

PERSONALIZATION

“Students need to clearly understand the goal/target for each lesson or unit and to work toward the same goal, albeit through personalized means. Students need to be at the centre of their learning through interactive project-based learning. Students need to understand not only what they need to learn, but how they learn. Students need time to process information, focus on process skills and competencies, become avid self-assessors, and have the opportunity to demonstrate their learning in multiple ways.”

Darlene Marcinkevics, Principal, Spruce Grove

Personalized instruction seeks to understand every student’s unique developmental level, learning style, passions, skills, and foundational knowledge. It is based on ongoing, differentiated assessment, and meaningful relationships between students and staff. Darlene Marcinkevics adds the following: “Tailoring learning; including the learning environment; personalizing learning to enhance social skills and a sense of responsibility; encouraging ethical citizenship; and using assistive technologies and resources to support all learners with mastery learning.”

Janet Grenier notes, “Learning is repetitive. If students can make repeated connections between the languages and the sciences, they will get a deeper understanding of their content. If you understand what was going on politically and economically wherever in the world you were living, and then you understand why a certain author was writing what he was writing, all of that makes sense ... Life doesn’t happen in a bubble; everything is related.”

Personalization and differentiated instructional practices can transform education into an adaptive practice designed to meet each student’s unique needs. Deanna Helton says, “The personalization element has led to really good interdisciplinary discussion. Teachers share an office, and they share the students, so it’s a lot harder for students to get lost. The whole point of personalization is to ensure that the pathway for each student is taken care of.”

What is the impact on students?

When staff know students, the students’ needs are more readily met. The school experience is increasingly built on relationships between students and adults in the school. Having role models is important, but more than that, students are able to convey their interests, goals and aspirations to the adults in the school. Tom Christensen describes the personalization principle at work in his school: “We don’t have a lunch block; it’s up to the students to use their time well. But we have a quad system, whereby the student body is divided into four groups and the students stay with the same teachers for math, social studies, English and science throughout high school. This helps build long-term relationships and contributes more than anything else to academic rigour. It’s a trade-off: we have much more flexible timetables, like post-secondary school, but those student-teacher relationships provide the security that students at this age group need.”

By having student needs up front, students accept the educational program as being more meaningful for them. Michelle Blair says, “In our academic support program, we have encouraged students to take more responsibility for their learning. Students are now better able to advocate for themselves, whether this takes the form of asking for accommodations based upon their learning needs or constructing a personal learning environment that helps them succeed.”

Through personalization, schools progress toward clarifying student hopes and dreams, setting and correcting the course or roadmap to accomplishing those dreams, and finding new interests – new career paths that fit with their skills, attitudes and ambitions. In her school, Darlene Marcinkevics notes, “The decrease in drop-outs and an increase in graduation rates are all positive signals that personalization for student learning is working.”

What is the impact on staff?

Managing to get to know every student and build relationships with them can be daunting in many schools. In addition, “Teaching is a very isolating job,” says Tom Christensen. “You spend most of your day in a classroom, except for a few minutes in the staff room. We’ve tried to deprivatize the classroom. [Teachers] share an office, they have open spaces where they work with students – they don’t take ownership of a classroom.”

Setting up advisory systems with teachers can bring a measure of awareness of individuals in the school. Longer blocks for each subject period allow teachers to spend more time with students and get to know them better. Staff can also participate in setting up student internships and work experience opportunities.

For many schools, the shift to personalization has resulted in greater dialogue and collaboration. Michelle Blair says, “As we worked to shift the focus onto students and how they learn, teaching conversations began to change from what to teach to how to teach.” Where teachers once spent PLCs creating exams, they now spend time dissecting those exams to determine what their students need next. Teachers are watching each other teach and offering positive feedback.

“There has to be buy-in from students, parents and teachers. There has to be communication and planning in advance.”

Deanna Helton, Principal, Bishop McNally



When personalization is a focus:

- communication and planning happen in advance, to ensure buy-in from students, parents and teachers
- teacher advisories are in place with a focus on building relationships and rapport
- multiple forms of assessment are used to get to know students’ knowledge base, interests and aptitudes, to help them build on that knowledge base and to expand opportunities for students
- diverse choices for diverse career learning paths, including non-traditional learning paths, are in place
- portfolios, including e-folios, allow students to showcase their work
- cross-curricular teaching and learning is encouraged
- credit recovery options are available to students.

SOURCES: Darlene Marcinkevics, Principal, Spruce Grove; Janet Grenier, Directrice, École Ste-Marguerite-Bourgeoys; Deanna Helton, Principal, Bishop McNally; Tom Christensen, Principal, Olds; Michelle Blair, Principal, Grande Prairie Composite School; Larry Dick, Principal, Bellerose Composite School