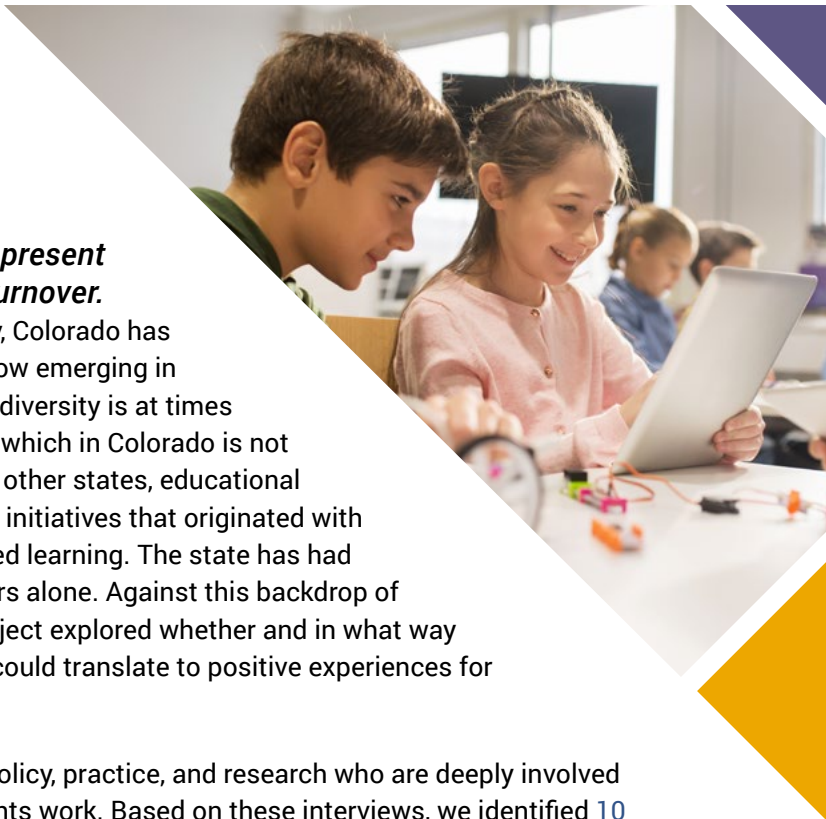




# **PERSONALIZED LEARNING: MEETING THE NEEDS OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES**

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY & PRACTICE IN COLORADO**



***Three factors reflect the hallmark of Colorado’s present education system: diversity, local control, and turnover.***

With its geographic, cultural, and demographic diversity, Colorado has long been a microcosm of the educational landscape now emerging in other states across the country. As in other states, this diversity is at times supported by and at times in tension with local control, which in Colorado is not so much a philosophy as a badge of honor. Lastly, as in other states, educational leaders in Colorado are often tasked with implementing initiatives that originated with their predecessors, including efforts around personalized learning. The state has had four state education commissioners in the last two years alone. Against this backdrop of diversity, a culture of local control, and turnover, our project explored whether and in what way statewide efforts and interest in personalized learning could translate to positive experiences for students with disabilities.

To answer this question, we interviewed 36 leaders in policy, practice, and research who are deeply involved in the state’s personalized learning and/or disability rights work. Based on these interviews, we identified [10 challenges and 10 benefits personalized learning systems pose](#) for students with disabilities in Colorado.

We invited 14 of the individuals we interviewed and a national partner to a November 2016 meeting in Denver to strategize about how to reduce challenges and seize the benefits of personalized learning for students with disabilities. The attendees identified the four issues most important to them:

- 1. Preparing Colorado’s educators to support personalized learning for all students**
- 2. Leveraging flexibility to address individual needs of students with disabilities**
- 3. Providing accommodations to enable greater access to a high-quality education for students with disabilities**
- 4. Facilitating accountability and support systems that best meet the needs of students with disabilities**

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## Personalized Learning and Meeting the Needs of Students With Disabilities in Colorado

November 17, 2016 – Denver, Colorado

### Meeting Participants

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Elisa Bowers, *Imaginarium: Denver Public Schools Innovation Lab*

Charlie Carter, *Thompson School District*

Angela Denning, *Colorado Department of Education*

Barbara Frye, *University of Colorado, Colorado Springs*

Scott Fuller, *Colorado Springs School District 11*

Roseyn Hood, *Colorado Department of Education*

Lucinda Hundley, *Consortium of Special Education Directors*

Christina Jean, *Colorado Education Initiative*

Danny Medved, *Denver School of Innovation and Sustainable Design*

Rebecca Midles, *Mesa County Valley School District 51*

Maria Moser, *NCLR (national partner)*

Nicole Ottmer, *Trailblazer Elementary School*

Linda Reed, *Archuleta School District*

Steve Sandoval, *Westminster Public Schools*

Beth Schaffner, *PEAK Parent Center*

Based on the group's discussion, NCLD identified major challenges confronting the state, and key actions to ensure that personalized learning efforts more fully meet the needs of Colorado students with disabilities. By taking these actions, we hope the state's efforts will continue to extend rigorous and inclusive learning opportunities that prepare all students for college, career, and civic success.



# ENSURING STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES BENEFIT FROM PERSONALIZED LEARNING IN COLORADO: OVERALL SYSTEM CHALLENGES

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## Culture

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- The special education culture can sometimes be strongly focused on compliance and on student deficits, factors that can both run counter to personalized learning.
- The personalized learning movement in the state lacks a single, clear definition of the term as well as a vision that includes changes in practice reflecting high expectations for serving students with disabilities.
- Special and general educators are often limited by a culture that places them in different silos, making collaboration difficult.

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## Educator Capacity

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- Professional development for special educators is often focused on the legal requirements they must meet, rather than on the instructional demands of their jobs.
- Many educators lack the skills necessary to support personalized learning for students with disabilities, including skills related to collaboration, effective use of data, effective use of assessments, parent engagement, and implementation of approaches such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and multi-tier system of supports (MTSS).
- General and special educators are routinely isolated from one another for pre-service training. This means they have little opportunity to see and experience personalized learning and collaboration between educators first-hand and in context.

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## Structures and Resources

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- Shortages of educators, time, and resources—especially in Colorado’s rural areas—may increase the demands of implementing personalized learning for students with disabilities.
- Structural barriers embedded in existing district, state, and federal policies inhibit the success of implementing personalized learning for students with disabilities. These barriers include rigidities in school calendars, strict separation between grade spans (elementary, middle, and high school), and narrow assessment and accountability systems.
- Structural barriers embedded in norms of school and district practice in Colorado inhibit the success of implementing personalized learning for students with disabilities. These include layering (not integrating) of innovative practices leading to innovation fatigue, norms around who is responsible for transitions and for providing accommodations for students with disabilities, and rigidities in the ways IEPs are written and implemented.

# ENSURING STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES BENEFIT FROM PERSONALIZED LEARNING IN COLORADO: POLICY & PRACTICE RECOMMENDATIONS

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**1. In collaboration with districts and schools, the state should outline the knowledge, skills, and dispositions personalized learning systems should achieve for all learners, and should align reporting requirements, technical assistance, and other supports to this vision.**

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- The Colorado Department of Education (CDE) should integrate the five competencies—academic, professional, personal, entrepreneurial, and civic—developed in partnership by Colorado’s educators, employers, and other leaders into its strategic plan for how it defines success for all students, including those with disabilities. CDE should ensure that these competencies guide its administration of programs and interactions with both virtual and traditional schools through all its divisions, including the CDE Office of Special Education (OSE), so that all students are held to the same high standards of success.
- The Colorado Content Collaborative, a group of educators convened by CDE to explore statewide performance assessments, should ensure that performance assessments in 10 content areas align with principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and should provide resources to help general and special educators in Colorado get the most out of these assessments for students with disabilities.

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**2. The state should invest in programs that ensure that implementation of competency-based education efforts are fully inclusive of students with disabilities.**

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- The Colorado State Legislature and Governor’s budgets should include funds for infrastructure resources to enable districts to take personalized learning to the next level, including investments in broadband and data and learning management systems that provide educators with actionable data. The funds should stipulate that such investments support inclusive educational experiences for all students, including those with disabilities.
- OSE should collaborate with the Choice and Innovation Unit at CDE to ensure that key programs, such as those using a multi-tier system of supports (MTSS), are integrated into the state’s support for personalized learning.
- The State Department of Education should encourage districts and schools to support the inclusion of self-advocacy and self-awareness skills in Individual Career and Academic Plans (ICAPs) for students with disabilities, and should develop professional development modules to help educators develop these skills and align them with students’ IEPs.

# ENSURING STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES BENEFIT FROM PERSONALIZED LEARNING IN COLORADO: POLICY & PRACTICE RECOMMENDATIONS (CONTINUED)

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## 3. Both pre-service and in-service educator preparation and training should emphasize the skills educators need to implement personalized learning strategies inclusively.

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- Colorado teacher and principal preparation and state licensure standards should be modified to ensure that special educators, general educators, and principals have experience working with students with disabilities in clinical contexts, and should further emphasize the importance of personalization in working with students in those contexts.
- The Colorado State Board of Education should establish policies ensuring that state teacher and principal induction standards and Colorado Professional Development guidelines all highlight the importance of developing competencies in collaboration across general and special education. These policies should emphasize important strategies essential to making personalized learning accessible to students with disabilities, including UDL.

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## 4. Personalized learning stakeholders and advocates should ensure that innovation, learning, and the means by which best practices are communicated account for the perspectives and needs of students with disabilities and their families.

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- CDE, in partnership with the Colorado Education Initiative and other statewide partners like Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES), should regularly convene networks of schools and districts implementing personalized learning, such as Next Generation Learning Breakthrough Schools and statewide Innovation Schools. There should be an explicit focus on enabling schools to share best practices on challenges and their successes in designing and implementing inclusive personalized learning environments, and on publishing and disseminating findings accordingly.
- Schools and districts implementing personalized learning in Colorado should work together and with family agency organizations and nonprofits to develop effective communications toolkits for families of students with disabilities. The toolkits should identify what personalized learning is, why it's beneficial, and how families can be actively involved.

