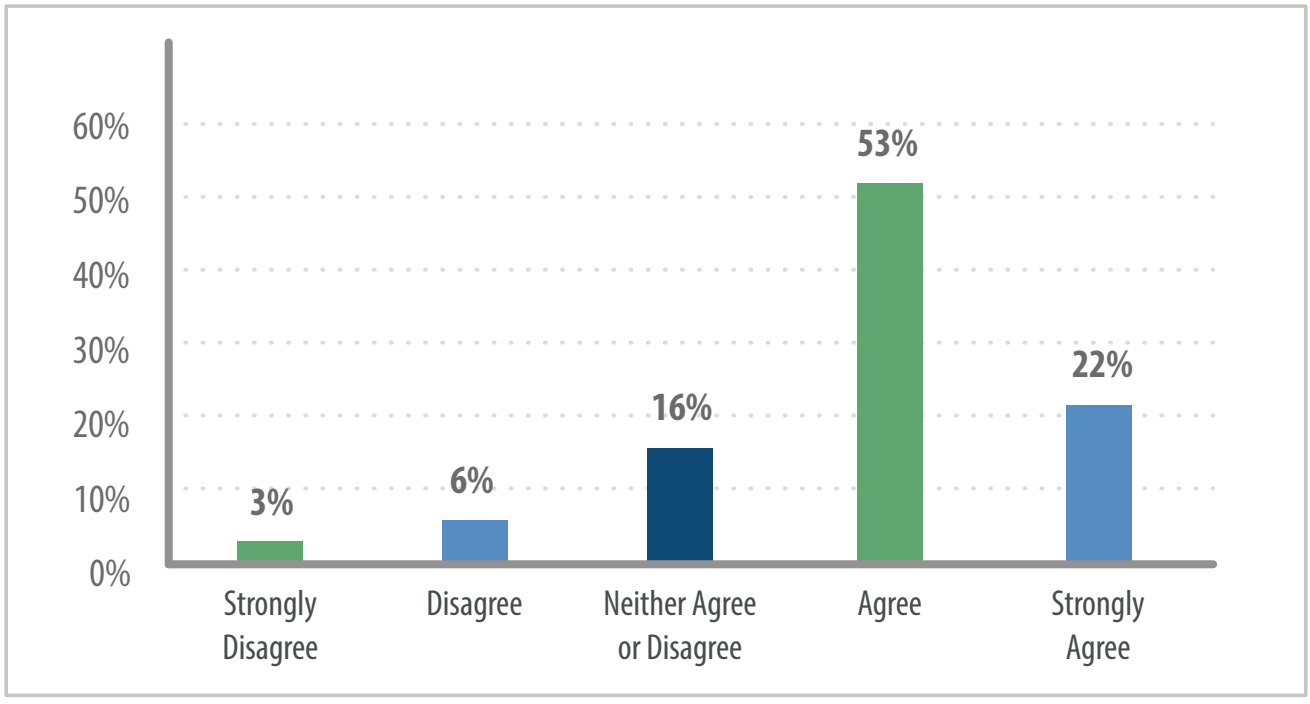
### ONGOING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Staff are more likely to stay in new roles if they feel they are sufficiently supported and continuing to grow professionally. As the RTT–D programs shift from start-up phase to ongoing implementation, many sites have made an effort to develop a professional development approach that reflects the philosophy of personalizing learning for all stakeholders. According to the survey, 75 percent of principals and instructional leaders agreed that their professional development aligned with a personalized learning philosophy (Figure 4).

In all sites, staff in key personalized learning roles meet regularly in groups (sometimes called professional learning communities, or PLCs) to share and customize learning. These weekly, biweekly, or monthly meetings allow personnel in similar roles to compare experiences and collaborate. Project directors emphasized the importance of such meetings for setting personal and group goals, identifying challenges and successes, problem solving, and planning. Survey data confirm that principals and instructional leaders find regular meetings with peers to be one of the most important ongoing professional development activities for staff in any personalized learning role.

> "We have monthly meetings with the coaches, and they pretty much have told us lately, "You know, we don't really need y'all. We just need time with each other." Their ability to talk to each other and solve problems and be real with each other, I think, has made a huge difference."

Figure 4: Percent of Survey Respondents Agreeing that "Our Site's Shift to Personalized Learning Is Reflected in Our Approach to Professional Development for Teachers and Coaches" (N = 489)



As implementations mature, some sites are finding that they needed to put more thought into how to differentiate training for staff in personalized learning roles. Even where minimal annual turnover occurred, new staff entering instructional leader and district leader positions needed a different kind of training than staff that had been in the roles for multiple years. If no onboarding process is in place for new hires, balancing the needs of staff with different levels of experience in one professional development session may be difficult.

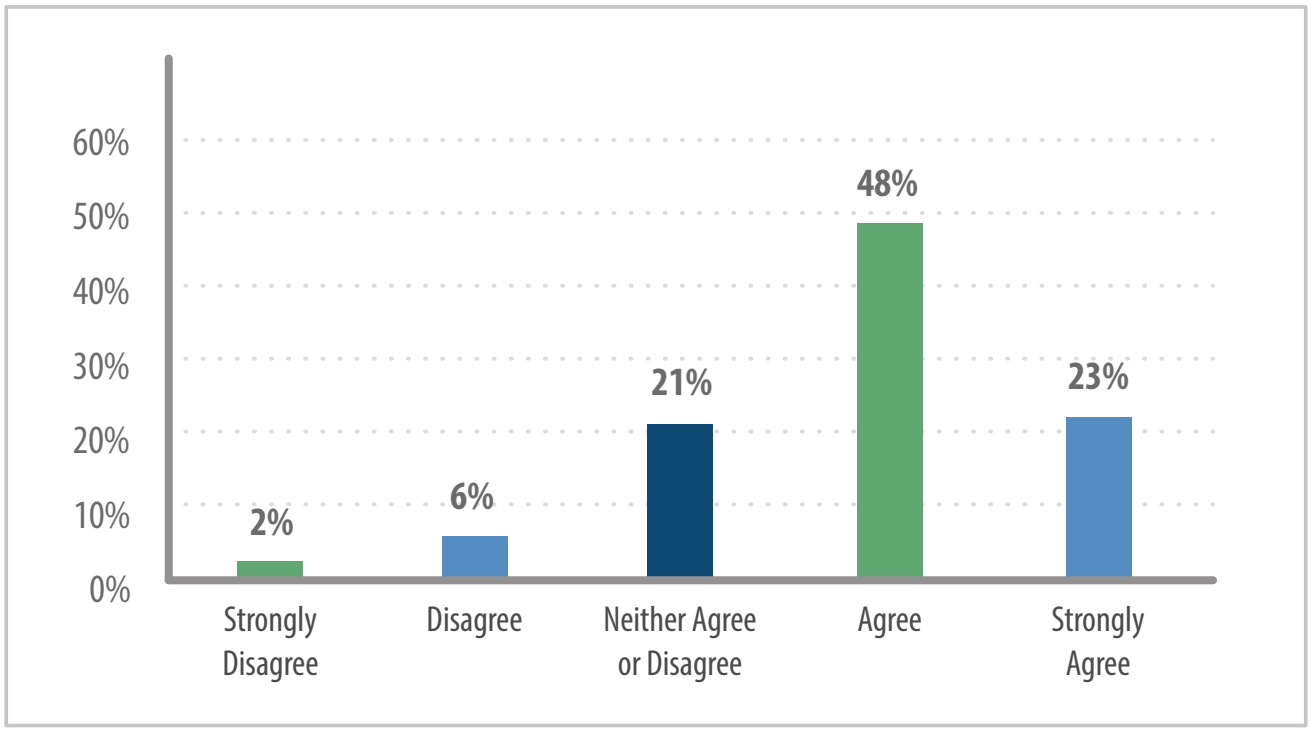
## CAREER PATHWAYS

Several years into implementation, the RTT–D sites offer insight into whether personalized learning models provide school and district staff with expanded career opportunities. Study findings show that although sites did not generally conceive of personalized learning roles as formal steps on a career ladder, in practice these positions do offer staff informal opportunities for career advancement or professional growth.

The great majority of grantees did not articulate the personalized learning roles as part of a formal career ladder. Only one project director described a clearly articulated series of career ladder steps — from learning facilitator to TOSA to learning director to principal — and two other sites reported that they were in the process of thinking through how the new roles fit into a formal career pathway. Despite the fact that no other sites reported formal career laddering, survey results show that the majority of building and instructional leaders believe that efforts should be made to incorporate the roles into explicit career pathways (Figure 5).

Although grantees did not define official career pathways, in most sites, the new roles operated as an informal path for career advancement. Staff in the

Figure 5: Percent of Survey Respondents Agreeing that "Personalized Learning Roles Should Be Part of a Formal Career Pathway for Teachers to Advance to Leadership Positions" (N = 489)



personalized learning roles have the opportunity to take on instructional leadership, administrative leadership, and sometimes disciplinary responsibilities. This expertise can help teachers and administrators prove their readiness for school administrator or central office positions.

> **Definitely, I think the pathway lead teacher gives them some exposure to more leadership responsibility. So I would definitely say it'd be a bridge to becoming assistant principal or a counselor, if that's what they want.**

Survey results showed that principals and instructional leaders agree that personalized learning roles offer teachers informal opportunities to grow professionally. Two-thirds (64 percent) of survey respondents agreed that teachers view such positions as an opportunity for career advancement (Figure 6), and three-quarters (73 percent) agreed that leaders look to staff in these roles when considering candidates for leadership positions (Figure 7).

Not all sites viewed instructional leader positions as a proving ground for other leadership positions, however. Some project directors explained that, in their districts, coaching and instructional skills were not considered key skills for principals; rather, operational skills were emphasized for building administrators. Nevertheless, even in those sites, personalized learning roles offered new options to teachers looking for new challenges outside the classroom.

For the most part, turnover in the personalized learning roles was not high; most sites reported just a few positions opening up each year.

Figure 6: Percent of Survey Respondents Agreeing that "Teachers View the Personalized Learning Roles as an Opportunity to Advance in Their Career" (N = 489)

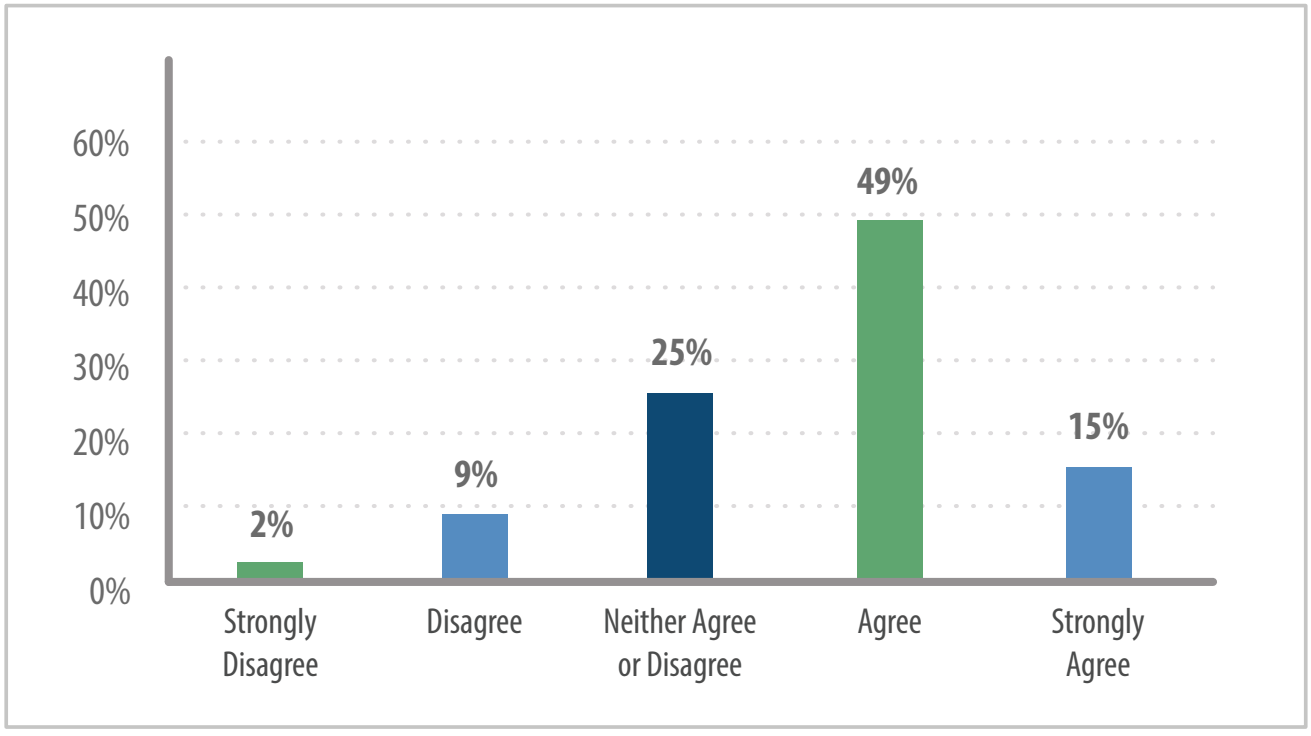
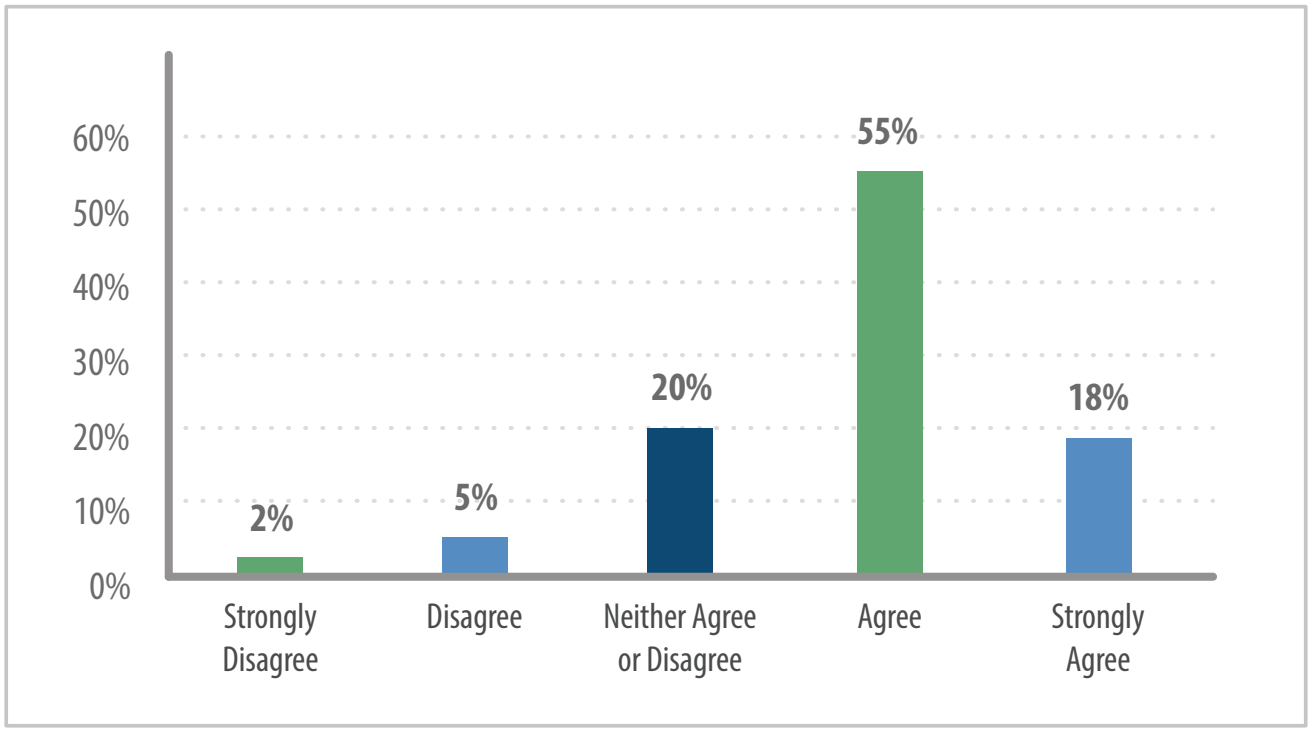


Figure 7: Percent of Survey Respondents Agreeing that "Staff Working in Personalized Learning Roles Are Viewed by Leaders as Strong Candidates for Building- or District-Level Leadership Positions" (N = 489)




Although the most common reason for turnover was promotion to other leadership positions, staff occasionally left the roles because it turned out not to be a good fit, or they retired or moved away. There were also several reports of coaches leaving to return to the classroom full time, reinforcing that some teachers viewed the roles as a lateral move that allowed them to apply and expand their skill set in a different modality for a period of time.

## TAKEAWAYS

Most of the RTT–D sites did not develop or adjust formal career pathway structures to accommodate personalized learning roles, although principals and instructional leaders see value in creating formal career ladders. Expansion of instructional leadership at most sites offers opportunities for teachers to apply expertise in new ways, improve leadership skills, and potentially advance to administrative positions. As these roles continue to provide additional avenues for instructional and administrative leadership, perhaps they will serve as an impetus for sites to articulate formal paths for advancement and professional growth.

It is important that ongoing support for instructional and administrative leaders reflect a personalized learning philosophy. Because personalized learning is a relatively new concept, many of these leaders are learning as they go, and their specific learning needs may be hard to predict and vary over time. Providing regular opportunities to meet, share experiences, and take charge of their own learning is an effective strategy for ensuring that key staff get the ongoing support they need.

# SPOTLIGHT: ENLARGED CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT OF MIDDLETOWN

## A TEACHER-CENTERED PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

One-third of Race to the Top–District (RTT–D) sites made fundamental changes to the roles of classroom teachers as part of their personalized learning initiatives. In the Enlarged City School District of Middletown in Orange County, New York, all elementary teachers transitioned from instructing one class of students in all subjects each day to being "blended learning specialists" with a specific focus on either ELA or math. The following section describes how Middletown accomplished this substantial professional development goal by combining comprehensive training and coaching with a phased approach and active engagement of and communication with teachers at every step.

### BACKGROUND

Recognizing the need to adopt a more personalized approach to instruction to improve achievement for all students, Middletown leaders designed an RTT–D initiative that focused on training every elementary school teacher to be "blended learning specialists" in ELA or math. This model was phased in over three years, resulting in 100 percent of the 345 Middletown elementary teachers being certified in blended learning by the third year. The district worked with an external professional development provider for blended learning training and created three new coaching positions to follow up that training with ongoing, on-demand support for technology integration.

### BUILDING ON A STRONG INSTRUCTIONAL FOUNDATION

District leaders explained that several building blocks had already been put in place that contributed to Middletown's successful transition to the blended learning model. Because of an earlier district focus on guided reading, elementary teachers were already well trained in the rotational model of instruction at the heart of blended learning classrooms. Teachers were accustomed to creating stations and centers, pulling small groups of students for targeted instruction, and using data to inform instruction — elements of classroom management often challenging for teachers new to blended learning.

In addition, Middletown had already implemented an innovative staffing structure in which all elementary teachers are either ELA or math specialists. Each pair of ELA and math specialists shares two classes of students, teaching their subject to one class in the morning and to the other class in the afternoon (math specialists also teach science and social studies). This model allows teachers to teach fewer subjects each day so they can deepen their instructional expertise in a specific area. Therefore, when it came time to transition to a blended learning model, all teachers already had deep expertise in the respective content area, and the primary focus was on using technology to enhance their instruction.

### STARTING WITH A CLEAR VISION AND COMMUNICATIONS PLAN

Before transitioning to blended learning instruction, Middletown district leaders developed a communications plan that involved all key stakeholders in the district. They started with communicating the blended learning vision to the board of education, then notified all school leaders and teachers about the plan to phase it in over several years. The district hosted informational meetings that detailed the district plan and gave teachers the opportunity to ask questions and provide feedback. Once the blended learning rollout began, the district continued to provide frequent communication about progress.

## USE OF OUTSIDE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROVIDERS

District and instructional leaders relied on outside experts to lay the foundation for blended learning best practices in Middletown. In particular, Middletown has an ongoing relationship with an educational consulting organization offering blended learning training and support. In the beginning, the consultants provided a three-day training for teachers and the technology Teachers on Special Assignment, or TOSAs. Middletown staff report that an essential part of the training was that each teacher worked with trainers to specifically plan what blended learning implementation would look like in their individual classroom.

After the training, the technology TOSAs created professional development sessions and provided on-demand coaching based on what they learned from the consultants. The consultants return several times each year to complete walkthroughs of teachers' classrooms and provide immediate feedback on their instructional practice. District leaders also provide substitutes several times throughout the year to relieve teachers from classroom duties to participate in multi-day professional development designed by instructional leaders.

In addition, Middletown works with university-based experts to provide annual professional development to teachers in math and literacy.

## PILOTING WITH A SMALL GROUP OF DEDICATED TEACHERS

Middletown used the philosophy of "go slow to go fast" when rolling out blended learning. They started with a small group of elementary teachers who volunteered to participate in the pilot year of blended learning implementation. The inaugural group included 33 teachers — just about 10 percent of all of the district's elementary school teachers — located in all four elementary schools throughout the district. Additional cohorts of volunteers were solicited during the second and third years of implementation. This phased approach to implementation was strategically important for securing 100 percent participation because when blended learning instruction was made mandatory for all teachers, many of those who had initially been reluctant to adopt the change felt more willing to do so after witnessing their colleagues' positive reactions and results. Furthermore, during each teacher's first year of blended learning implementation, they were given amnesty from evaluation so they could feel free to take risks and experiment with new types of instructional strategies, technology, and content providers without the pressure of student performance affecting their evaluation scores.

## INVOLVING TEACHERS IN KEY DECISIONS

At the beginning of the transition, district leaders formed a committee of teachers — those who volunteered for the pilot — to select the ELA and math digital content providers that teachers could use in blended learning instruction. This committee of teachers interviewed multiple providers and tested out the content. They considered which content providers best aligned to the Common Core State Standards and which were most customizable to fit multiple teaching styles, and finally made purchase recommendations to the district. Teachers in the district reflected that this peer-review process was important in establishing teachers' trust in the resources. One year after implementation, the district asked the teacher committee for input on the quality of the resources and used the feedback to adjust their purchases for year two accordingly.

## THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY TOSAS

Before implementing blended learning, Middletown employed instructional leaders in ELA and math. These TOSAs were responsible for supporting and providing professional development to teachers in their respective content areas. With the rollout of blended learning, district leaders created the role of technology

TOSA in addition to the ELA and math TOSAs. Middletown employs two technology TOSAs charged with specifically coaching teachers in the integration of blended learning technology into instruction. The consultants help support the TOSAs in building capacity and taking increasing responsibility for teacher training in the district.

Technology TOSAs provide training, support, and professional development to teachers transitioning to and implementing blended learning. Though the TOSAs provide training to other teachers, they are not responsible for evaluating teachers in order to create a stress-free learning environment. Teachers report that they feel comfortable approaching the TOSAs when they misunderstand something or need support without ramifications for their performance rating.

Technology TOSAs differentiate the professional development and support they offer. For some teachers, they interact via email and provide resources and feedback. For other teachers, they visit classrooms frequently to co-teach or model specific instructional strategies. The TOSAs also noted that the level of support they needed to provide to early adopters in the first year was different from that needed by subsequent cohorts of teachers; they had to learn to adjust their style to the teachers' level of comfort with technology and change. Overall, their role is to be on the pulse of how blended learning implementation is going throughout the district and then provide the support and professional development opportunities accordingly.

# DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In a 2015 report entitled "School District 2.0," researchers from the Highlander Institute wrote:

> **While we continue to see hopeful signs of change through the emergence of high quality, free resources for teachers (including classroom tools, content, and professional development opportunities), the promise of a new district-wide vision for teaching and learning has not yet come to fruition. The human capital component of establishing district-wide, effective blended learning classrooms continues to be a huge challenge.[5]**

The findings from this study paint a picture of a human capital landscape reflective of an emergent and growing field. Many districts and schools are grappling with simply conceptualizing what personalized learning looks like in practice. Accordingly, current human capital needs have emphasized expanding leadership roles outside of the classroom more than experimenting with new staffing structures in the classroom or innovating on traditional teacher roles. Across the RTT–D sites, the new leadership roles have created opportunities for teachers and administrators with a pioneering mentality, strong communication skills, and a learner-centered approach to step up and begin laying the foundation for a new vision for teaching and learning.

At this early stage of implementation, smart hiring is essential because staff who take on leadership roles are truly "building the plane while flying it." They must juggle developing their own understanding of personalized learning strategies while simultaneously modeling these concepts and providing support and encouragement to others. As the scope of responsibilities for these positions has become clear, several RTT–D sites have had to adjust and hone job descriptions. Furthermore, some are retooling hiring processes to include performance tasks that require candidates to demonstrate the soft skills that are so important for success in this kind of role.

The importance of investing in comprehensive training to help instructional leaders build multiple areas of expertise cannot be overstated. Creating a shared understanding of personalized learning in practice proved to be a critical first step in capacity building. Key staff also benefited from training in how to coach adults, in tandem with training on specific areas such as project-based learning or instructional technology. Ongoing professional development in many RTT–D sites reflected the personalized learning philosophy of tailored supports, with key staff meeting regularly together to set goals, assess progress, and customize their own learning.

Study results show that, at this stage of implementation, most grantees did not significantly change salary structures or articulate formal career pathways to create key roles.

[5] Highlander Institute, "School District 2.0," https://www.highlanderinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Redesigning-Districts-to-Support-Blended-Learning.pdf.

Sites that offered additional compensation did so through stipends or additional days or months of salary. With or without additional compensation, the creation of new leadership roles provides expanded options for teachers or administrators seeking new challenges, and in many sites, staff who take on these roles are viewed as strong candidates for future building-level or district-level leadership positions.

Ultimately, to achieve the full promise of personalized learning, the RTT–D grantees are finding that a central human capital challenge is first conceptualizing what the model looks like in practice and then identifying the right leaders and building their capacity to effectively communicate that vision to teachers.

Below are recommendations to help districts set staff up for success in the transition to personalized learning. Table 3 provides a checklist of key questions for district leaders to consider related to each recommendation to help guide the planning and implementation of a district-wide personalized learning initiative.

1. **Develop and communicate a clear district-wide vision of personalized learning.** The sites in this study found that the critical first step to implementation is ensuring that all staff understand what the district's personalized learning approach should "look like" in practice. District leaders can lay a strong foundation for personalized learning by first engaging multiple stakeholders in developing a district-wide vision for their specific approach. Just as critical is developing a communication plan to disseminate this vision to all administrators, teachers, and families. Clear and frequent communication about the shared vision, goals, and implementation plan improves coaches' ability to be effective, increases principals' and teachers' willingness to adopt change, and ensures consistency across sites.
2. **Be bold in vision and measured in implementation.** Personalized learning provides a powerful opportunity for educators to rethink the traditional classroom and school environment. District leaders should think in bold terms about how personalized learning tools and strategies may not only reshape instruction but also facilitate the transformation of fundamental school structures. What innovations in staffing, scheduling, compensation, professional development, and career advancement opportunities could increase teachers' access to the resources, expertise, and support they need to maximize student learning? At the same time, the grantees' experiences show that systemic transformation takes time and careful forethought; those sites that made the most sweeping structural changes had generally built their personalized learning initiatives on a foundation laid by several prior years of deliberate cultural and institutional change. By taking the "go slow to go fast" approach — phased implementation with frequent opportunities for teacher choice, input, and feedback — district leaders can better ensure district-wide collaboration in adopting a bold, student-centered vision for education.
3. **Provide increased compensation for personalized learning leadership roles and plan for sustainability.** As this study shows,

the successful implementation of personalized learning initiatives relies heavily on the leadership of instructional coaches and district coordinators. These leaders take on a wide set of responsibilities, including educating themselves about personalized learning tools and practices, learning effective change management strategies, educating and motivating others about changes in practice, and continuously refining and improving the implementation of the initiative. By offering higher compensation, districts can better attract and retain individuals who will be the best fit for these complex and demanding roles. Planning for these roles should include consideration of how leadership needs may change as the implementation matures and of how funding for key roles will be sustained over the long term.

4. **Invest in a comprehensive and versatile professional development strategy that emphasizes instructional practice and skilled coaching.** A critical element of any district's large-scale professional development effort is the need to gain the trust and cooperation of the teachers and other staff working directly with students. The importance of attending to this human element cannot be overstated; although it may require more investment up front, it will ensure greater fidelity, consistency, and buy-in over the long term. Accordingly, even where the introduction of new technology is a centerpiece of the initiative, professional development should not be limited to training on the use of technology. Sites that were most successful in implementing system-wide changes drew on a combination of external and internal sources to deliver professional development that:
   - Included specific training for instructional leaders on coaching strategies so they could lead change effectively
   - Won the trust and buy-in of teachers by focusing on how new practices and technology will support effective instruction rather than on the technology itself
   - Applied the principles of personalized learning to staff development by supporting teachers and leaders in developing individualized learning plans matched to their specific needs

5. **Strategically engage principals at every stage of planning and implementation.** Although professional development on personalized learning was often targeted toward teachers and coaches, there was wide consensus among grantees that strong principal leadership is essential to the successful implementation of personalized learning in schools. Staff in personalized learning roles who felt effective in their jobs often credited supportive school leadership as a key factor. This suggests that principals should not be overlooked when planning the rollout of personalized learning; district leaders should clearly define what role principals will play and find ways to enlist principals' support at every stage. Grantees suggested a variety of ways to build principals' understanding of personalized learning and promote their ownership of the initiative, such as including principals in implementation planning, the hiring of staff for personalized learning roles, and professional development sessions.

Table 3. Human Capital in Personalized Learning Initiatives: Recommendations and Guiding Questions

| 1. DEVELOP AND COMMUNICATE A CLEAR DISTRICT-WIDE VISION OF PERSONALIZED LEARNING. | ✓ |
|---|---|
| Have district leaders developed a vision for personalized learning that clearly articulates what the approach will look like in schools? | |
| Have district and school stakeholders been involved in the vision-setting process? Who is missing? | |
| Has a plan been created for communicating the district's personalized learning vision to all school leaders and teachers? | |
| How will the district assess principals' and teachers' understanding of the vision? | |
| **2. BE BOLD IN VISION AND MEASURED IN IMPLEMENTATION.** | **✓** |
| Have district and school leaders visited other sites that provide examples of innovative personalized learning practices? | |
| Are there modifications to staffing, scheduling, and/or job descriptions that can improve teachers' and administrators' ability to achieve the goals of the personalized learning initiative? | |
| Does the implementation plan articulate what district, school, and classroom systems and practices are already in place and need to be put into place for the initiative to be successful? | |
| Does the implementation plan include a strategy for piloting the personalized learning approach before gradually building to full implementation of the vision? | |
| How will the results of each phase of implementation be captured? How will results be used to inform ongoing implementation and build buy-in among teachers and principals? | |
| **3. PROVIDE INCREASED COMPENSATION FOR PERSONALIZED LEARNING LEADERSHIP ROLES AND PLAN FOR SUSTAINABILITY.** | **✓** |
| Have job descriptions been created for each new role to articulate the unique skills, time investment, and responsibilities required of each position? | |
| What funding strategies can be used to provide additional compensation for staff in new personalized learning roles during the early stages of implementation? | |
| Which key roles need to be maintained as implementation matures, and what funding strategies can be used to sustain increased compensation for those roles? | |
| **4. INVEST IN A COMPREHENSIVE AND VERSATILE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY THAT EMPHASIZES INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICE AND SKILLED COACHING.** | **✓** |
| Does the professional development plan include opportunities for principals, coaches, and teachers to observe the personalized learning model in practice? | |
| How can outside resources such as vendors, consultants, and/or universities be engaged to build staff capacity in the central components of the personalized learning approach? | |
| Does the professional development plan include training to build instructional leaders' capacity to coach adults? | |
| How will professional development opportunities be differentiated according to professionals' individual skills and knowledge? | |
| How does the professional development plan reflect a personalized learning philosophy? | |
| Do instructional leaders have frequent opportunities to meet regularly and share learning? | |
| Do teachers have access to ongoing coaching and constructive feedback after training sessions? | |

| 5. STRATEGICALLY ENGAGE PRINCIPALS AT EVERY STAGE OF PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTATION. | ✓ |
|---|---|
| How will principals be engaged in defining the district vision, hiring key staff, and participating in professional development? | |
| What role will principals and assistant principals play in communicating and supporting the district vision within their schools? | |
| What role will principals and assistant principals play in supporting the instructional leaders who are helping teachers implement personalized learning? | |

# APPENDIX

## SUMMARY OF RTT–D GRANT AWARD WINNERS AND THEIR PROJECTS

| GRANTEE | COHORT | AWARD AMOUNT | STUDENTS SERVED | TYPE | APPROACH | PROJECT DESCRIPTION |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Carson City, NV | 2012 | $10,000,000 | 4,109 | City | Mastery/ Competency-Based Learning; Career Exposure | Creating a consistent mastery learning environment aligned to locally developed assessments in grades 6-12. School counselors develop individualized academic plans for students who pace their progress using an e-portfolio and learning guides. Career clusters will be established in each high school. |
| Charleston, SC | 2012 | $19,388,399 | 9,493 | City | Mastery/ Competency-Based Learning; Student-Directed Learning | Using a 1:1 computing device initiative, personalized learning coaches, and customized student learning plans to create mastery-based learning environments in targeted elementary, middle, and high schools. |
| Clarendon, SC | 2013 | $24,980,857 | 11,957 | Consortium (Rural) | College Access and Success; Career Exposure | Teachers are employing "Enterprise Learning" in their classrooms— an instructional model that provides interdisciplinary and life-skills learning. Each of the four participating districts have Enterprise Learning coaches and Digital Resource coaches. Districts are expanding dual enrollment with local technical colleges and assigning career mentors. |
| Clarksdale, MS | 2013 | $10,000,000 | 3,250 | Rural | Project-based Learning; Student-directed Learning | Students are choosing themed magnet schools according to individual strengths and interests. Project-based learning is core to the high school programs. Data and instructional coaches at each school within the district support instructional differentiation. |
| Galt, CA | 2012 | $9,999,973 | 3,800 | Suburb | Student-Directed Learning; Blended Learning | Creating personalized learning plans for students in grades PreK-8 and repurposing school libraries as centers supporting extended, blended learning opportunities. |

| GRANTEE | COHORT | AWARD AMOUNT | STUDENTS SERVED | TYPE | APPROACH | PROJECT DESCRIPTION |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Green River, KY | 2012 | $40,000,000 | 58,837 | Consortium (Rural) | Student-Directed Learning | Supporting 112 mostly rural schools to create implementation plans that offer personalized learning strategies that meet student needs and create a culture of "students as leaders" to enable students to take agency in their learning. |
| Guilford, NC | 2012 | $30,000,000 | 16,944 | City | Student-Directed Learning; Blended Learning | Forming personalized learning teams in middle schools to design and facilitate student-driven learning environments. Includes the creation of several virtual middle school classes to bring lagging students up to speed in math, a parent academy to foster family engagement, and a focus on literacy skills for African-American males. |
| Harmony, TX | 2012 | $29,866,398 | 11,699 | Consortium (Town) | Blended Learning; Mastery/ Competency-Based Learning; Project-Based Learning | Personalizing STEM-focused instruction via project-based learning and blended instruction via a two-hour daily block that enables remediation support, enrichment activities, and elective courses matched to student needs. |
| Houston, TX | 2013 | $29,999,782 | 37,115 | City | Student-Directed Learning; Project-Based Learning; College Access and Success; Career Exposure | Implementing "linked learning" to prepare students for college and careers by binding rigorous academics and flipped classroom techniques to real-world applications. Local partnerships provide targeted support to the middle grades to support related college and career-ready activities. |
| IDEA, TX | 2012 | $29,242,882 | 12,617 | Town | Student-Directed Learning; Blended Learning; College Access and Success | Expanding blended learning to the secondary level while better supporting teachers in performance management. Additional supports are provided via a summer institute for struggling and advanced students. |

| GRANTEE | COHORT | AWARD AMOUNT | STUDENTS SERVED | TYPE | APPROACH | PROJECT DESCRIPTION |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Iredell-Statesville, NC | 2012 | $19,999,703 | 9,473 | Rural | Mastery/ Competency-Based Learning; Blended Learning | Expanding the performance learning centers established under its federal Investing in Innovation (i3) grant and creating customized instructional plans that emphasize college and career-ready skills and feature graduation projects. Students can "swap" between a fixed and a flexible schedule based on their changing needs. |
| Kentucky Valley, KY | 2013 | $29,999,203 | 42,256 | Consortium (Rural) | Mastery/ Competency-Based Learning | Seventeen school districts partnering to provide students with personalized learning environments via classroom and non-classroom settings. Distance learning and partnership-based curricular supports provide academic content previously inaccessible to this region. |
| KIPP DC, DC | 2012 | $10,000,000 | 3,040 | City | Blended Learning | Developing teachers who create personalized learning environments by emphasizing 1) data-driven decision making, 2) differentiated instructional practices, and 3) technology-enabled instruction. The result will be a pipeline of teacher candidates who are well prepared to utilize data and integrate technology into their instruction. |
| Lindsay, CA | 2012 | $10,000,000 | 4,074 | Town | Mastery/ Competency-Based Learning | Developing mastery learning systems that rely heavily on technology-enabled instruction. Redefining teachers' roles as "learning facilitators" and working with community partners to offer internships and other experiential learning opportunities for students. |
| Miami-Dade, FL | 2012 | $30,000,000 | 11,760 | City | Blended Learning; Mastery/ Competency-Based Learning | Middle school initiative offering blended learning spaces that enable self-paced math instruction. District-wide updates in bandwidth have been made to support a 1-1 computing experience in these "iPrep" classes. Project aims to increase out-of-school connectivity options as well. |

| GRANTEE | COHORT | AWARD AMOUNT | STUDENTS SERVED | TYPE | APPROACH | PROJECT DESCRIPTION |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Middletown, NY | 2012 | $19,995,588 | 7,091 | City | Blended Learning | Leveraging blended learning and a partnership with Syracuse University to radically improve student outcomes. Includes individualized learning plans, 1:1 computing access, and curriculum alignment with the state's standards. |
| New Haven, CA | 2012 | $29,352,565 | 12,920 | Suburb | Blended Learning | Integrating technology to increase student engagement and foster improvements in literacy and math. Incorporates individualized goal setting with academic parent-teacher teams (APTT) and wraparound services for students and families through "Kid Zones" centers. |
| Puget Sound, WA | 2012 | $40,000,000 | 147,085 | Consortium (Suburb) | Mastery/ Competency-Based Learning; Blended Learning; Career Exposure | Using digital tools for personalized STEM instruction and a collective impact model to reduce achievement gaps. Engaging students with career exploration games and tools in grades 3-12. Providing professional development across partner districts to shift roles of teachers and leaders toward a more student-centered focus. |
| Springdale, AZ | 2013 | $25,878,038 | 21,424 | City | Student-Directed Learning | Personalizing education through technology-enabled instruction and student-directed learning. Schools have altered their schedules to adopt advisory periods where students develop their own personalized learning plans. A new School of Innovation serving grades 8-12 opened in fall 2014; new career academies will open in its high schools. |

| GRANTEE | COHORT | AWARD AMOUNT | STUDENTS SERVED | TYPE | APPROACH | PROJECT DESCRIPTION |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| St. Vrain, CO | 2012 | $25,878,038 | 5,757 | Suburb | Career Exposure; Project-Based Learning | Expanding STEM supports seeded by federal Investing in Innovation (i3) funds, including project-based learning via a rigorous STEM curriculum in 11 elementary and middle schools. Increasing opportunities to apply STEM schoolwork to real-world experiences via a new Innovation Center, a workplace learning curriculum, and career exposure opportunities. |
| Warren, IN | 2012 | $28,570,886 | 11,711 | City | Student-Directed Learning | Promoting in- and out-of-classroom credit-bearing experiences for students. Leveraging digital learning platforms to align the curriculum to the state's standards and offer alternative coursework for high school credit. |

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The U.S. Department of Education would like to thank the 21 Race to the Top–District grantees for their participation in this study and especially Carson City, Middletown and Puget Sound for sharing their time and insights for the district highlights. Their willingness to share their experiences will benefit other school districts.

This report was prepared for the U.S. Department of Education under Contract number ED-ODS-12-A-0010/19 with AEM Corporation. The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the positions or policies of the Department of Education. No official endorsement by the U.S. Department of Education is intended or should be inferred. We would like to thank Bellwether Education Partners for providing research, analytic, and writing support and AnLar for providing layout and graphic design.