DOINGWHATW⟳RKS

Personalizing the Learning Environment
April 2009

Topic: Dropout Prevention
Practice: Learning Environment

Highlights

- Between 40-60% of students don't feel a sense of belonging in school.
- Schools that have implemented personalized learning environments report higher student academic performance and lower dropout rates.
- Personalizing the learning environment can be achieved by creating small learning communities within a school, limiting student enrollment to fewer than 600 students, or by creating "schools within a school."
- In smaller learning communities, teachers have time to focus on each student's learning and provide the opportunity for caring, supportive relationships with students.
- Collaboration among the school faculty is necessary to implement radical changes to a school's structure and schedule.

Full Transcript

Slide 1

Welcome to the overview on personalizing the learning environment.

Slide 2

Dwight goes to a large high school. He sits in the back, when he bothers to show up, and doesn't really pay attention to the lesson.

The teacher doesn't talk to him in class and just puts check marks on his work, good or bad. He doesn't really feel that anyone notices him, no matter what he does.

Slide 3

According to research, as many as 40-60% of high school students can relate to Dwight. They don't have any sense of belonging to their schools. Without a connection to either the textbooks or the instructors, their engagement is low, their performance unmotivated, and their likelihood of dropping out is high.

Slide 4

Schools that have implemented personalized learning environments have seen higher performance and lower dropout rates. A common component among schools that have seen success is a combination of strong academic focus with smaller learning communities.

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There are a number of ways to reduce the size of learning communities. On the district level, new smaller schools can be opened with limited enrollment of four- to six-hundred students. Studies suggest that students enrolled in smaller schools had higher attendance rates and were more on track to graduate than students at larger schools.

Slide 6

For existing large schools, it's possible to create smaller, physically separate communities within an existing building. These "schools within schools" can operate as independent, autonomous schools or be interlinked in various ways.

For example, a school may divide ninth-grade students into grade-level clusters that are taught by a core, interdisciplinary group of teachers. Upon entering tenth grade, students would return to a more traditional whole-school setting. Another school may create thematically oriented "schools within schools." Students can elect to participate in these their whole high school career, staying with the same core group teachers and like-minded classmates all four years.

Slide 7

Regardless of the degree of school reorganization, small class sizes of between 18–30 students have been shown to have the most beneficial impact on students.

Slide 8

Smaller classes and school environments help create a personalized learning environment that gives teachers the time to focus on each student's learning and provides the opportunity for caring, supportive relationships between students to develop.

Teachers who are able to connect with each student can get a sense of what motivates them, notice problems early, and determine why they are having difficulty. This understanding not only helps teachers individualize their encouragement but also allows teachers to effectively tailor their instructional techniques to the needs of their students.

Slide 9

Studies show that when this kind of connected, supporting environment is combined with "academic press"—a focus on learning and high expectations for student achievement—student outcomes show improvement.

Slide 10

Many effective models of personalized learning environments feature small learning communities with interdisciplinary teams of teachers who stay with students through one, two, three, or all four years. By staying with the same groups of students for more than one year, teachers can form stronger and more powerful relationships with them. These teams also allow teachers to build stronger working relationships with each other as they work together on curriculum and develop a better understanding of how to serve each student's needs.

Slide 11

This approach can also work at the classroom level, with two teachers working together, sharing common lesson plans and decision-making. While one teacher leads a given class session, the other can focus on more one-to-one interactions with students. Teachers benefit from each other's particular teaching strengths and have a built in support system for working with students who are struggling. By working together teaching teams become more effective instructionally and are able to develop stronger relationships with their kids.

Slide 12

School schedules also play a significant role in keeping students engaged. Block scheduling, extended class periods, advisory/study periods, and other strategies for extending time can allow for teachers to have more connection with students and more opportunity to learn about and meet student needs. One study found that ninth-grade students taught by interdisciplinary teams over four 80-90 minute periods each day earned more credits towards graduation and were more likely to move on to tenth grade than students outside the program.

Slide 13

Implementing such radical adjustments to a school's culture may be met with skepticism from students, faculty, and board members alike. It's essential to get principal and staff input at the beginning of the planning process. Timelines for implementation need to be openly discussed and realistic given school resources. Professional staff development will be needed to help teachers and staff learn new instructional strategies, develop collaboration skills, and understand how to build a different kind of relationship with—and belief in—their students. Lots of collaborative planning time should be scheduled to maximize stakeholder buy-in. As students enter the system, they will likely be uncertain and resistant. Patience and persistence will be necessary as these new relationships are built.

Slide 14

Dwight wasn't sure about some of the new changes at the school. The idea of fewer classes each day appealed to him, but spending more time with each teacher seemed like a drag. He was surprised to find that some classes had two teachers now, but he was even more surprised to find out that the teachers knew who he was and wanted to help him with his studies. He doesn't feel quite so invisible anymore, and Ms. Conners recently suggested he check out the after-school soccer team. He's starting to think about what he can do at school and less about getting away from it.

Slide 15

To learn more about personalizing the learning environment, please explore the additional resources on the Doing What Works website.