Journey to Personalized Learning

Bright Future: A Race to the Top-District Initiative in Galt Joint Union Elementary School District



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School District



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Overview

The concept of "personalized learning" is fairly new in K–12 education; however, the intriguing practice of providing individualized, targeted, just-in-time learning opportunities for every learner is capturing the interest of practitioners and policymakers across the United States (EdWeek, 2014 Project Tomorrow, 2016). Over the past few years, policies and funding sources supporting personalized learning have grown significantly (Banister, Reinhart, & Ross, 2015 Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2014; U.S. Department of Education, 2017). As various personalized learning models and strategies are being put into practice, researchers now have an opportunity to study the implementation and effectiveness of personalized learning (Bingham, Pane, Steiner, & Hamilton, 2016). Though several early studies and evaluations of personalized learning have reported positive results (Pane, Steiner, Baird, & Hamilton, 2015; Patrick, Worthen, Frost, & Gentz, 2016; U.S. Department of Education, 2017), there is an urgent need for research to examine and understand how schools and districts are implementing personalized learning.

What Is Personalized Learning?

Definitions of personalized learning often focus on the individualized instruction and support provided to students, often involving blended learning that integrates technology and digital tools to support students' learning in various ways. For instance, Bingham, Pane, Steiner, and Hamilton (2016) define personalized learning as "a technology-based instructional model designed to tailor instruction to student needs, strengths, and interests to promote mastery of skills and content" (p. 2). Other definitions do not mention technology, and focus instead on meeting the individual needs of students in order for them to be successful. For instance, the U.S. Department of Education (2017) defines personalized learning as instruction in which the pace of learning and the instructional approach are optimized for the needs of each learner. Learning objectives, instructional approaches, and instructional content (and its sequencing) may all vary based on learner needs. In addition, learning activities are meaningful and relevant to learners, driven by their interests, and often self-initiated.

Personalized learning typically provides learners a degree of choice in how and what they learn, which ultimately allows learners to build upon their individual strengths, needs, motivations, and goals. According to EdWeek (2014), personalized learning often encompasses:

• Competency-based progressions: Students' progress toward clearly defined goals is continually assessed.

- Flexible learning environments: Students' needs drive the design of each individualized learning environment.
- Personal learning paths: All students follow a customized path that responds and adapts based on their individual learning progress, motivations, and goals.
- Frequently updated learner profiles: All students have up-to-date records of their individual strengths, needs, motivations, and goals.

Moreover, with personalized learning, frequent informal measurement of students' progress, areas of need, motivations, and goals allows educators and digital learning resources to adapt instruction in real time to best support learners' needs (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2014; U.S. Department of Education, 2017).

Bright Future: A Personalized Learning Initiative

In 2012, Galt Joint Union Elementary School District (GJUESD) in Galt, California was awarded a \$10 million federal Race to the Top-District (RTT-D) grant to implement personalized learning for its learners' and educators through a districtwide initiative called Bright Future. Located in California's San Joaquin Valley, the small to mid-sized (~3,900 students) district supports a population of diverse learners. For instance, the percentage of students classified as low-socioeconomic status ranges from 40% to 81% across the district's schools; the percentage of students classified as English language learners ranges from 8% to 55% across each of the district's schools; and the percentage of students receiving special education services ranges from 13% to 17%. During the first three years of the RTT-D effort, GJUESD created the necessary infrastructure for the initiative, and then implemented personalized learning for all of its transitional kindergarten (TK) to grade eight learners.² To implement the initiative, the district made profound, yet coordinated, changes to district, school, and out-of-school policies and practices. The efforts resulted in a unique and integrated system that is designed to support every learner's strengths and individual learning needs.

Evaluating the Bright Future Initiative

Though personalized learning policies and funding sources are increasing (Banister, Reinhart, & Ross, 2015 Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2014; U.S. Department of Education, 2017), there remains a strong need to identify best practices in personalized learning and to articulate its benefits and challenges. WestEd has been conducting an evaluation of GJUESD's Bright Future initiative that speaks to this need, as it examines the

¹ The GJUESD community uses the terms "learner" and "student" interchangeably.

² GJUESD also implemented aspects of personalized learning in the district's preschool.

various components of the district's personalized learning initiative, and describes specific implementation successes and challenges. WestEd's mixed-methods descriptive evaluation study (see Appendix A for details on the evaluation methodology) addressed the following overarching research questions:

- 1. How was personalized learning implemented at the district level?
- 2. How was personalized learning implemented at the school level?
- 3. What were the benefits of personalized learning for learners and educators?
- 4. What were the challenges in implementing personalized learning?

Results from WestEd's evaluation of the Bright Future initiative can provide useful knowledge for administrators, teachers, researchers, policymakers and others about how personalized learning can be implemented in small and medium-sized school districts that support ethnically and economically diverse populations of learners. Accordingly, this paper describes the framework and components of GJUESD's Bright Future initiative; presents excerpts of case studies on GJUESD schools currently implementing personalized learning; and shares feedback from focus groups and interviews with GJUESD educators, administrators, and parents on the successes and challenges of implementing personalized learning at the school level.

The Bright Future Initiative: Framework and Components

The federal Race to the Top-District program supports bold, locally directed improvements in learning and teaching that will directly improve student achievement. Upon receiving funding, GJUESD implemented the Bright Future initiative, an innovative program to evolve the district's strategic planning efforts to incorporate RTT-D objectives. One goal of the initiative was to allow the district to move from a student-centered proficiency model to a learner-centered growth and achievement model as a basis for instruction and learning, which in turn would maximize growth and achievement. The project allowed for TK to grade eight learners to experience personalized learning in their classrooms and in multiple other environments, including in their school library, which was transformed into a tech-rich, extended-hours community space called a Bright Future Learning Center; in afterschool clubs with activities focused on Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS); in school-based and off-site outdoor service-learning activities; and in learners' homes.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that guided planning and implementation of the Bright Future initiative included implementing three interconnected project areas:

- 1. Personalized Plans to Learning Pathways: College, Career, and Life. These are locally designed personalized learning plans (PLPs) for TK through grade eight learners related to their college, career, and life pathways. The PLPs are designed to help educators and learners set goals and track progress. The information that PLPs provide also informs educators as they make decisions on the use of digital learning resources, face-to-face and small group instruction, and other learning opportunities. The information in the PLPs can also inform updates to learners' daily schedules to better reflect the interests, needs, and talents of each learner.
- 2. Personalized Learning Options: Blended to Extended Learning Environments. Examples of these learning environments include the Common Core State Standards being implemented and applied in classrooms, school libraries, community settings, virtual platforms, and other expanded learning environments.
- 3. Systems Continuous Improvement: Learner-Employee-District. This area of the initiative includes processes, tools, and measures for continuous improvement and accountability that are applied throughout the system with personalized evaluation practices.

Figure 1, taken from the Bright Future initiative's logic model, shows key programs and actions for each project area; projected "outputs" (structures, tools, and resources) produced by these key programs and activities; and the relationships between project areas and outputs.



Figure 1. The Bright Future Initiative Logic Model

Project Areas

Note: The figure illustrates the programs and actions related to each of the three project areas; the projected outputs (structures, tools, and resources); and the relationships between project area and outputs.

PD stands for "professional development" and PLC stands for "professional learning community."

The initiative's theoretical framework specifies that by implementing these three project areas, the district will move from a student-centered proficiency model to a learner-centered growth and achievement model as a basis for instruction and learning. It indicates that these changes will maximize growth and achievement.

Key Districtwide Structures, Tools, and Resources to Support Personalized Learning

Districtwide implementation of the Bright Future initiative — which involved implementing each of the programs and actions detailed in the initiative's logic model — brought new products and tools to GJUESD, as well as new ways of thinking, working, communicating, and learning. A number of structures, tools, and resources played important roles in the effective implementation of the initiative, including:

- Personalized learning plans
- Blended and integrated technology opportunities
- Bright Future Learning Centers
- Strength-related assessments
- Computer-adaptive assessments
- Learning management system
- Personalized educator professional learning and growth cycle
- Extended learning opportunities and annual project-based service learning

Following a detailed strategic plan over the first three years of the Bright Future initiative, district leaders worked with schools to implement these structures, tools, and resources (described in the sections below) at all schools in GJUESD.

Personalized Learning Plans

Personalized learning plans (PLPs), stored and accessed via the district's data and learning management platform, are a cornerstone of GJUESD's Bright Future initiative. Every learner, TK through grade eight, has an individual PLP that is updated to reflect changes in learner information related to grades, learning, and goal setting (see Appendix B for a sample personalized learning plan). The PLPs store dynamic information in multiple sections, including:

- *Learner profile*: A section focusing on learning information, with CCSS growth data, district assessments, and engagement information (e.g., learners' strengths and attendance data).
- *Goal-setting*: A section focused on goal setting that includes goal-setting information on reading/language usage, mathematics, engagement, English language development for English language learners, and service-learning.
- *Performance progress*: A section that includes a grade report.

Educators and learners frequently use PLPs to reflect on individual learner data, participate in individualized goal setting, and blend digital learning resources with

face-to-face instruction to work toward goals. The PLP online platform includes drop-down menus with suggested activities and the platform enables users to designate stakeholders (e.g., educators, parents, instructional assistants, school social workers, afterschool staff) who will support the learner's goals and actions.

Through the PLPs, educators and parents have weekly access to updates on learners' progress and accomplishments. The PLPs represent a shift away from the "traditional" trimester report cards toward the district's new ongoing growth and achievement model. The PLP is a goal-setting tool designed to facilitate frequent reflection and discussion — by capturing and reporting multiple sources of data at frequent intervals, learners, as well as their educators and parents, can monitor growth and set goals for achievement in specific areas.

Blended Learning and Integrated Technology Opportunities

The Bright Future initiative brought a wealth of technology and opportunities for blended, virtual, and other types of digital learning to GJUESD. Blended learning involves integrating various technology tools and platforms into the learning process, alongside "traditional" classroom instruction, in order to support learning by tapping into additional modalities that can, ideally, engage more learners. For instance, Chromebook laptop computers were made available to every GJUESD classroom, and the district is approaching a one-to-one learner to device (laptop or tablet) ratio districtwide. Broadband was strengthened, so connectivity for each school and classroom is robust. Learning platforms, accessible to all learners and educators, deliver courseware that supports learning in reading/language, mathematics, science, and English language development. The courseware is adaptive, meaning it adjusts support and learning activities to best target learners' specific learning needs.

Bright Future Learning Centers

In the first year of the Bright Future initiative, all school libraries in GJUESD were transformed into Bright Future Learning Centers, or BFLCs. BFLCs are open daily — both after school and throughout the summer — at every school location to offer safe, caring, and connected learning support and opportunities. These resource- and technology-rich centers have become hubs for extended learning opportunities. Each center is well-stocked with Internet-connected computers and tablets for use at the center and for "checking out" to take home. For instance, families can explore options for clubs and other afterschool activities, including off-site service-learning activities. With computers available for use, learners can also use the BFLCs to participate in virtual courses and to complete homework, use digital tools, courseware, and learning platforms. And, with

extended hours during the school year and summer, learners' families are welcome to visit BFLCs to chat with bilingual staff and to use technology and the Internet.

Strength-Related Assessments

Educators, administrators, staff members, and learners in grades four to eight in GJUESD take the Gallup Strengths Finder Survey, which identifies each individual's three strongest strengths or talents. By identifying individual strengths, the survey supports the district's efforts toward personalization and building a culture that recognizes and maximizes each individual's strengths. Educators, administrators, and staff members often identify their strengths publically, for instance, on email signatures, nametags, and office signs.

For each learner, the three strongest strengths or talents identified by the Gallup Strengths Finder Survey become part of the learner's PLP and they are included in the PLP information to parents. Learners are also made aware of their strengths and talents, and this awareness plays a part in the engagement goals that learners make on their PLPs. Educators encourage learners to apply their strengths and talents daily, and they provide activities to help develop and nurture learners' strengths and talents.

Learners in grades five to eight also take the Gallup Student Poll each year. The poll anonymously measures hope, engagement, entrepreneurial aspiration and career/financial literacy. The web-based survey is administered in the fall of each school year and supplies educators, administrators, and community leaders with actionable data. Results of the poll are disaggregated by classroom, school, and district, and are discussed with district staff, the school board, and at annual community outreach meetings. The results are also reported in the district's Annual Performance Report to the U.S. Department of Education.

Computer-Adaptive Assessments

Since year one of the Bright Future initiative, all learners from TK to grade eight have taken the CCSS-aligned NWEA Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) English language arts and mathematics assessments three times per year. The MAP assessments address reading, language usage, and mathematics. The assessments are accessed via computers and are adaptive, meaning that the difficulty of each question is based on how well the learner answered all the previous questions.

The detailed MAP assessment data is valuable in measuring learners' growth in English language arts and mathematics. Along with other district assessments, including the district reading and writing assessments and the recently introduced Smarter Balanced assessments for English language arts and mathematics, the MAP assessment allows learners, educators, and families to follow learners' progress on specific academic skills. In addition, data from the adaptive assessments guide each learner's individual blended learning experiences by allowing their online coursework to be adjusted based on current ability level.

Learning Management System

The district uses a comprehensive and integrated learning management system, Illuminate, which allows educators and administrators to create, store, and update PLPs. A parent portal provides anytime access for parents and caregivers to view their children's ongoing classroom progress and accomplishments. All schools and educators are provided weekly learner information online using a single system for performance and engagement data.

Educator Professional Learning

In similar fashion to the learners in their classrooms, educators also personalize their own professional growth by setting personal learning growth areas and creating strategies to meet those focus-area goals. Specifically, each educator creates a professional growth plan that involves selecting a content or pedagogy focus area, indicating a district strategic plan goal, and identifying a need. Based on their professional growth plans, educators take part in personalized learning experiences during the school year. Professional learning opportunities are available to educators via professional learning communities, online resources and courses, and opportunities to attend professional learning conferences.

In addition, educators respond to reflective questions from their administrator mid-year and at the end of the school year. The year-end reflective conferences serve as a starting point for the professional learning cycle in the new school year.

Extended Learning Opportunities and Project-Based Service Learning

The Bright Future initiative promotes year-round learning beyond the classroom by offering a wide range of CCSS- and NGSS-focused afterschool activities and clubs, school-based and off-site outdoor service-learning activities, and rich summer learning opportunities. This expanded learning program operates at every school across the district. Afterschool activities and summer camps include intentional connections to college and career planning, mathematics and reading components, and strengths-development by support staff trained in youth development principles. These outside-of-school learning opportunities and resources are made possible through efforts with partner organizations.

Each year, over 2,500 TK through grade eight learners participate in project-based service learning. Learners engage in these service-learning projects in a range of learning spaces,

including school-site outdoor nature areas, garden habitats, and the nearby Nature Conservancy preserve. An online toolkit entitled *Invisible Walls: Learning Beyond the Classroom*, is available on the GJUESD website for "one-stop" access to help learners identify and register for service learning activities in outdoor and community settings.

Implementing Personalized Learning at the School Level: Case Study Excerpts

With the support of GJUESD, every school in the district put into place all of the structures, tools, and resources prescribed by the Bright Future initiative (as described in the previous section). Analysis of educator and administrator interviews and focus groups showed that implementing these personalized learning structures, tools, and resources has resulted in important changes in the way that instruction and learning take place in GJUESD schools.

Educators mentioned that teaching with a focus on personalized learning has led to finding new ways to address the abilities and interests of individual learners. By thinking "out of the box," gathering and sharing ideas with other educators, and testing innovations on a small scale before putting them into practice with the entire class, educators reported finding ways to effectively implement personalized learning.

The shift to personalized learning in GJUESD has also resulted in creativity and flexibility in classroom systems. Examples include using rotation models between classrooms that allow learners to occasionally move to different classrooms for certain subject-matter instruction that will benefit them the most; using flexible seating to allow learners to choose the position in the classroom where they learn best; creatively transforming classrooms into alternative spaces like an underwater world or Jurassic Park; and making instructional adjustments to account for learners' formative assessment results or social-emotional observations.

Educators' instructional approaches have also shifted in various ways. For instance, within a single subject like math, some educators reported implementing multiple curriculum pathways tailored to different learner levels. And, as one administrator cited from an English lesson she observed, teaching about metaphors can involve visualization, drawing activities, and using alternate approaches that generate what they referred to as "different opportunities to access the content." One educator noted, "What we've accomplished this year is more than I've ever accomplished in any year, but in a different way. I've almost never used a textbook this year but taught everything through other means."

In this section, we provide excerpts from four case studies to illustrate examples of the learning and instructional shifts that have been taking place at schools in GJUESD.

Case Study Excerpts

WestEd researchers used case study research methods to investigate how the Bright Future initiative was being implemented at individual schools. Case studies were created for six GJUESD schools from which data were collected. Review of the final case studies showed that, while each school implemented all key programs and actions specified in the initiative's logic model, each school found unique and innovative ways to implement personalized learning. Brief excerpts from case studies of four schools in the GJUESD are presented below.

Greer Elementary School: Using Technology to Support Learning

The Bright Future initiative provided learners with access to diverse online resources and technology. It also supported the expansion of the wireless infrastructure, and Greer Elementary now uses over 500 Chromebooks and 70 tablets every day. Learners have access to a multitude of online educational resources, which study participants said allow for greater differentiation and individualized instruction for every learner. Greer has also been able to expand opportunities for learners to demonstrate their learning through technology, including through the use of a new media center. Educators commented that the increased access to technology was key to supporting a personalized, blended learning environment. Typical comments included, "One of the single best things that came out of the grant is the technology," and, "It really helps us with personalized learning...That's really where you individualize for learners in...a very meaningful way."

Online programs such as Lexia Learning, Compass Learning Odyssey, Accelerated Reader, and Khan Academy have helped to accommodate differences in student academic preparation, as in the case of an out-of-state transfer student who entered second grade with below-grade-level skills and content knowledge. This student was able to work on kindergarten-level material that matched his current achievement level, while continuing to be supported by these digital platforms as he progressed towards mastery of grade-level content.

Lake Canyon Elementary School: Personalization Within and Beyond the Classroom

Lake Canyon Elementary School's model for personalized learning is driven by a commitment to college and career readiness. With more than 20 afterschool clubs, Lake Canyon has generated a wealth of indoor and outdoor learning opportunities that directly align to building students' civic, college, and career readiness. Crucial partnerships with parents, community members, and businesses have added to Lake Canyon's success in delivering a wide range of offerings and learning experiences. Club offerings range from

knitting, to robotics and mechanical engineering, to art and mural design. These indoor club offerings are complemented by distinctive outdoor service learning experiences, including pollinator gardens. As one administrator shared in an interview:

Now we have kids, three years in, in the classroom, who know robotics, computer programming (who have built their own animations), and performing arts and who understand other cultures and the food of other cultures because they've had opportunities to engage in [those things]. That goes back to the classroom and it becomes part of the student choice model.

Lake Canyon Elementary School's afterschool-learning, outdoor-learning, and servicelearning opportunities help introduce learners to possible future pathways and interests they might pursue. This approach aligns closely to the school's overall attitude toward personalization. As an administrator stated:

It truly is about knowing each and every student deeply. What are their interests? What excites them? What are they passionate about? Then providing them real access — not just talking, but doing — to explore and engage in those opportunities.

Marengo Ranch Elementary: Genius Hour

Genius Hour, an initiative that was introduced in third through sixth grade classrooms at Marengo Ranch Elementary, allows learners to explore their own passions and encourages creativity in the classroom. Within a designated block of time in the school day, learners are offered a choice of what they would like to learn, allowing them a unique opportunity to direct and take ownership of their own learning. With basic parameters from their educators, learners can select a topic they are interested in, engage in research to learn more about the topic, and find a creative way to present their findings to the class.

Genius Hour allows learners to harness their creativity, conduct research, and develop presentation skills around a topic they feel personally invested in. An administrator at Marengo Ranch highlighted the value and impact of the Genius Hour initiative on learners and educators:

I think the Genius blocks have been critical. Because they have really opened the teachers' eyes to, "You know what? These kids really can self-select topics to research and study — topics they're interested in." I think [the teachers] really understand now that [the Genius block] is so engaging for the kids. It's meaningful for them. You want them to have that buy-in to what they're doing in the classroom. That's been a huge part of it.

River Oaks Elementary: Flexible Seating

At River Oaks Elementary, several grade levels introduced flexible seating arrangements in the classroom to help create a personalized learning environment. Educators from the fourth and fifth grades physically transformed their classrooms away from traditional layouts to allow learners to move around within the room and change position based on what is most comfortable for them. These flexible seating options, which help accommodate different learning styles and incorporate learner choice, appear to be having a positive effect on learners' involvement in learning and collaboration. Teachers expressed that the new and varied seating options make it easier and more natural for students to work together in groups and stay engaged throughout the school day. One administrator said:

Kids aren't just sitting in the same desk or chair all day. They are able to get up and move around the room and use the seating that suits them the best. I think that's helped with engagement and motivation. Students are saying, "Oh it makes it exciting because we never know where we're going to get to sit and we feel like our teachers are listening to our needs."

A teacher described the joy that ensued for students as a result of being able to take control and come to understand where and how they learn best:

We had an occupational therapist come in and explain [to the students] some of the different options that we were giving students and what it would offer students. To see the [students'] faces light up because they understood for the first time why they were more comfortable laying on the floor to do their writing than they were sitting at a desk. They were so excited that it was real, it wasn't just their imagination playing with them. There was a reason behind it.

The Bright Future Initiative: Implementation Successes and Challenges

To evaluate the implementation of the Bright Future initiative, WestEd researchers conducted site visits as well as focus groups and interviews with educators, administrators, and parents. This section presents selected findings and quotes about successes and challenges related to the various components of the initiative.

Overall Shift to Personalized Learning

In focus groups and interviews, educators, parents, and administrators were enthusiastic about the district's shift to personalized learning, particularly the new and diverse learning options and environments. A majority of participants mentioned that schools and classrooms had changed tremendously, and that the learners were engaged in new ways of learning. As one parent commented:

It seems to me as if [my kids] are always sharing with me new ways they're learning. They seem to be always excited about it, which I really appreciate.

Similarly, an administrator described the positive effect that the shift towards personalized learning has had on how learners are motivated:

What's changed about their learning is that it's evolving into more than sit and receive from the teacher and spit back what you think the teacher wants to hear. It's becoming a more creative process where students are a little bit more responsible for their learning in terms of utilizing the technologies that are available.

Despite these changes, one challenge faced by the district during implementation of the Bright Future initiative was ensuring that programs and actions were implemented consistently across all schools and in all classrooms. For instance, parents voiced concerns that their children's teachers were not all employing personalized learning at the same capacity. In a focus group, one parent stated:

The individualized learning needs to be heard and done by every teacher... I think more teachers need to get on board with that quicker. Challenges in implementation were particularly acute in the middle school, where educators often work within one academic domain instead of teaching multiple subjects to one group of students. Middle school teachers expressed that they would benefit from additional support through professional learning opportunities geared toward the grade levels and subjects they teach, noting that much of the professional development opportunities around personalized learning seemed to cater more to the elementary grades.

Personalized Learning Plans

Personalized learning plans (PLPs), which have replaced report cards in the district as a way to document learners' progress, have been an important tool in reshaping and redefining learners' learning experiences. According to analyses of educator focus groups and interviews, PLPs have helped allow learners to learn at their own pace, marking an important change in practice. As one educator explained:

I think we address some of the things with this grant through personalized learning plans that parents have been concerned about for a long time, [such as,] "Why is everybody [expected to go] at the same pace?" Because not everybody is up to the same pace. So I think it's been a benefit to the kids.

In addition to helping educators support all their learners through differentiated learning, PLPs also encourage educators to critically consider and adjust their approaches to teaching. As indicated by one educator:

It has been more of a learning thing for us [educators]. I think it's probably more helpful for us than the kids, in terms of getting us to think about [the] individual — like, "What does this group of kids need to work on?" or "What does this child need?"

Similarly, one administrator noted:

[The PLPs have] definitely made [educators] think more about what they can do to personalize their instruction.

The use of PLPs has also resulted in increased parent awareness of their children's progress. The data suggest that the PLP offers parents a more comprehensive view of their child's progress. As one parent commented:

It seems to me [the PLP] is more personalized and more direct. I see exactly where [my children are] excelling, where they're not. It's more than just the grade and a comment by a teacher. They're looking into all things: their effort, their ability, their getting along with others. Though participants widely agreed that the PLP is a useful document, some educators and parents mentioned that the PLP is sometimes difficult to interpret, particularly for parents. Because the PLP has many more details than the traditional report card, parents were often confused by all the data and terms on the PLP. While the PLP has been refined and made easier to understand over the past year, additional revisions are likely still needed to enhance parents' understanding of the document as well as to reduce the time and effort that teachers spend preparing PLPs. As one educator explained:

Preparing the PLP is very cumbersome. But I do see that evolving. There's been little tweaks along the way, but there still needs to be more changes. I think there's so much information for parents, I think they're overwhelmed. I know for myself as a parent that I just think...I [understand] a lot of it because I'm a teacher, but someone who's not necessarily in this field...I just don't think they pay attention to as much of the information, so I kind of think less is more.

Transitioning to a Growth Model

Educators indicated they felt the PLPs represent a positive transformation away from trimester report cards toward ongoing growth, goal-setting and achievement plans. One educator said the PLP is a living document that is the focus of reflection and discussions with learners, educators, and parents. A significant finding from the educator focus groups was that the PLP is viewed as a useful tool for monitoring and highlighting learner growth. As one educator noted:

A "pro" is that I can see some of the student growth. It's a good tool for me. The concept overall, it's wonderful. It's wonderful to have that growth model instead of saying, "They have to meet this benchmark." Parents dread coming and hearing, "Oh, they didn't meet the benchmark." The other exciting part about the growth visuals [in the PLP] is the kids love them. You show them, "Look, you were here, and now you're here — oh my gosh!" Celebrate all that.

Goal Setting for Learners

Educators and parents indicated that by allowing learners to reflect on their learning paths and create their own goals, learning becomes more personalized and learners can take a degree of ownership in their learning. In focus groups and interviews, educators and parents recognized the value of the goal-setting process as an important experience for learners, and as a way for parents and educators to understand and help guide individual learner growth. One educator described the importance of goal setting as follows:

My biggest takeaway from the whole Race to the Top grant has been goal setting for the students, and giving them a little bit more choice...It's part of them now and they know about goal setting.

Similarly, one parent explained:

[The goal-setting process] makes [learners] more aware of what they might need to work on, or the areas that they struggle with, and it calls attention to these...It gives them initiative to work on it.

A number of educators mentioned in focus groups that the act of goal setting raises awareness for learners' own growth and introduces an aspect of accountability in the classroom. One educator commented:

I was so thrilled with this part of personalized learning, that they took complete control...Setting their own goals and knowing what their weaknesses are and what they need to work on. I think that's so important...You're totally holding them accountable.

Educators also shared that introducing goal setting has come with some challenges. For instance, teachers discussed that it can often be difficult to track student completion of certain goals:

If I say [the goal is to] go to the Bright Future Learning Center, I don't know if they met that goal because I'm not walking them there every day. No one is taking roll every day if they need to use the Learning Center. So I want something tangible that I can [measure] — and that part's not optioned.

Several teachers also shared that the expectation for the younger students to be capable of creating their own goals was unrealistic. As one teacher stated:

At a primary grade they're supposed to choose their own goals. My kids don't even know what their snack or their lunch is. So the idea is [good], but the practicality is lacking.

Bright Future Learning Centers

Analysis of educator, parent, and administrator focus groups and interviews indicated that the Bright Future Learning Centers (BFLCs) were important to the success of personalized learning at their schools. Hosting afterschool clubs, summer programming, and various other activities during the school day, BFLCs have become a valuable feature for schools across the district. As one administrator explained:

Learning centers that are open after school and during vacations, including summer vacation, the different clubs that are offered, the different options that are available to students through the BFLC — I think is outstanding. It just gives students opportunities to extend their learning in different ways other than [just classroom] math, writing, and reading. The kids love it.

Interview findings also highlighted the important role that BFLCs play for the larger community, beyond the school, as a resource for information, services, and access to technology. As one parent commented:

The BFLC is the biggest, biggest, biggest blessing for us...[At] this school, a lot of students didn't have access to a physical computer...I've seen moms in there with little ones to utilize the services.

Educators also noted the value of the BFLC to parents and community members:

We see a lot of parents come in, and even daycare providers will come with the students so that they can receive the services they need that can't necessarily be accessed at home.

Technology, Digital Tools, and Blended Learning

Findings from focus groups and interview data revealed positive feedback on the increased access to technology (such as laptops and tablets) that resulted from the RTT-D grant. Administrators agreed that the new technology served as a valuable tool for personalized learning. As one said:

Probably some of the biggest successes [in the initiative] have to do with the way we are able to use technology now to personalize learning and how we've been able to expand almost one-to-one devices to students.

Another administrator mentioned that as educators became familiarized with technology and digital tools, their teaching methods changed, allowing them to make instructional decisions based on individual learners' needs and strengths:

As you go from classroom to classroom, you'll find that teachers, when they have this kind of suite of tools available to them, they make choices based on

the needs of their learners. So it looks very different from grade level to grade level and classroom to classroom.

One educator described how she used information from the Lexia literacy courseware to make instructional decisions for a struggling learner:

Lexia has diagnostic testing that tells me, "They don't understand phonics. They don't know sight words. They don't know how to do syllables." So that really helps me...I personalize their homework with Lexia. So if they are in Unit 4 — that's a second grade level — I'm pulling everything for level 5 to give them some background knowledge so they can move forward.

The increase in technology and digital tools available to students and teachers provided ample opportunities for blended learning in the classroom, allowing educators to integrate technology and digital platforms into lessons to complement their more traditional instruction. Overall, educators, parents, and administrators largely consider blended learning to be a positive addition to the district's elementary and middle school classrooms. Educators described positive outcomes of the use of blended learning, including increased involvement in learning, new ways to solve problems and communicate, and an increase in self-directed learning. One educator commented:

Kids like using [the technology], so they're more motivated to do math, or write. They can [include] pictures. For instance, I have a writing club, and they find pictures of whatever it is they're writing about, like a shark. So they'll put a shark on their paragraph page. They're super proud of their work...I think it's definitely improved the kids' interest and motivation. I love the technology. [I have seen] leaps and bounds as far as what they [the students] can do online compared with pen and paper...Even my reluctant writers will go on the computer and start typing and stuff.

Another educator shared:

My kids are on the Chromebooks daily, and all of their writing assignments are completed on the Chromebooks. We begin with their graphic organizers, transition to rough drafts, edit via shared documents, and then publish. All of it is done with the Chromebooks. The students are highly tech savvy already, but this gives them a specific platform on which to operate. [Students] ask to take the Chromebooks home even when I don't assign them to do those programs...[They] always [ask for] Prodigy and Khan Academy [courseware] for math. What kid is begging to do math? It's awesome.

Blended learning has also allowed learners to deepen their research and problem-solving skills and to engage in new forms of communication. One administrator noted:

I think we've kind of lit the fire under them and they all have this little research bug where they wanted to find out information and they're realizing...their Chromebooks have access to all kinds of things. They'll go in there and research and look up things to share with their classmates.

Similarly, one educator noted learners taking initiative to seek out information and to problem-solve:

[The students have] become more independent due to the technology. You know, I've had students go on Khan because they didn't understand what I just taught, and they wanted to go back on Khan just for fun to learn it again. We didn't see that before technology. Their troubleshooting skills are also better — I don't have so many hands being raised over the Internet not working, or they got an error. They're figuring it out. So the problem-solving is higher.

Another administrator mentioned that learners and educators are finding new ways to communicate with each other:

There's more interaction now between teacher and student, especially as they get into the older grades, because they are able to communicate in ways that they didn't really communicate before. Via Google Classroom, via email, via chats or messages or whatever, I think in a way it has allowed them [learners] to take a little more responsibility for their own learning.

While much of the feedback on technology and blended learning was positive, there were also a variety of challenges in the integration of new technology into the learning process. For instance, some educators quickly became familiar with technologies while others were slower to adapt digital tools. Educators reported feeling challenged by having limited time and training to both become proficient in new digital programs themselves and complete the necessary prep to implement them in the classroom:

There's so many programs that are supposed to be so wonderful out there, but if we get trained in five minutes and then go back to class and do it — I don't have the time to sit and set it up for everybody.

Educators also found it to be a significant challenge to deliver seamlessly functioning technologies and digital products. For instance, many educators recounted stories of creating lessons for a class period, then having to change plans at the last minute due to glitches in the required technology. As one teacher recounted:

I think there are a lot of pros and cons to our technology in this district. We'll plan for this epic technology lesson — and then the Internet doesn't work. Or the printers don't work. Or the system kicks the kids out because too many people are on at the same time. You only get helped on the day that [the technology] person's going to come...So you've got to hurry up and find the next lesson that you would have done on a different day, or come up with something on the fly.

Another educator reflected on the need for consistent information technology support for successful blended learning:

Blended learning depends on the IT support [teachers] have. If teachers don't trust [technology], they won't use it.

Educator Professional Learning

Findings from analysis of educator focus group data from across the district showed educators' satisfaction with activities related to their professional learning, as well as an appreciation for the opportunities provided by the district. A strong majority of educators recognized several major improvements from the past: the increased focus on professional development opportunities and the ability to select their professional learning opportunities. As one educator noted:

I think our district is amazing in the fact that they've given us so much time and resources and coaches and in different ways to learn. So that has been amazing.

The implementation of the Bright Future initiative has also provided educators with an opportunity for growth and self-expression through risk taking and adopting new approaches. Findings from administrator interviews indicated that personalized learning has challenged educators to move beyond their comfort zones and more fully integrate their own passions into their teaching. As one administrator said:

I think Race to the Top has pushed us, whether the teachers know it, pushed us hard to rethink how we teach — step outside the traditional role of the teacher, take some risks, and do some things that we know are going to be better in the long run.

Another administrator reflected on the benefits of a more personalized approach to educators' professional learning:

If the social-emotional needs of my teachers are met, just like with the students, and they have access to operate in their areas of passion...they flourish and they thrive. They love what we're doing with this.

Afterschool and Summer Learning Opportunities

As part of the Bright Future initiative, all schools developed rich afterschool and summer opportunities for learners. Overall, findings showed that educators and parents viewed the afterschool activities, clubs, and summer program opportunities as both unique, engaging, and a complement to classroom learning. According to parent, educator, and administrator focus groups and interviews, the school clubs have created opportunities for learners to engage in new and worthwhile experiences, and for parents to become more involved in their children's education. One educator commented:

The changes that we've seen with parent buy-in through the clubs has been absolutely amazing.

Parents also expressed appreciation for the availability of school clubs and summer programs. Comments from parents included:

I see that this is another thing where my kids can be really excited about doing something that is creative. It's productive. They get to interact with peers on a different level than they may in the classroom. They're obviously doing things that they wouldn't have the opportunity to do otherwise.

Data on Academic Achievement and Engagement

The results of the evaluation of the Bright Future initiative suggest that there have been significant benefits from the use of personalized learning in GJUESD. Academic data from the district and from the California Department of Education (CDE) reveal various gains in achievement over the course of the initiative. In this section, we present data on learners' academic achievement and engagement.

Analysis of academic data from the district and from CDE reveal various gains in academic achievement and engagement.³ Early results, reported by CDE (California Department of Education, 2017) in year four of the initiative, showed that GJUESD was one of five districts in the state with significant growth in achievement in mathematics on annual the Smarter Balanced Test (SBAC). The percentage of students testing proficient or above improved over multiple grade levels, including a growth of over 15 percentage points in grade 5.

In year three of the Bright Future initiative, as the initiative's key programs and actions were fully implemented, growth in learner academic achievement and in learner engagement were noted from the 2014/15 school year to the 2015/16 school year. Highlights of these findings include gains in measures of academic achievement and student engagement. Notable gains in student academic achievement from 2015 to 2016 include the following:

- The percentage of pre-kindergarten students who met all reading benchmarks, as measured by the District Reading Assessment,⁴ went from 51% to 62%.
- The percentage of first grade students who met all reading benchmarks, as measured by the District Reading Assessment,⁵ went from 52% to 60%.
- In 2016, MAP assessment results showed gains in mathematics achievement for grades 1, 2, 4, 6, 7, and 8, when compared to 2015 scores.
- Findings on the Smarter Balanced state assessment showed that, from 2014/15 to 2015/16, the percentage of GJUESD students who met or exceeded the

³ This report, originally published in early 2017, was updated in November 2017 to include new information about GJUESD's academic achievement results on the Smarter Balanced Test as reported by the California Department of Education (2017).

⁴ The GJUESD Pre-K District Reading Assessment includes items adapted from the Pre-K Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Reading Assessment. The assessment was modified to align with the preschool assessments used by other First 5 school readiness districts.

⁵ The GJUESD K–8 District Reading Assessment includes items adapted from the California Reading and Literature Project and the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills reading passages.

specified achievement level for their grade increased by 5.3% on the English language arts/literacy component and increased by 2% on the mathematics component.

- Findings from the Smarter Balanced state assessment also showed achievement gains, from 2014/15 to 2015/16, of 8.9% for grades 4 and 8 on the reading/English language arts component.
- Findings from the Smarter Balanced state assessment also showed achievement gains, from 2014/15 to 2015/16, of 8.9% on the mathematics component.
- Children from low-income communities in grades 4 and 8 showed substantial gains from 2014/15 to 2015/16 on the Smarter Balanced state assessment in both reading/English language arts and math achievement.
- 67% of GJUESD learners met individual reading goal targets assessed through the MAP assessment, with 45% exceeding the targets.
- 70% of GJUESD learners met individual math goal targets assessed through the MAP assessment.
- The number of course failures in the district decreased by 19.4%.

In addition, gains in student engagement from 2015 to 2016 include:

- Decreased suspensions rate from 131 to 127.
- Increased attendance rate (learners with an attendance rate of 95% or above) from 37% to 40%
- Individual engagement goal accomplishment increased for every significant subgroup and ethnicity (grades 4–8) from the previous year as noted in students' Personalized Learning Plans.

The GALLUP student poll, measuring hope and engagement in learners in grades 5–8, also showed significant gains from 2015 to 2016.

- Engagement scores increased in the district from 4.10 to 4.11 (the U.S. average for 2016 is 3.88).
- Scores from the measure of hope increased from 4.32 to 4.37 (the U.S. average for 2016 is 4.24). In addition, individual survey item scores related to hope were impressive:
 - 93% agreed or strongly agreed that they will graduate from high school. Not one learner disagreed.
 - 92% agreed or strongly agreed that they will have a good job in the future. Not one learner disagreed.
 - 88% agreed or strongly agreed that they have a great future ahead of them.

Conclusion

This evaluation study provides an example of a small to mid-size school district that implemented a Race to the Top–District initiative focused on personalized learning. The district used a unique combination of programs and actions to implement the project that could provide a compelling example to educators, administrators, policymakers, and others interested in gaining a better understanding of effective personalized learning models. By providing more individualized and differentiated learning experiences for learners, focusing on goal-setting and learner choice, and broadening the everyday contexts where learners encounter personalized learning, GJUESD has been finding ways to engage and support learners to achieve college and career readiness.

Implementing the Bright Future initiative in GJUESD involved change at every level of the district, and involved thousands of stakeholders. Despite surmounting and continuing to work through various challenges associated with this major initiative, GJUESD has been successful in implementing personalized learning across all of its schools by building a coherent initiative based on: (1) personalized plans to learning pathways for college, career, and life; (2) personalized learning options involving blended and extended learning environments; and (3) continuous systems improvement that benefits learners, employees, and the district as a whole.

Appendix A. Evaluation Methodology and Data Analysis

WestEd conducted the evaluation of the Bright Future initiative. As of 2017, the evaluation is ongoing as the initiative continues to progress and evolve. The evaluation used a mixedmethods descriptive evaluation design to address the study's research questions. Evaluation study designs are useful in assessing the processes and consequences of innovations in social policy or organizations (Payne & Payne, 2004). Moreover, descriptive evaluation designs provide information about changes in an environment without manipulating the environment for the purposes of the study (U.S. Office of Research Integrity, 2016). In addition to a descriptive evaluation design, the study also used case study design and research methods to investigate how the Bright Future initiative was implemented at individual schools. Case study research methods are useful because they allow researchers to rigorously investigate a phenomenon within the environment in which it is occurring (Yin, 1984).

Data Collection

In the spring of 2016, WestEd researchers conducted site visits at six schools (five elementary schools and one middle school) in the GJUESD. Each site visit included classroom site visits as well as focus groups and interviews with educators, parents, and administrators. Data collection included over 30 focus groups and interviews with parents, educators, and administrators. In addition, researchers reviewed and coded numerous reports, administrator reflections, evaluation reports, and other written artifacts from each school and from the district.

Data Analysis

Audio files from focus groups and interviews were transcribed. All transcripts, notes from site visits, and from artifact review were coded using qualitative data analysis methods. To address the research questions, researchers analyzed the data to generate themes, using a combination of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and established methods for coding qualitative data (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to identify and categorize participants' responses and information gathered during school site visits. Throughout the process, researchers used peer debriefing and auditing to check codes and concepts. Identified codes and concepts were further sorted to generate categories. These categories were again reduced to produce the themes that emerged from the data. While the district data

analysis was conducted, data from individual schools were analyzed in separate analyses to create school case studies. Analysis for each school case study included educator, parent, and administrator focus group and interview data, as well as data from school site visits, reports, and other written artifacts from the schools and district.

Appendix B. Sample Personalized Learning Plan

The following is a sample Personalized Learning Plan for a grade 4 student.



Learner's Name: Teacher: Grade: 4 Personalized Learning Plan School Year: 2016 - 2017

	My Learner Profile				
	Future Thinker	Achieving Caring			
	My Engagement Goal	Learner will strengthen involvement and enthusiasm for learning.			
	My Future College and Career Aspirations	I would like to be a Fashion Design	er and attend Stanford University.		
EMENT	My Year-Long Action(s)	T1 I will ask for help when I need it. the same goal.	T2 I will continue working towards		
LEARNER ENGAG	My Service Learning Project(s)	This year, I will learn about how recy will help to Improve recycling efforts community.	vcling helps our world. Then I s at school, home, and in my		
	Comments	T1 "I asked for help a few times and asked the teachers if they could help	it helped. I was struggling so I o me."		
	Did I meet my Engagement Goal?				
Extra Curricular Activities/BFLC Clubs/ School Clubs/ASES	I participated in the Arts and Crafts	: Club.			

Attendance:	Fall	Winter	Spring
Days Absent	8	11	
Tardies	0	12	

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Learner's Name:

N	WEA MAP Reading	Prior Spring	Fall	Winter	Spring	Annual Growth
5	Overall RIT SCORE	158	212	211		6
1AP leasu mic s)	Literature	Low	High	High		11000
EA/N G (M cadel gres	Informational Text	Low	HiAvg	Avg		125 1712
NWI ADIN of A Pre	Vocabulary Acquisition & Use	Low	HiAvg	Avg		
RE/	Lexile		817	799		
My Literacy Goal	Learner will demonstrate continuous growth as evidenced by MAP Annual Growth Progress, District Writing Assessment and other evidence.					
Action	will read chapter books and fourth grade social studies book to develop my comprehension skills. I will read at least 30 minutes a day rom my AR book.					
Comment	"I'm struggling with with main idea. The o	ass activities were h	ard because I was ab	sent."		
Action						
Comment						
Reading Goal	Did I meet my Readi	ng Goal?				
e en l'én hij	District Writing Assessment		Fall	Winter	Spring	LITING CORED STER
	Opinion/Argument T	ask				RY WR BE SC
WRITING Assessments	Narrative Task					EVER S MAY ERV T
	Informative/Explanator	y Task	2			NOT
Action	I will use transitions that are appropriate	for the detall, exampl	e, or reason they are	introducing,		
Comment	"I need to work on this goal. Informative	writing is difficult. I ne	eed to use the poster	s to help with this."		
Action						
Comment						
My Writing Goal	Did I meet my Writi	ng Goal?				
NWI	EA MAP Mathematics	Prior Spring	Fall	Winter	Spring	Annual Growth
(ss	Overall RIT SCORE	199	197	205		12
MAT s of ogree	Operations & Algebraic Thinking	Avg	LoAvg	LoAvg		0866
MAP isure ic Pr	Number & Operations	LoAvg	Low	HiAvg		
/EA/ (Mea dem	Measurement & Data	LoAvg	LoAvg	LoAvg		
Aca	Geomerty	Avg	LoAvg	LoAvg		
My Math Goal	Learner will demonstrate conti	nous growth as ev	idenced by MAP A	nnual Growth Prog	gress and other	evidence.
Action	Practice your multiplication facts throug	h 12x12. Reread and c	hunk information in i	math problem to ald Ir	n comprehension.	
Comment	"I'm working on multiplication facts. I ha	ve a bad memory and	that makes it difficult	t. I need to use the mu	utiplication chart."	
Action						
Comment						
My Math Goal	Did I meet my Math Goal?					

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Learner's Name:

SCIENCE GOAL	Learner will accurately use evidence from Science Standards aligned investigations and/or texts to support a claim.
Action(s)	Use evidence from a variety of sources to make a claim about a specific phenomenon.
Comments	"We learned about waves and how they move back and forth. We wrote in our journals which helps with our projects."

SOCIAL STUDIES GOAL	Learner will cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources in Social Studies.
Action(s)	Use a secondary source to cite evidence to support their claim.
Comments	"We learned about Native Americans. We learned about their culture areas and how they lived. I haven't started the project yet."

Additional Comments	

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GRADE⁴ PERSONALIZED LEARNING PLAN: GRADEBOOK REPORT SCHOOL YEAR: 2016 - 2017

Name: Teacher Name:

Subject	Trimester 1	Trimester 2	Trimester 3
Reading	S		
Writing	S		
Mathematics	S		
Science	E		
Social Studies	S		
Music	E		
Physical Education	E		
Citizenship	S		
English Language Development			
Band			
Choir			

E= Excellent (90%-100%) A= Above Average (80%-89%) S= Satisfactory (70%-79%) N= Needs Improvement (<69%)

How did I do 1st Trimester? Nightly reading Is an Important part of Sophla's reading progress.

How did I do 2nd Trimester?

How did I do 3rd Trimester?

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