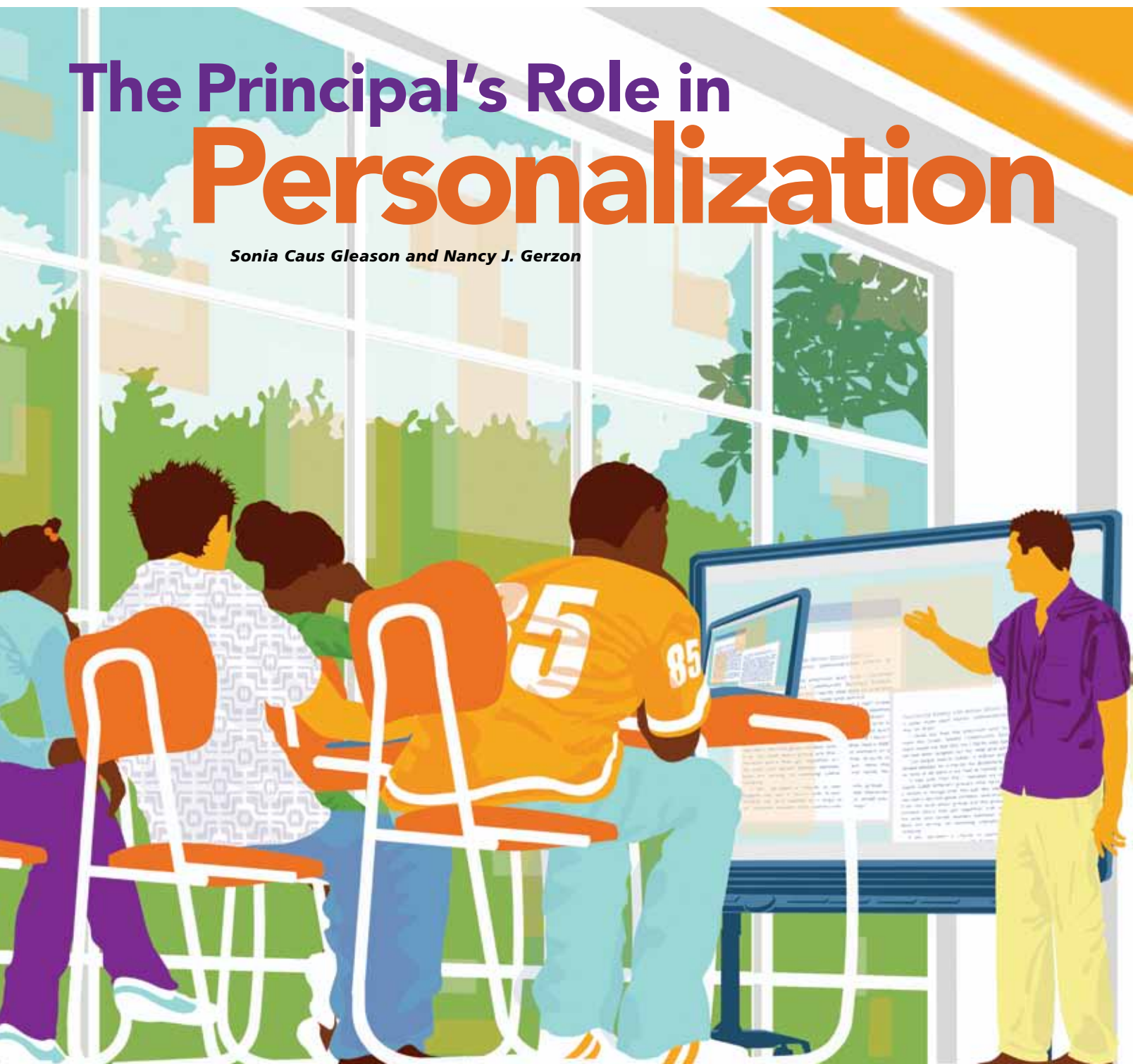


# The Principal's Role in Personalization

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ost people remember a teacher who personalized their learning when they were in school or know of teachers who personalize learning for some of their students today. Schools personalize learning for students by ensuring that teachers' own professional learning models and teaches how to personalize instruction.

When researching high-poverty, high-achieving urban and rural schools that systematically personalize student learning, we found consistent patterns of leaders planning, supporting, and implementing adult professional learning that leads to personalized learning for students. In those schools, a commitment to equity is front and center. A clear manifestation of that commitment is school leaders' oversight of the attention that teachers pay to understanding, nurturing, and challenging each student. The school leaders developed systems to ensure that learning is personalized for every student, not just the ones who struggle or who are likely to succeed. And the leaders also developed parallel practices to ensure that learning is personalized for every educator.

Definitions of personalization generally include optimized differentiated instruction, small class size, and positive teacher-student relationships. Each of those characteristics is important in adult professional learning. Teachers also need their ongoing learning to be differentiated and their personal learning needs identified and supported. For that to happen, teachers must be understood as professionals and individuals with particular strengths and passions and must be able to develop personal goals that dovetail with school goals and desired student outcomes.

### Personalized Learning for Every Student

School leaders in the study consistently focused on, facilitated, and scaffolded powerful learning experiences for students and adults.

**Focus on equity.** In the schools studied, an equity agenda is foremost and central. It guides the allocation of time, energy, money, and other resources and shapes agendas and professional learning itself. Equity is measured by examining how much each student's needs and gifts—as well as their achievements—are attended to. Leaders facilitate focus and accountability.

**A web of leaders.** In addition to principals, the web of leaders who provide instructional leadership may include formal and informal teacher leaders, coaches, and curriculum specialists. That group facilitates the conversation that sets the goals, pace, and content of conversations and organizes the resources needed to help teachers attend to each student's needs.

High-performing schools that personalize learning align and integrate the work done on the individual, team, and whole-school learning levels.

Because student needs change over time, educator supports are fluid as well.

Schools that personalize student learning continually support adult learning and recognize that most professional learning happens in teams.



## Strategies to Facilitate Professional Learning That Focuses on Personalized Learning

Leaders of professional learning ensure that:

- Individual and collective student strengths and needs are the focus of agendas and conversations
- Data are collected, organized, and available to support of understanding of and attention paid to student gifts and needs
- There is a consistent time to meet
- Meetings are effectively prepared and facilitated
- Team leaders and members have a clear understanding of their roles
- Individual teachers and teams use schoolwide protocols for discussion, decision making, and feedback
- Team practices are closely monitored
- Team leaders are supported
- There is continuity of leadership
- There are scheduled opportunities to share practices within and across teams.

Adapted from Gleason, S. C., & Gerzon, N. (2013). *Growing into equity: Professional learning and personalization in high-achieving schools*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

**Scaffolded adult learning.** Schools that support personalization ensure that there is time to discuss teaching, learning, and assessment in general and as they relate to specific students; use data to ground and focus conversations; and set up practices to ensure that meetings are effective. Although data use and effective meeting management are overarching practices that facilitate solid professional learning, the focus on discussing teaching, learning, and assessment evolves from attending to just some students to supporting all students as the school increases its focus on equity.

### Understanding Each Student

Personalized student learning practices direct educators' focus toward understanding each student as a person and a learner. Those practices can be found in different strategies and require specific professional learning supports to be successful. When strategies are named, leaders ensure that teachers have what they need to make them work.

For example, at Social Justice Humanitas Academy (SJ Humanitas)—part of César Chávez Learning Academies in San Fernando, CA—teachers have unstructured time each morning to meet about individual students. Because all teachers in the school share that unstructured time, it is easy for teachers to tap colleagues who aren't on their teams.

The school also has a protocol for communicating when a student needs extra supports. A teacher who has a concern about a student will e-mail the students' other teachers to learn whether they share that concern. Even if the other teachers don't have that concern, their knowledge of the student might give them some insight into how the first teacher may address it. If the teachers share that concern, they communicate first by e-mail. If it becomes clear that the student needs extra support or early intervention—academic or behavioral—one of the teachers may call for a very important person (VIP) meeting during which the student, his or her family, and the adults in the school who teach and work with the student meet to discuss the situation and how everyone can help improve it. Teachers meet in advance to create consensus on the issues and key messages. One consistent message is, "We care about you. You deserve a VIP meeting."

To formalize personalization discussions schoolwide, the special education teacher and the principal created an individual pupil education plan (IPEP) form that is used for each student by subject. (See figure 1.) The IPEPs are not forms that teachers complete and file, but catalysts to help educators learn in collaboration, build on what they know, and draw on the expertise of colleagues. And leaders can use them to advance the conversation, help the right people get together, and plan the professional learning.

Principal José Navarro (personal communication, September 2012) said, "We're working to address each student's individual needs through [an] interdisciplinary curriculum [and] go deep in content with strategies based on how our students actually learn—putting all this into an individualized frame for student learning. As individuals, we may not know how to respond to it. But as a team..."

Figure 1

## Individual Pupil Education Plan (IPEP)

Student Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Teacher: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Present Level of Performance: \_\_\_\_\_ Grade: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Mathematics Course: \_\_\_\_\_ Grade: A  B  C  D  F

**Strengths:** Please describe academic strengths here.

**Areas of Need:** What are some areas that students need improvement in?

Organization: E  S  U  Work Habits: E  S  U   
 Cooperation: E  S  U

|                          | Negative                 | Average                  | Positive                 | N/A                      |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Attitude towards school: | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Attitude towards peers:  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Attitude towards you:    | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

| Overall Concerns | Solutions/Recommendations |
|------------------|---------------------------|
| Type here        | Type here                 |

**Other Comments:** Other information not covered above

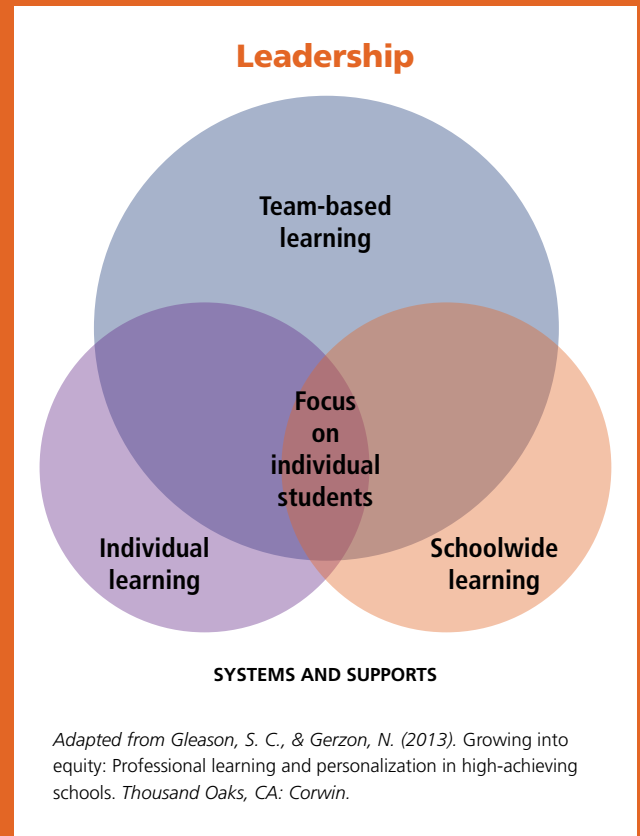
### Using Data to Improve Practice

Personalized learning does not mean fragmented or random learning. Paying attention to individual needs does not mean ignoring common standards or expectations. With appropriate assessments, standards provide context and direction for the efforts of individual teachers and teams.

Data Days—a key strategy for connecting individual and broader efforts at SJ Humanitas—are professional development days that are dedicated to analyzing data and creating lessons and action plans on the basis of those data. Data Days are held every five weeks, the week after grades are due, to bring together the whole school and grade-level teams to look at students in terms of the data.

Navarro made a spreadsheet to organize the data points that frame the IPEPs, including grades, English–language learning test scores, reflections on the 40 Developmental Assets for Adolescents from the Search Institute, the results of other assessment results, and students’ multiple intelligences inventories. (Teaching to at least four intelligences is an instructional goal at SJ Humanitas.) The data are collected at different times during the year and brought together during Data Days.

Figure 2



“It was a PD pinnacle,” said Navarro. “We never had all that data in one place at one time before. This took years for teachers to develop a way to [collect and organize the data and] look at all of them systematically.”

During one Data Day, their analysis uncovered a trend: 40% of the lowest-performing students were predominantly bodily-kinesthetic learners. Teacher teams immediately started considering relevant instructional strategies and sharing knowledge about kinesthetic learners, which in turn informed individual lesson planning, future team discussions, and deeper investigation into instructional strategies.

The evolution of Data Days was slow and sometimes diverted by budget cuts, furloughs, district requirements, and a change of buildings. But the principal, two teacher leaders, and additional teachers who take responsibility for different partnerships and aspects of professional learning shaped and facilitated the work. Making Data Days a regular part of the school year demanded persistence and fidelity to building team, collective, and individual capacity over time.



## Personalizing Learning for Staff Members

A combination of forums to support collaborative, professional learning was present in all the schools we studied:

- Team learning, which may take place in grade-level teams, departmental teams, teams of adults who support advisory classes, or teams that are convened to address a particular school priority. This is the central forum for reflecting on individual student learning and for gathering advice, ideas, and supports for taking the next instructional steps.
- Whole school learning, where common outcomes and practices are introduced and reflected upon.
- Individual teacher learning, where there is feedback and specialized support for teachers who want to hone a particular skill, be part of an advance team to support learning for the school as a whole, or go deeper in skill building as it relates to a particular school need or personal passion. (See figure 2.)

At Montgomery Elementary School in Montgomery Center, VT, the principal systematically orchestrates professional learning at each level. The middle grade teachers in this small, rural school meet together as a team. The team typically holds two types of meetings:

- A 105-minute weekly meeting that focuses on data, the progress and needs of students, and needed adjustments to instructional strategies.
- A 45-minute biweekly meeting to talk about other issues of common concern, such as the progress of students and trends across subjects. Teachers often collaborate to try particular strategies across disciplines. As discipline-specific issues come up, teachers turn outward to colleagues or professional networks.

Although whole-school professional learning time was allocated for the beginning and the end of the year, the principal gained support from the school and the district to reallocate time across the academic year. That allowed teachers and administrators to measure the previous year's progress, plan outcomes at the beginning of the year, track progress, make mid-course corrections, and develop new knowledge and skills during the year.

The multigrade team also practices using protocols for collaborating as adult learners and for working with students. Teachers use those protocols as they work in their teams. They may reach out locally, regionally, and nationally, identifying books and resources that can help the school take its next step. Meanwhile, the principal tries to visit each classroom every day for a walk-through. Some visits are informal opportunities to discuss a particular practice or student informally, affirm an effective practice, or offer advice. Other visits are more formal, and the principal will bring her iPad and document observations that she will discuss with the observed teacher later.

## Conclusion

Most schools have some evidence of individual, team, and whole-school learning, but high-performing schools that personalize learning align and integrate the work done on those three levels. They are parts of a whole that ensures rigorous, personalized learning across the board. Progress is tracked and informs the work of individual teachers and the school as a whole.

Schools that personalize student learning continually support adult learning and recognize that most professional learning happens in teams that come together to reflect on individual students, shape strategies and interventions, reflect on progress, and adjust instruction and supports to better meet students' needs.

The attention paid to adult learning mirrors the attention that is paid to personalized student learning. Educators tap prior knowledge and connect it to new concepts, make meaning with others, reserve time for reflection, experiment with application, practice over time, and demonstrate mastery. Mistakes are valued because the school community recognizes that people who try and fail but try again build resilience (Dweck, 2010). Because the school community also knows that student needs change over time, educator supports are fluid as well. So the content and balance of whole school, team, and individual learning are set intentionally and also dynamically. Over time, efforts to improve professional learning build a school's ability to problem solve and grow professional practice. Principals can influence the focus, leadership, and supports that make sustained individual, team, and whole-school learning possible. **PL**

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## Individual, Team, and Whole School Professional Learning Practices



| Individual Learning  | Team Learning  |
|--|--|
| <p><b>Individual learning goals:</b><br/>Teachers set goals based on schoolwide priorities, student learning data, and individual needs and gifts. The principal, coach, and sometimes colleagues know these goals, which frame professional dialogue. Teachers collect and share evidence on progress.</p> <p><b>Coaching and modeling:</b><br/>Teachers approach colleagues as sources of best practice and to get feedback on their work. Schools with coaches have more intensive and structured programs, yet each site provides teachers with direct feedback.</p> <p><b>Peer observations:</b><br/>Educators learn using a structured peer observation process with protocols and clear expectations. The culture of observation includes informal visits to other classrooms to observe lessons and offer feedback or learn a new practice.</p> <p><b>Self-initiated learning:</b><br/>Each site encourages self-initiated learning, which is shared and cultivated through team and whole school forums, thereby building capacity and integrating individual interests with school priorities.</p> | <p><b>Grade-level/multigrade teams:</b><br/>Each teacher has a primary go-to team. Based on timely student data, meetings provide structure for learning, instruction planning, strategy sharing, assessment, and personalizing instruction.</p> <p><b>Vertical teams:</b><br/>Complementing grade teams, these teams align standards across grades. To personalize instruction, teachers learn about standards at other grade levels and how to help trailing, succeeding, and excelling students.</p> <p><b>Team leadership:</b><br/>Team leaders may be members who receive support as a leader, a coach, or principal. They guide process, align priorities, and deepen practice over time.</p> <p><b>Data team:</b><br/>A data team tracks benchmark and interim assessment results. It regularly reports back to teams and individuals on progress and activates teacher supports when needed.</p> <p><b>Scheduled team time:</b><br/>Teams have structured meeting times to focus on and complete curriculum, instruction, and assessment tasks. Minimum meeting time is one hour per week, and teams hold additional meetings.</p> |
| Whole-School Learning  |  |
| <p><b>Attending to the big picture:</b><br/>Leaders propose and frame priorities. Educators make meaning, develop shared understanding, and collectively clarify key messages.</p> <p><b>Reflection as integral to practice:</b><br/>Communities make time for reflection to build shared understanding and professional capacity, and to assure sustained implementation.</p> <p><b>Knowing each other as persons and learners:</b><br/>Gatherings promote relational trust and support. Reflective dialogue practices and protocols encourage shared beliefs and experiences.</p> <p><b>Shared accountability:</b><br/>Progress is celebrated. Teacher and team learning goals are public and reviewed. Lack of progress stimulates new strategies to ensure success.</p>  |  |

Adapted from Gleason, S. C., & Gerzon, N. (2013). *Growing into equity: Professional learning and personalization in high-achieving schools*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.