EXPERIENCES IN PRACTICE:

PERSONALIZED INTERVENTIONS AT LANDIS ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

National Center for Learning Disabilities

Grasping certain literacy and math concepts felt impossible to 8-year-old Beth Phillips.[1]

At first, her parents and teachers were puzzled: Beth was bright and motivated. She worked hard on everything she was assigned. But she still had trouble with decoding and reading, and she couldn't process foundational mathematical principles. With time, she was falling further and further behind. It was clear to her teachers that her needs were not being met and that she could benefit from customized learning strategies. Most teachers don't have the time to create customized strategies for all 20 students in their classrooms on a regular basis. In most schools, a student like Beth would fall even further behind. But at Beth's school—Landis Elementary in Landis, North Carolina—there was a system in place that could meet her needs.

Through the school's personalized intervention system, staff at Landis had the right resources to effectively support Beth. Using the platform Branching Minds, Beth's teachers were sent a survey designed to identify her needs and strengths. Based on the survey results, this tool gave her teachers a list of options and approaches to meet Beth's needs. That's when the school's ingenuity and teamwork among staff kicked in. Her teachers came together and determined which approaches to take. Soon they had collectively decided on the Orton–Gillingham approach to address Beth's reading difficulties and Number Worlds for her math challenges. As this collaborative process unfolded, Beth was identified with dyslexia. Beth, her educators, and her parents were empowered with strategies to support her success. Throughout the school year, Beth has continued to make academic progress. Her learning path no longer seems like a mystery to her or to the adults who work with her.

THE VISION: COLLABORATIVE, CONNECTED, RELEVANT, AND PERSONALIZED

This process of identifying and collaboratively addressing Beth's needs didn't take place haphazardly. It is part of a broader strategy designed to fit the needs of a once-struggling rural school and its school district. When Dr. Lynn Moody took the helm as superintendent of Rowan–Salisbury School System (where Landis Elementary is located), she brought with her a vision to do education differently. Specifically, she wanted to extend the time during which learning could take place and wanted to open up new experiences to students like Beth in this rural community. Administrators, educators, students, parents, and business and community leaders came together to form a vision for education across the district. This vision is guided by four principles: Collaborative, Connected, Relevant, and Personalized (CCRP). The central unifying theme of CCRP was to connect students to each other and to community members, and to deepen their own personal investment in learning.

The CCRP vision developed by district-wide conversations would become part of the DNA of Landis Elementary—as highlighted by the school's mission: "To create and maintain an engaging school community that is characterized by meaningful relationships, effective collaboration, and instruction that is relevant, connected, and personalized." The district and school began making major changes, including investing in a one-to-one technology strategy, investing heavily in use of data and data literacy, and working to prepare staff to meet the goals of CCRP.

1 In this instance and throughout the rest of the text, the student's name has been changed to protect privacy.

Along the way, Moody and her staff recognized a common pitfall of large-scale education reform: It misses struggling learners like Beth who need additional supports to access rigorous learning. In response, the district began to strategize about how their system could not only elevate learning, but also effectively intervene on behalf of students like Beth who had trouble developing a foundation for learning.

THE INITIATIVE: BRANCHING MINDS AND SYSTEM-WIDE COLLABORATION

For a district focused on personalization and strategic use of technology, Branching Minds was an important tool to help address this intervention challenge. Founded by Maya Gat, a former teacher, Branching Minds provides essential tools for teachers and intervention teams to pinpoint student challenges and identify research-based interventions to address those challenges. It provides a platform for intervention teams and teachers to coordinate and collaborate around a response.

Branching Minds isn't the only tool out there to support identification and response to student challenges. But for the district and for Landis Elementary, this particular tool aligned well with the CCRP principles, empowering collaboration among educators to facilitate relevant and personalized interventions for students. And for students like Beth, the type of useful information Branching Minds provides and the connection it facilitates is essential. "The district was looking for a tool that helped pinpoint areas of challenge and provided actionable steps to move forward for every struggling student. Branching Minds did that for us and made every player in our school part of a team," reflects Barbara Ward, the school counselor who helps coordinate much of the work.

IMPLEMENTING BRANCHING MINDS

Regardless of the platform used, staff at Landis and in other districts implementing intervention systems know that it isn't the technology that does the work. The people do. The Landis Elementary administration knew that Branching Minds, or any other system, wouldn't work without the support of a dedicated team and effective protocols within the school or district. Before investing in the system, key stakeholders at the district and school came together to ensure they had the necessary protocol to achieve success. This included the following steps to ensure the system effectively serves Beth and her peers:

- **Step 1: Take a survey of the student's needs.** Upon recognizing that a student is facing learning challenges, teachers first flag the issues with Barbara Ward, who sends a Branching Minds survey to all teachers who are working with the student. By having more than one team member fill out the survey, teachers begin to pinpoint the underlying cause for a student's learning challenge. In analyzing survey results, two of Beth's teachers, Rachel Bryant and Kendall Fulham, began to see that she was experiencing challenges with reading fluency and number sense.

LANDIS ELEMENTARY SCHOOL
AT A GLANCE

Location:
Landis, North Carolina

# of Students: **515**

# of Students With Disabilities:
70

Interventioninst Program Began:
2016-2017

Other Grants/Funds Supporting Work:
Regular district allocation

- **Step 2: Meet in assistance teams to discuss a response.** Following survey completion, the assistance teams, including Ward and teachers who work with the student, come together to discuss the response. After identifying the student's areas of need, the Branching Minds system suggests nearly 30 different interventions in its clearinghouse, targeted to address the learning issues identified. Teachers then discuss the interventions that best align with their own skills and experiences. During the first round of interventions for Beth, teachers selected Orton–Gillingham and Number Worlds. Through this meeting and a decision-making process, different teachers are assigned responsibility for implementing interventions and documenting Beth's learning accordingly.
- **Step 3: Check progress on interventions and implement new interventions as necessary.** After six weeks, the teachers and the student's parents meet to determine whether interventions are working or if new strategies are required. If the latter, as was the case with Beth, teachers go back to the initial intervention inventory and choose new interventions to implement. Beth's teachers chose two new approaches: Reading Mastery and Touch Math.
- **Step 4: Refer student for an evaluation and continue intervening.** If by the second round of interventions, teachers find that the student is still not making gains, teachers move forward with referring the student for a special education evaluation while continuing to draw strategies from the inventory to implement. It was through this process that Beth was identified as having a reading disability. Upon that identification, teachers came together with Beth's parents to strategize a whole new way to support her.

It is important to recognize that the reason this process was successful for Beth has less to do with the technological platform, Branching Minds, and more to do with the system in which it is implemented. Landis Elementary has made strategic staffing decisions, including to have a counselor and a school psychologist to help teachers with this work. It has also invested in professional development for staff on how to effectively collaborate and leverage interventions. It has a strong team structure in place, allowing school improvement teams, data teams, behavioral teams, and grade-level teams to meet every other week to discuss interventions. Absent this investment in staffing and resources, Beth's teachers couldn't achieve the necessary buy-in and coordination to change Beth's learning experience.

BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Establishing an intentional process and developing a system of collaboration across the school and district help ensure Landis Elementary can maximize the potential of Branching Minds.

Key Benefits of Leveraging Technology-Enhanced Intervention Systems for Students With Disabilities

- **Identifying Needs**—Through its built-in survey function, Branching Minds provides an efficient and consistent protocol to identify a particular student's learning needs and strengths.

- **Identifying Interventions**—Through the intervention library, Branching Minds helps teachers identify evidence-based practices more quickly than they would have been able to otherwise.
- **Coordinating Response**—The Branching Minds system provides a communication feature for teachers to engage each other on challenges the student is experiencing in different classrooms, enabling them to implement a more efficient and timely response to the specific needs.

Key Challenges of Leveraging Technology-Enhanced Intervention Systems for Students With Disabilities

- **Dedicated Time to Strategize**—While Branching Minds helps teachers identify students' needs, the only way this identification can lead to action is if, like Landis Elementary, a school has a culture and protocol for teachers and staff to come together to discuss how to address those needs.
- **Limitations of Interventions**—Branching Minds interventions help set the foundation for learning. But for other important goals, including ensuring that students are creative, critical thinkers and collaborators, the school needs to have an effective instructional core in place.

- **Comfort With the System**—The coordination required for this approach can only occur if the staff is invested in the system's success and committed to using it. If teachers are not technologically inclined and do not receive the professional development required, these benefits cannot be realized.

CONCLUSION

The exciting opportunities that technology provides may lure many districts into investing in it as a quick fix. That hasn't been the approach at Rowan–Salisbury. The district has worked to make strategic investments in technology, but only if the investment furthers their instructional mission and deepens the quality of human interactions that lead to advanced student learning. In the case of Branching Minds, that's exactly what the district and Landis Elementary got. The program and the accompanying structures empower staff to more effectively work together, communicate with families on their children's needs, and strengthen relationships with the student. Through these deepened human relationships and the district's vision of Collaborative, Connected, Relevant, and Personalized education, the teachers of Rowan–Salisbury are transforming learning and helping students like Beth succeed.