



Lessons Learned from Implementing Personalized, Competency-based Learning in North Dakota

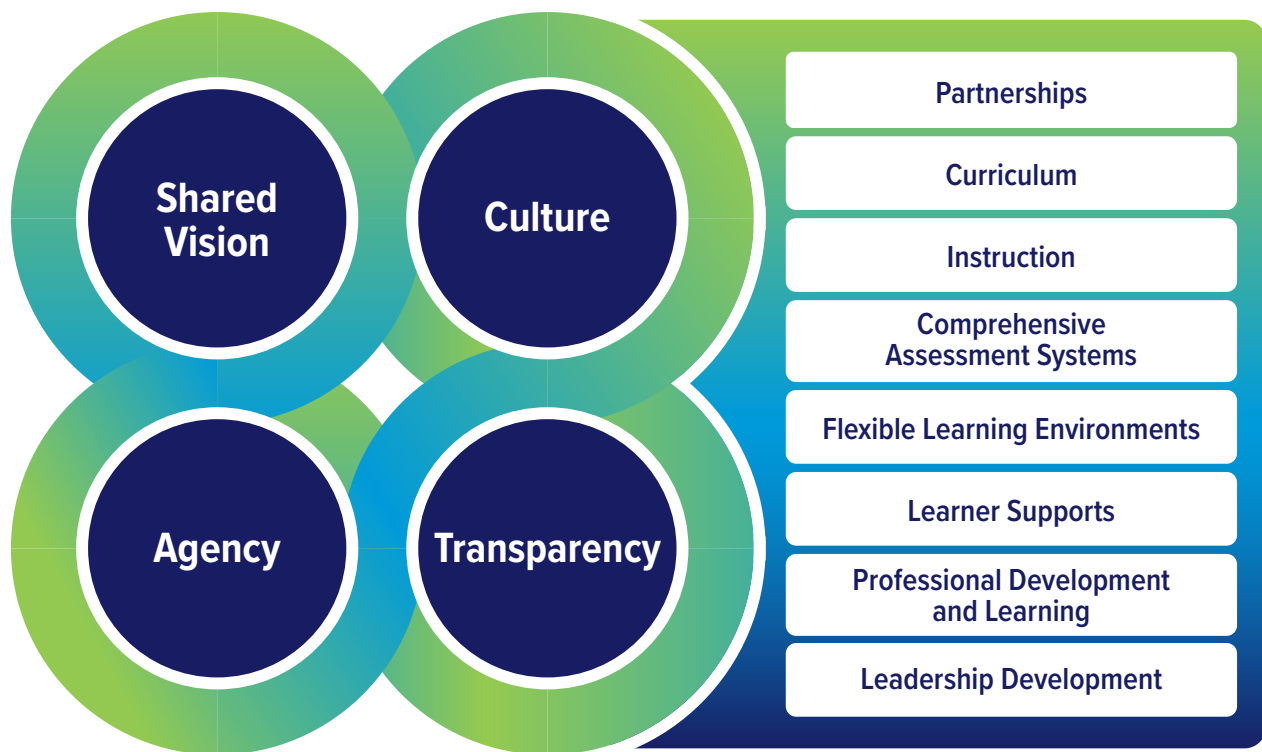
Three districts transformed their education system by designing and implementing a personalized, competency-based learning approach.¹ This transformation, driven by a commitment to deeper, more flexible learning experiences, aimed to create equitable outcomes for learners by transforming conventional education systems. WestEd conducted a [formative and summative evaluation of the initiative](https://www.wested.org/resource/north-dakota-personalized-competency-based-learning-initiative/), which showed measurable progress across key indicators. The initiative was supported by the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction and KnowledgeWorks through a five-year grant from the Bush Foundation. This brief summarizes lessons learned from implementation over five years.

1. This infographic is based on a larger evaluation report: Ahigian, R., & Lacireno-Paquet, N. (with Lolashvili, G.). (2024). *The North Dakota personalized, competency-based learning initiative: Progress and outcomes after 5 years*. WestEd. <https://www.wested.org/resource/north-dakota-personalized-competency-based-learning-initiative/>

What is personalized, competency-based learning?

Personalized, competency-based learning is an instructional approach that centers on each individual learner's strengths, needs and interests. Personalized, competency-based learning allows educators to provide differentiated support and allows learners to demonstrate their knowledge in a variety of ways, preparing them for future success. This could involve focusing on small group instruction, providing students with a choice of “must do” and “may do” assignment options, and offering relevant learning experiences.

Conditions for Personalized, Competency-Based Learning Implementation



Overview of Personalized, Competency-Based Learning in North Dakota

Each participating district had a design team composed of leaders, educators, other school staff, community partners, regional education associations (REAs) and sometimes parents and students that led personalized, competency-based learning in their districts. Each district participated as a member of a cohort, supported by KnowledgeWorks and the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction, and other partners. The cohort served as an incubator to provide space and support for each district to design what it would look like in their district, and how they wanted to get started to be successful in their unique local contexts. The design teams then led and supported the implementation of their district's unique plans. Looking at design and implementation across the three districts, the evaluation identified key implementation factors.

Key Implementation Factors

Context Matters

Implementation strategies should be tailored to the specific needs and readiness of each district. For example, each of the three participating districts has locally driven focus areas.

- **Northern Cass School District**
Demonstrated strong implementation with a focus on shared vision, culture, building learner and educator agency and transparency
- **Oakes School District**
Accelerated implementation after initially focusing on increased understanding and ownership of shared vision, increased transparency and the deepening of practices with instruction, assessment and professional learning
- **West Fargo Public Schools**
Showed a strong district commitment to personalized learning with a clear vision and alignment of various efforts with personalized learning at the district level, centering equity and providing educators with more opportunities for voice and agency

Leadership is Critical

Strong leaders champion and support the implementation of personalized learning, ensure alignment across initiatives and foster a districtwide culture of transparency and agency.

Over the five years of the initiative, Oakes School District had three different superintendents. This instability in leadership directly impacted the progress of the implementation, with educators and others unsure about whether and how the commitment to personalized, competency-based learning might change. District progress was uneven with “starts and stops” until a new superintendent and school leadership focused on building trust and agency with educators and learners, leading to notable changes toward personalized learning.

Shared Vision

A clear and consistent vision that is shared from the highest levels of leadership to educators, staff, learners and families is critical for success.

The district design team in West Fargo developed a clear mission and vision for personalized, competency-based learning based on a set of belief statements that addressed crucial aspects like self-efficacy and agency, relationships, a guaranteed and viable curriculum, assessment

and feedback, goal setting and reflection as well as pathways and pacing. This foundational work became a guiding framework for personalized, competency-based learning in West Fargo Public Schools. The district's approach was deliberative, with an initial focus on building understanding at the district level, then moving outward to teachers, learners and families.

Professional Learning and Onboarding

Continuous professional development and comprehensive onboarding for new staff are essential for sustaining personalized learning. It is not a one-and-done initiative.

Time and Commitment

Implementing personalized learning requires sustained effort and dedication from all members of the learning community. Time needs to be built into the schedule for school staff to learn about and plan for implementation.

Continuous Improvement

Regular reflection, data analysis and adjustments are necessary to refine and improve personalized learning practices.

Northern Cass School District actively shared personalized, competency-based learning survey data with the school community. By making these data transparent, the district engaged in reflection on their progress toward personalized, competency-based learning practice and demonstrated a commitment to understanding their current state and identifying areas for potential improvement.

Partner Organizations

External support from organizations like KnowledgeWorks provides valuable expertise, accountability and guidance throughout the implementation process. Schools and districts found it helpful to connect to the community of schools across the country implementing personalized

Where to Learn More

If you're interested in learning more about personalized, competency-based learning in North Dakota, visit [NDPLnetwork.org](https://ndplnetwork.org). Visit [KnowledgeWorks.org](https://knowledgeworks.org) to learn more about bringing personalized, competency-based learning to your district.



KnowledgeWorks is a national nonprofit organization advancing a future of learning that ensures each student graduates ready for what's next. For more than 25 years, we've been partnering with states, communities and leaders across the country to imagine, build and sustain vibrant learning communities. Through evidence-based practices and a commitment to equitable outcomes, we're creating the future of learning, together. [KnowledgeWorks.org](https://knowledgeworks.org)



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