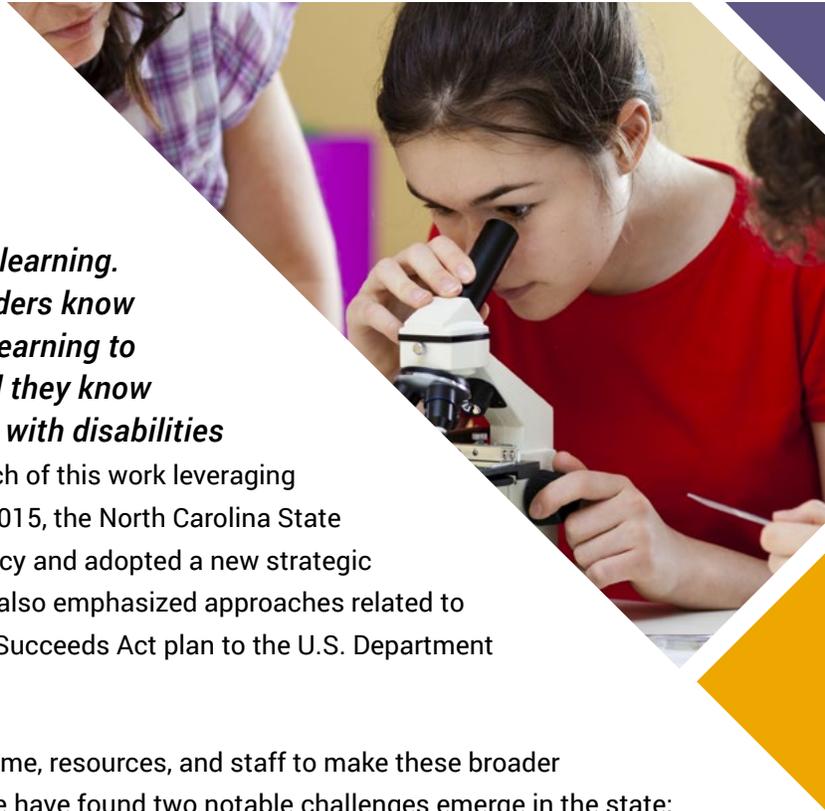




PERSONALIZED LEARNING: MEETING THE NEEDS OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

**RECOMMENDATIONS FOR
POLICY & PRACTICE IN
NORTH CAROLINA**



North Carolina is making a bet on personalized learning. As in many other states across the country, leaders know their students need to master deeper levels of learning to succeed in a globally competitive economy, and they know that North Carolina’s students—including those with disabilities and across other subgroups—can do better. Much of this work leveraging personalized learning in North Carolina is new: In late 2015, the North Carolina State Board of Education (SBE) passed a credit flexibility policy and adopted a new strategic plan that emphasized personalized learning. The state also emphasized approaches related to personalized learning in its most recent Every Student Succeeds Act plan to the U.S. Department of Education.

The question across the state now is how to leverage time, resources, and staff to make these broader goals a reality. Without greater clarity in these areas, we have found two notable challenges emerge in the state: 1) Confusion on the goals and means to support personalized learning, and 2) Procurement and simple use of technology being conflated with personalized learning, leading to issues with both access and rigor of learning experiences. Against this backdrop of both promise and potential for emerging personalized learning initiatives in North Carolina, 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 27 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](#) to students with disabilities in North Carolina.

We invited 14 of the individuals we interviewed and one partner to a March 2017 meeting in Chapel Hill to grapple with ways to address the challenges personalized learning systems pose to students with disabilities, while simultaneously seizing the opportunities of these systems. The attendees identified the four issues most important to them:

1. **Preparing North Carolina’s educators to support personalized learning for all learners**
2. **Providing flexibility and customization through more helpful IEPs and accommodations**
3. **Ensuring accountability and support systems that best meet the needs of students with disabilities**
4. **Engaging families of students with disabilities in the success of personalized learning efforts**

Personalized Learning and Meeting the Needs of Students With Disabilities in North Carolina March 23, 2017 – Chapel Hill, North Carolina Meeting Participants

Beth Anderson, *The Hill Center*

Ann Jolly, *Charlotte–Mecklenburg Schools*

Bobbie Cavnar, *2016 State Teacher of the Year*

Diane Ryndak, *UNC Greensboro*

Kristin Cuilla, *New Tech Network*

Lisa Schwartz, *Johnson Primary School*

Catherine Fowler, *UNC Charlotte*

Alicia Tate, *Chapel Hill–Carrboro City Schools*

Karen Laughlin, *Exceptional Children's
Assistance Center*

Melanie Taylor, *Iredell–Statesville Schools*

Tomeka Hart, *Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation
(partner)*

Beverly Vance, *North Carolina Department of
Public Instruction*

Martez Hill, *North Carolina State Board of
Education*

Mary Ann Wolf, *The Friday Institute*

Bill Hussey, *North Carolina Department of
Public Instruction*

Based on the group's discussion, NCLD identified major challenges confronting the state, and key actions to ensure personalized learning efforts more fully meet the needs of North Carolina students with disabilities. By taking these actions, we hope the state's efforts will lead to an education that prepares all students for college, career, and civic success.



ENSURING STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES BENEFIT FROM PERSONALIZED LEARNING IN NORTH CAROLINA: OVERALL SYSTEM CHALLENGES

Culture

- Students with disabilities are often an afterthought. General education initiatives are planned and designed without their needs in mind, and then retrofitted for students with disabilities.
- The longstanding separation between general and special education can be an obstacle in implementing any new initiative. Collaboration across groups is difficult, and both groups suffer from innovation fatigue.
- Distrust among administrators, educators, and parents can result in risk-aversion and can perpetuate a culture that focuses on special education compliance rather than innovation.

Educator Capacity

- Preparation of general educators and preparation of special educators remain largely separate in both coursework and field experiences.
- Legislative action has limited the overall amount of time and narrowed the window of time that could be dedicated to professional learning that would enable educators to develop key skills such as data and assessment literacy, family engagement, and implementation of Universal Design for Learning (UDL).
- Low pay and inadequate training for school principals limit the capacity of districts to recruit and retain school leaders who can effectively lead and evaluate the instructional transformation required for personalized learning.

Structures and Resources

- There are insufficient resources to fund the accommodations that are needed for appropriate student instruction and interventions.
- There is no dynamic or widely used way for schools across the state to share best practices in implementing personalized learning initiatives for students with disabilities.
- The state funding cycle for education makes it difficult for districts to be nimble and support rapid response interventions for schools that may be struggling throughout the year.

ENSURING STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES BENEFIT FROM PERSONALIZED LEARNING IN NORTH CAROLINA: POLICY & PRACTICE RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The North Carolina State Board of Education (SBE), higher education institutions, educators, parents, and other key stakeholders should collaboratively develop a clearer vision and definition of personalized learning, and should work to align existing initiatives to this vision.

- The SBE, with input from partners, should clarify its goal for personalized learning, define the term as a means to higher, deeper levels of learning for all students including those with disabilities, and charge the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) to ensure that various programs and initiatives align with this new goal.
- The DPI Exceptional Children’s Division (ECD) and the K–12 Curriculum and Instruction Division should collaborate to support districts and schools in leveraging Universal Design for Learning (UDL) as the decision-making framework for all efforts and strategic plans around personalized learning, and should ensure that parents are engaged throughout the process and build on other frameworks (such as the state’s multi-tier system of supports) that provide greater inclusion for all students’ learning.
- The DPI should evaluate all standards and implementation plans including the state’s Digital Learning Competencies and Digital Learning Plan to ensure that they reflect higher, deeper levels of learning for all students and that they include sufficient accommodations for students with disabilities.

2. The state should invest in professional learning for teachers and school leaders to ensure that both have the skills necessary to implement personalized learning inclusively.

- The North Carolina General Assembly should provide greater flexibility in the timing of professional learning opportunities for educators, and should stipulate that resources be leveraged to support more joint learning between special and general educators. This will allow the two groups to collaboratively gain the skills they need to implement personalized learning inclusively.
- To attract and prepare candidates qualified to be true instructional leaders, state and local revenue streams should be leveraged to increase principal salaries. The SBE should strengthen policies around principal induction, preparation, and professional learning to ensure that leaders have the skills to implement personalized learning inclusively.
- Districts should support professional learning for educators to better leverage IEPs and Personalized Learning Plans as tools to support personalized student learning.

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

3. State and district leaders should collaborate on an assessment, accountability, and intervention system that is more actionable and responsive to student and school needs.

- DPI and SBE should take action to ensure that the state accountability system places emphasis on both student proficiency and growth, and that the state enlists rapid response intervention teams (which could include past state teachers or principals of the year) to advise and support schools and districts that are struggling to support overall or subgroup growth in achievement.
- The Accountability Services Division of DPI should work with and support districts in developing multiple assessments of student learning that abide by principles of UDL and that are rigorous, valid, reliable, and comparable.
- ECD should work with other divisions within DPI to expand professional learning and technical assistance to schools and districts across the state, with the goal of enhancing the data literacy capacity necessary to translate information gathered from the Exceptional Children's Accountability Tracking System (ECATS) to improve outcomes for students with disabilities and their peers.

4. State and district leaders should leverage policies and processes to communicate with and engage students with disabilities—and their families and communities—in personalized learning implementation efforts.

- The General Assembly should provide seed money to fund pilot programs that implement inclusive approaches to personalized learning and that enlist family and community engagement in the process. The state DPI should then gather and disseminate best practices and lessons from these programs to other communities implementing personalized learning.
- Districts and schools implementing personalized learning should set an explicit goal of community and family engagement—including families of students with disabilities. They should present opportunities through multiple means and should create an ongoing communication and engagement plan as implementation efforts roll out.

