

CASE STUDY

How North Dakota is Personalizing Learning Across the State

The need for change

North Dakota has long been proud of its public schools—and for good reason. In 2016, graduation rates hovered around 90% and surveys showed high satisfaction among families and students.

Beneath the state's strong numbers was a paradox. Despite the high graduation rates, nearly one in three first-year college students still required remedial coursework. Teachers reported that many students were "doing school," but not fully engaged. Rural learners had fewer opportunities for advanced classes or career pathways. And employers said graduates were leaving high school without the collaboration, problem-solving and communication skills needed to be competitive in today's economy.

State leaders saw an opportunity to move from good to great. From a system that works for most students to one that works for every learner. Personalized learning offered a promising way forward.

By shifting the measure of success from seat time to mastery, schools could ensure a diploma truly meant readiness for college, career and life. Students would build the confidence needed to take ownership of their learning and graduate with durable skills for the future.

But recognizing the need was only the beginning. Turning vision into reality would require bold policy action, new partnerships and the willingness to rethink "school as usual."

North Dakotans are passionate for this work. We believe in our students, and we want to provide opportunities so that our students are 'choice-ready' no matter what their choices may be.

**Ann Ellefson, Director for Academic Support,
ND Department of Public Instruction**



What is personalized, competency-based learning?

Personalized, competency-based learning tailors education to each learner's strengths, needs and interests. Instead of advancing based on how many hours they've spent in a classroom, students progress when they've demonstrated they understand and can apply what they've learned. It empowers learners with agency, provides timely and meaningful feedback and builds systems where every learner has the opportunity to succeed.

Policy opens the door

The North Dakota journey toward system transformation began in April 2016, when the North Dakota State Superintendent and KnowledgeWorks representatives found themselves engaged in conversation during a legislative conference in Washington, D.C.

In the fall of 2016, KnowledgeWorks conducted a policy audit which took a deeper look at North Dakota state policy. As a result of that audit, a recommendation was made to propose a new law that allowed districts to apply for waivers enabling them to try new approaches to teaching and learning.

In the spring 2017, Senate Bill 2186 created the Innovative Education Program, giving districts the chance to design personalized, competency-based approaches and granting the state superintendent the authority to approve them.

The bill passed with bipartisan support, backed by both the North Dakota Chamber of Commerce and North Dakota United, the state's largest union of public educators and employees. While the effort was carried forth and championed by North Dakotans, KnowledgeWorks played a critical role by providing strategic guidance that helped shape the path to success.

In the early years, the work gained structure through new frameworks. The state developed the Choice Ready Framework to measure whether graduates were prepared for college, career or military service and districts created local Portraits of a Graduate to define the key skills students should have when they graduate. Together, these efforts provided both local vision and cohesive accountability. KnowledgeWorks partnered with

stakeholders across the state to create the [North Dakota Learning Continuum](#)—a set of progressions outlining the knowledge, skills and mindsets each learner needs to develop for success in school and beyond.

In 2021, North Dakota passed Senate Bill 2196, which created the Mastery Framework and allowed districts to award credit in alternative pathways. The new framework gave districts the ability to award credit based on mastery rather than seat time, further embedding personalized, competency-based learning into state policy. But even before the legislation passed, districts were bringing the vision to life through practices in the classroom.





Key milestones

- 2016** KnowledgeWorks conducts policy audit, identifying policy gaps and opportunities.
- 2017** Senate Bill 2186 passes with bipartisan support, creating Innovation Waivers allowing flexibility for districts to implement personalized, competency-based learning.
- 2018** Choice Ready Framework establishes statewide indicators to measure whether graduates are prepared for college, career or military service.
- 2020** Portrait of a Graduate defines a shared vision of the competencies and durable skills students should have before they graduate.
- 2021** SB 2196 establishes the North Dakota Mastery Framework, a statewide framework of competencies and progressions to guide personalized, competency-based learning
KnowledgeWorks, with support from the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction and Northeast Education Services Cooperative, creates the [North Dakota Learning Continuum](#) with stakeholders from across the state.
- 2023** North Dakota Network for Personalized Learning is established to provide ongoing professional learning, resources and a community of practice.
- 2025** The state commits \$1 million in direct funding to support the Intermediary for Innovative Education at Valley City State University to coordinate expansion and sustainability of the North Dakota Network for Personalized Learning.

From vision to action

When Senate Bill 2186 opened the door to innovation in 2017, North Dakota launched its first cohort of four districts, including Northern Cass, Oakes, West Fargo and Marmot School within the North Dakota Youth Correctional Center (YCC).

Each district entered the work at a different stage. Northern Cass was already several years into implementing personalized learning and saw the initiative as a way to accelerate progress. Oakes, a small, rural district, was exploring personalized learning approaches and used the pilot to deepen its efforts and connect with statewide peers. West Fargo, one of the state's largest and fastest-growing districts, came to the table looking for ways to align efforts across schools at the elementary, middle and high school levels. And YCC joined with a determination to better serve young people too often left behind by traditional systems.

We wanted districts to get closer to this collective efficacy — to believe they were better together. The shift happened when they began hosting site visits and learning from one another.

**Lori Phillips, Senior Director,
Teaching and Learning, KnowledgeWorks**

The pilot gave districts a push to innovate with peers across the state. Each district created a local design team of leaders, educators and community members to shape the work. The North Dakota Department of Public Instruction (NDDPI) partnered with KnowledgeWorks to host statewide convenings that brought the design teams together to collaborate. Professional learning cycles gave educators space to test new practices and reflect on results.

Tools like *KnowledgeWorks' Navigation Tool for Scaling Personalized Learning* helped districts translate big ideas into everyday practice, while the Choice Ready Framework allowed NDDPI to align the work to statewide goals. KnowledgeWorks offered strategy and coaching, while [Bush Foundation](#) provided funding.

Momentum grew quickly. Convenings created space for collaboration, and district-led site visits helped stakeholders see new possibilities through each other's buildings and classrooms. What started as a possibility on paper quickly became a network of schools and educators rethinking what learning could be. The challenge then became how to sustain the momentum and build capacity to carry the work statewide.



A visit that changed minds

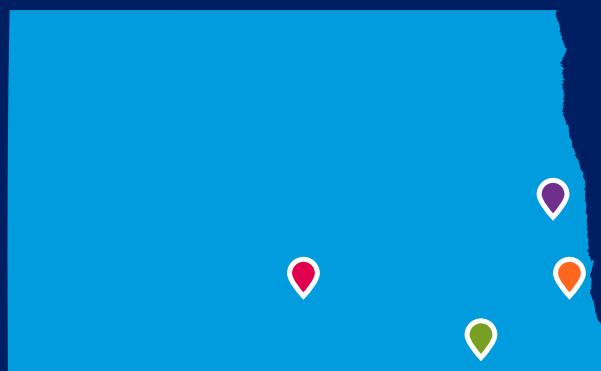
During a cohort site visit to Oakes Elementary, educators from across the state came to see how a small, rural district was putting personalized learning into practice.

Oakes worried they didn't have enough to share. Larger districts weren't sure how much they could learn from a school so different from their own. What they found surprised them. In Oakes classrooms, elementary students were confidently explaining their work and taking ownership of their learning.

"If they can do this at the elementary level," one West Fargo teacher wondered, "why are we not doing this at the middle school level?"

The visit flipped assumptions on what was possible. Oakes realized its practices were stronger than it gave itself credit for. West Fargo saw that even the smallest districts could provide inspiration. And the entire cohort learned that every community – large or small – had something valuable to share, and there were commonalities across districts.

North Dakota Personalized, Competency-Based Learning Cohort



Northern Cass

- » Size: ~700 students (K-12)
- » Context: Rural, single-campus district

Oakes Public Schools

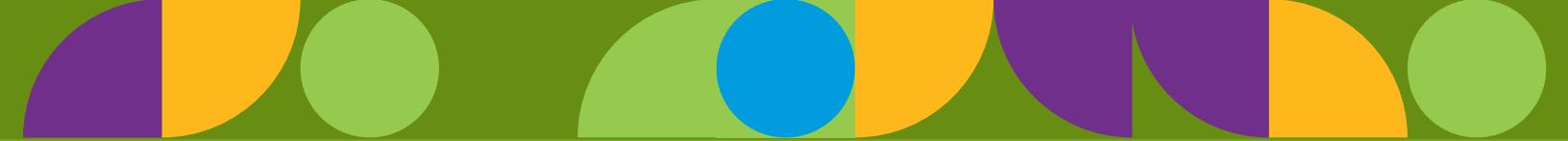
- » Size: ~500 students (K-12)
- » Context: Rural, small-town district

West Fargo Public Schools

- » Size: ~12,000+ students
- » Context: Suburban, multi-campus district

North Dakota Youth Correctional Center

- » Size: ~100 students
- » Context: One campus, serving unique student population



Building capacity, continuous improvement and sharing ownership

Sustaining momentum required more than enthusiasm. It required structure. The pilot cohort had shown what was possible, but the next step was providing North Dakotans with the tools, professional learning and support needed to carry the work forward sustainably and make it their own.

At first, KnowledgeWorks worked side by side with NDDPI to help personalized, competency-based learning take root. The KnowledgeWorks team, in partnership with the community, led the design of programs, set up convenings and provided instructional coaching for district leaders and educators.

From the beginning, though, the goal was for North Dakotans to own, sustain and spread the work beyond the initial pilot.

Each district's design team guided local work, and quarterly cohort convenings allowed leaders and educators to share what they had tried, what worked and what didn't – all in the spirit of continuous improvement. Teachers weren't just participants in professional learning; they were leading it, showing their colleagues and peers what personalized, competency-based learning looked like in practice.

Those gatherings helped build trust and shared understanding. Rural and urban districts, large and small, discovered they faced some of the same challenges. Educators could learn from one another, even when the settings were different. That sense of shared meaning laid the foundation for something more permanent. What began as a small group of early adopters turned into a permanent personalized learning network.

As the work matured, KnowledgeWorks and the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction gradually but deliberately stepped back, allowing cohort leaders to take the reins—running the convenings and professional learning themselves. This intentional transfer of leadership was essential to building lasting local capacity and ensuring that the work could continue to thrive beyond the initial partnership. Teachers stepped into leadership roles, facilitating sessions and mentoring peers. District leaders, in turn, began to rely on one another for guidance and collaboration.

With this growing confidence and capacity, the cohort expanded, inviting new districts from across the state to join the effort and transforming what began as a small group of innovators into a statewide network for personalized, competency-based learning.

That collective momentum helped formalize the [North Dakota Network for Personalized Learning](#), now housed at [Valley City State University](#), where it continues to serve as a hub for professional learning, resources and collaboration. In 2025, the state made its first direct investment in personalized learning, signaling its emergence as a sustained education priority.

Proof in practice

The impact of personalized, competency-based learning is evident in both numbers and narratives. Statewide data indicates gains in readiness and enrollment, while students and teachers share how the approach is reshaping classrooms for the better. Together, the stories and statistics offer evidence that the work is making a difference.

Using choice boards to support learner agency

At Oakes Elementary School, teachers rely on “choice boards” of options for how students can show their learning. Teachers invite learners to design their own ways to demonstrate mastery. Instead of producing nearly identical assignments, students create projects that show their individual creativity and understanding.

Self-direction and learning with intention

Northern Cass School District’s approach to personalized, competency-based learning emphasizes learner agency and goal setting. Classrooms across grade levels reflect flexible learning environments where learners choose where to sit, with whom to collaborate and how to pace their work. Elementary learners, for instance, often decide the order of their assignments and activities, fostering ownership of their learning journey. Learners set goals and track progress using Empower, the district’s learning management system, which supports self-paced learning and encourages reflection. This model supports both academic growth and emotional well-being, ensuring learners are challenged and supported at every step.

Reflection as a routine

In West Fargo, teachers build reflection time directly into the school day. At the end of each lesson, students rate their proficiency on the learning target, jot it on a sticky note and post it on the door as they leave. The simple practice helps students pause to assess their progress while giving teachers real-time insight into where support is needed. Teachers say the shift has improved both engagement and outcomes. Students are invested in tracking their growth and, as a result, evidence of learning has increased.



Statewide shift

A new vision for learning in North Dakota

North Dakota's personalized, competency-based learning is showing measurable impact for students, teachers and schools.



60%

60% of high school students say they can demonstrate learning in various ways



81%

81% of educators say they give learners multiple ways to show mastery



Growth from four pilot districts in 2017 to dozens of districts in 2025



80%

80% of elementary students say they can demonstrate learning in various ways



61%

61% of educators say that working toward personalized learning has improved their district's culture



\$1 million state investment to support the Intermediary for Innovative Education at Valley City State University



+14

+14 percentage points workforce ready



The North Dakota Network for Personalized Learning boasts more than 300 members, representing five partners in higher education and 16 K-12 districts. And it's still growing.



Lessons learned

North Dakota's journey wasn't always smooth. The state's experience offers important lessons for others pursuing personalized, competency-based learning.

1. Vision guides the work.

Starting with a clear 'why' was critical to the work. Districts anchored work in district-level Portraits of a Graduate or learner visions that kept them focused through the ups and downs.

2. Stable leadership matters.

Consistent, visionary leadership at both the state and district level made the difference in North Dakota. Districts with steady superintendents and principals sustained momentum, while turnover slowed progress in others.

3. Collaboration fuels accountability.

Quarterly convenings, design teams and a personalized learning network created both support and healthy pressure. When districts shared openly – about successes and challenges – it built trust and encouraged everyone to keep moving. Change felt less isolating when educators knew they were in it together.

4. New measures are critical.

The work is difficult because it pushes against an entrenched system. Traditional test scores don't fully capture changes happening in classrooms. Early dips in traditional measures masked important gains in student agency, ownership and readiness. New measures – from Choice Ready indicators to student surveys – were critical to showing real progress and kept the work moving.

5. Progress isn't linear.

Early on, implementation gaps are to be expected. As new approaches take root, practices are refined through measurement and continuous improvement cycles. Leaders had to reassure teachers and communities that this was a normal part of the transformation process. Now, districts report stronger student ownership, teachers leading their peers and early signs of improved readiness for college, career and life.

6. Context makes a difference.

The network helps schools and districts learn from one another, but each district faces unique implementation challenges depending on its context and readiness. It's critical to remember that districts will need varying support during implementation.

7. Local ownership sustains change.

KnowledgeWorks was a key partner in catalyzing the work, but it stuck because North Dakotans took charge. District design teams and NDDPI led the way, shifting responsibilities for convenings and training into local hands. With a permanent home at Valley City State University and dedicated funding, The North Dakota Network for Personalized Learning offers a long-term anchor for the work. Lasting change depends on local leadership and capacity.

What's next

North Dakota has come a long way—from four pilot districts in 2017 to a statewide network of schools rethinking how learning works best. But local leaders aren't finished yet.

The legislature's \$1 million investment in 2025 gives the North Dakota Network for Personalized Learning a permanent home and ensures professional learning will continue long after the pilot phase. Already, the network boasts more than 300 members, five higher education institutions and 16 districts. And it's still growing.

The next chapter will focus on further aligning policy and practice, including scaling teacher leadership, building new funding pathways to sustain innovation and strengthening a culture of continuous improvement. Districts will continue to spread personalized, competency-based learning approaches in an effort to reach every student, beyond the early adopters. Building on the three policy areas outlined in its recently released Innovation Guide, North Dakota is highlighting examples of how schools and districts are beginning to use existing policy flexibilities to remove barriers, empower educators and transform learning for students, and how others might build on these examples in their own contexts.



Change like this doesn't happen overnight. It takes all of us, working together and staying connected to our purpose—especially when things get hard. We have to keep lifting each other up and reminding ourselves why it's worth it.

**Bill Hite, President/CEO
KnowledgeWorks**

North Dakota's journey is drawing national attention, presenting at leading education conferences and earning distinguished awards and recognition. Northern Cass, one of the pilot partner schools, was a finalist for the Yass Prize in 2022, and North Dakota received the 2024 Frank Newman Award for State Innovation, honoring its success in spearheading the nation's first competency-based graduation pathway. The state has shown that personalized learning isn't just a vision; it can be scaled across districts of various sizes and settings. As more states look for ways to make education more innovative, rigorous and relevant, North Dakota offers a model for how to do it: align vision and policy, invest in leaders and educators and stay committed for the long haul.

Who was involved?

North Dakota's personalized, competency-based learning work was built on a broad coalition of support.

Bush Foundation

Regional organization that provided critical funding to launch and sustain the initiative.

EdLeader21*

Created the statewide Portrait of a Graduate.

KnowledgeWorks

Ongoing partner. Served as lead partner during the initial cohort, providing direct support to districts. Over time, shifted to behind-the-scenes strategy and policy support.

North Dakota Chamber of Commerce

Partner in supporting the passage of SB2186.

North Dakota Department of Public Instruction (NDDPI)

Direct partner from the start, led by the state superintendent and director of academic support. Supported recruitment, planning, facilitation, leadership coaching and alignment across the state.

North Dakota Personalized Learning Network

Connects districts and educators through professional learning, resources and collaboration.

North Dakota United

State teachers' union that supported the passage of SB2186.

Valley City State University

Hosts the Intermediary for Innovative Education, which houses North Dakota Personalized Learning Network. Provides a long-term home for personalized learning in the state.

WestEd

Research partner to capture and summarize implementation outcomes, analyze impact and share implications.



Additional resources

Additional resources

- » [North Dakota Innovation Guide](#)
- » [Personalized Learning in North Dakota Supported by Education Policy](#) (video)
- » [Personalized, Competency-Based Learning in North Dakota](#) (video)

Evaluation and data

- » [North Dakota Outcomes Report](#)
- » [Key Findings in North Dakota](#)

Policy and frameworks

- » [Text of SB 2186](#) (2017)
- » [Text of SB 2196](#) (2021)
- » [Choice Ready Framework](#)
- » [North Dakota's Portrait of a Graduate](#)
- » [North Dakota Learning Continuum](#)

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