

Lessons from the NESSC NextGen Personalized Learning Initiative

November 2017



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Forward

In 2014, the New England Secondary School Consortium (NESSC),¹ in collaboration with the Great Schools Partnership (GSP), initiated a three-year NextGen Personalized Learning Initiative.² This project was funded through a grant awarded by the Next Generation Learning Challenges (NGLC) Regional Funds for Breakthrough Schools initiative. The NESSC NextGen Personalized Learning Initiative was designed with the aim of supporting a network of schools in accelerating school-wide transformation toward personalized, proficiency-based learning. By offering each student the support that she or he needs in acquiring knowledge and skills essential for success after high school, personalized, proficiency-based learning aligns with the NESSC's long-term goal of increasing the educational achievement of all students.

The 21³ schools selected for participation in the NESSC NextGen Personalized Learning Initiative represent a subset of the League of Innovative Schools (LIS), a regional network of secondary schools supported by the NESSC. From June 2014 through June 2017, GSP staff worked alongside school leaders and teachers to design and implement personalized, proficiency-based learning systems with the intended outcomes of:

- Improved achievement and learning for all student demographic groups;
- Improved high school graduation rates for all student demographic groups; and

1 The New England Secondary School Consortium (NESSC) is a unique regional partnership working to close persistent achievement gaps, strengthen college and career readiness, and promote greater educational equity and opportunity for all students. Coordinated by the Great Schools Partnership with generous support from the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, the NESSC facilitates collaboration between state education agencies from Connecticut, Maine, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont. Its collective aim is to support the simultaneous revision of policies, enhancement of practice, and engagement of communities so that all students experience a public education system that personalizes learning.

2 Funding for the NGLC Regional Funds for Breakthrough Schools initiative was provided by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

3 20 Schools were selected for participation in the NESSC NextGen Personalized Learning Initiative in December 2014. Monmouth Middle School broke away from Monmouth Academy before the start of the 2015-2016 school year, bringing the adjusted number of schools participating in the Initiative to 21.

- Improved ninth-grade-to-college-enrollment rates for all student demographic groups.

All schools participating in the Initiative received multiple supports to assist them in this effort, including grant funding, GSP coaching,⁴ and facilitated learning opportunities with other schools in the LIS network.

This report shares what we learned alongside our school partners as we supported their transformative change efforts. In particular, it focuses on how the implementation of personalized, proficiency-based education looks different from school to school and across states depending on a wide range of contextual factors. It also reflects on the challenge of designing short-term interventions that hold promise for sustaining ongoing school-wide transformation in the longer-term.

4 The Great Schools Partnership specializes in school and district transformation coaching. Each school's assigned coach works with a representative leadership team to develop an action plan informed by Global Best Practices—a research-based self-assessment tool—and provide targeted follow-up support. GSP coaching intentionally builds on the strengths of work already underway in three broad areas: policy refinement, capacity building for improved practice, and community engagement.

All schools made progress on transformation activities

80% of schools completed at least 11 of 21 defined activities.

45% of schools completed at least 17 of 21 defined activities.

What We Learned

Our work through this Initiative over the past three years has affirmed the value of supporting schools in identifying tailored approaches to adopting personalized, proficiency-based learning as a core commitment. Moreover, our experience working alongside participating schools has confirmed the importance of framing our collective effort as the evolution of existing work leading to greater levels of personalization, rather than branding personalization as a bold innovation in and of itself. This framing is especially relevant when working with 'transformation sites,' as was the case for all of the schools that participated in the Initiative.

The process of reflecting on this work has also encouraged us to look more closely at the sequencing of activities encompassed by school transformation toward personalized, proficiency-based learning. By juxtaposing changes that are more technical in nature with those that are more adaptive, we began to identify patterns of implementation. We also began to look more closely at the dual nature of some activities that could be implemented as either technical or adaptive change depending on the context and with varying results. Similarly, the implicit approach of the Initiative was to push change across all dimensions of the system simultaneously. While this worked for some schools, particularly those who had started this work prior to the grant, others struggled to fully implement the defined activities and focused primarily on instituting technical changes.

These reflections from the intermediary perspective resonate with the experience of participants. School leaders described their relentless perseverance through starts and stops, and the importance of being able to see victory even in small advances. They also identified coaching support as a significant factor in helping them remain both on track and realistic, especially when the work felt insurmountable. In particular, school leaders appreciated having GSP coaches as thought partners with enough understanding of the school to offer contextually-relevant support and guidance. Researchers from Center on Reinventing Public Education concur, noting in their observations from across schools that are supported by multiple NGLC-funded intermediaries: "The most critical supports, we're

learning, come not from generic consultants with technical expertise, but rather from outsiders who can help leaders think through key decisions and a sound game plan...this specialized role is emerging as one of the most important kinds of help a school can have as it tries to make the leap to personalized instruction for every student."⁵

"The funny thing is, we were a staff that all agreed to make this shift—knowing and feeling like it was the right shift to make. And yet it was still incredibly challenging and eye-opening to make it happen."

— School Leader, Connecticut

Streamlining and sequencing also emerged as important factors influencing school-wide transformation toward personalized, proficiency-based learning. In some instances school leaders and coaches were able to use the Initiative to integrate multiple strands of work under a single umbrella. "The biggest advantage for us," a school leader in New Hampshire reflected, "has been that we've been able to pull everything together, and look at it through one lens, through personalization." GSP coaches similarly noted that they tried to help school leaders and their faculty see how the different activities defined by the Initiative fit together and aligned with existing school priorities.

At the same time, school leaders and coaches were not immune to the sensation that "educators are constantly running from behind, seeking to keep up before the next new reform—often disconnected from the last reform—sweeps over them."⁶ GSP coaches working with schools participating in the Initiative

5 Betheny Gross and Colleen McCann, "Why Schools Shouldn't Go It Alone on Personalized Learning," The Lens (CRPE blog), September, 21 2016, <https://www.crpe.org/thelens/schools-shouldnt-go-alone-PL>.

6 Anthony S. Bryk et. al., *Learning to Improve: How America's Schools Can Get Better at Getting Better* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard Education Press, 2016), x.

noted how some of the teachers they encountered seemed worn down by a barrage of shifting demands and priorities. They also reflected that the list of activities defined by the Initiative (see Appendix III) sometimes resulted in the unintended consequence of participants adopting a technical, checklist mentality to the work. Notably, educators helped craft the list of requirements, which were intended to outline high-leverage activities supportive of building a personalized, proficiency-based system. This experience raises questions about the delicate balance between taking a systems change approach to school transformation and not overwhelming educators.

We explore these lessons more fully within this report. Before we do, however, we need to establish the context in which this work took place by briefly defining our approach to personalized, proficiency based-learning and how it informed the design of the NESSC NextGen Personalized Learning Initiative.

About the NESSC NextGen Personalized Learning Initiative

Historically, students have passed courses with As and with Ds. They have earned diplomas that do not certify the mastery of skills required for success in higher education or the rapidly evolving job market, and they have received instruction that may have been uneven or inconsistent across teachers and grade levels. The sobering reality is that many high schools don't know what their graduates have learned or are capable of doing.

The NESSC NextGen Personalized Learning Initiative set out to change this dynamic, recognizing that schools in transition need practical guidance that can help them determine what they are doing well, and what they need to change.

In the context of the Initiative, we define personalized, proficiency-based education as a system that:

- Sets clear graduation standards that hold all students accountable for demonstrating that they have acquired essential knowledge and skills;
- Ensures that all students take responsibility for their own

learning, and have opportunities to develop the required knowledge and skills through a variety of learning experiences responsive to student needs and interests; and

- Monitors multiple measures of student learning and school effectiveness and implements an effective system of interventions to ensure continuous and equitable improvement for each student and the school as a whole.

Critically, *all three* of these strategies must be integrated. Unless a foundation of proficiency-based graduation standards exists alongside personalized learning experiences, schools run the risk of personalizing standards and growing the achievement gap rather than narrowing it. Likewise, defining standards without simultaneously developing diverse pathways for achieving them risks leaving some students behind.

Through the NESSC NextGen Personalized Learning Initiative, we set out to apply the foundational strategies of personalized learning to the school transformation process. Doing so required finding a balance between tailored, school-specific approaches and clearly-defined implementation criteria.

A nested structure of supports that offered schools multiple and diverse learning opportunities represents one approach to achieving this balance. Coaching support from the Great Schools Partnership provided each school with individualized attention focused on achieving its goals. Meanwhile, the cohort model of implementation offered opportunities for staff from participating schools to learn from each other as they charted a common course. The regional network coordination through the NESSC League of Innovative Schools facilitated engagement with a broader community of like-minded educators. Finally, the NESSC provides guidance and support to foster policy conditions across the region that support personalized, proficiency-based learning, including public advocacy for these policies by a group of NESSC Champions composed of legislators, business leaders, education leaders and teachers.

We also tried to strike an effective balance between tailored implementation approaches and structured guidance regarding the core-components of a high-performing personalized, proficiency-based learning system, including:

- proficiency-based instruction, assessment, grading and reporting;
- a multiple-measures assessment strategy that incorporates authentic demonstrations of learning and personal learning plans;
- a systematic system of interventions;
- personalized learning pathways; and
- broad data collection on school practices.

While each school participating in the NESSC NextGen Personalized Learning Initiative set its own priorities for meeting specific organizational and student needs, 21 activities defined by the project provided clear criteria for meeting expected standards (see Appendix III). For instance, the criterion: *The school has clearly defined graduation learning standards that lead to college and career readiness sets a clear benchmark that spurred schools to develop broad, foundational standards.* Supports provided by the Initiative created opportunities for each school to meet that benchmark by pursuing activities consistent with its specific context and needs (e.g., bespoke coaching support, site visits, and information exchange with other schools). Likewise, the required Global Best Practices self-assessment process served as a foundational roadmap for all participating schools by identifying specific elements of system-wide implementation without prescribing exactly how schools should pursue them.

School Selection Process

Participation in the NESSC NextGen Personalized Learning Initiative was open to the 75 members of the League of Innovative Schools as of January 2014. In keeping with our goal to apply foundational principles and strategies of personalized learning to the project itself, the selection process for participation was criterion-referenced, not norm-referenced or based on relative measures of peer competition.

In other words, we did not look for the best five or ten school proposals, but rather identified all of the schools in the pool of applicants that met articulated standards of capacity, commitment, and readiness (see Appendix V). Similarly, the decision made about each school at the end of each step in the

selection process was either "yes" or "not yet"—never "no"—in order to encourage all schools to stay involved in the League of Innovative Schools and continue to grow, even as we devoted targeted support to a smaller subset.

Final selection was determined by a review team composed of members from each of the five NESSC state education agencies, two representatives from NGLC, one representative of the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, one representative of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and four representatives from the Great Schools Partnership. This team reviewed the schools' proposals as well as summary reports from site visits conducted in November and December 2014. Twelve schools were selected to participate in Cohort 1 based on the high degree of capacity, commitment, and readiness they demonstrated.⁷ An additional eight schools were identified for Cohort 2, which would continue to develop their readiness in the run-up to implementation the following year.

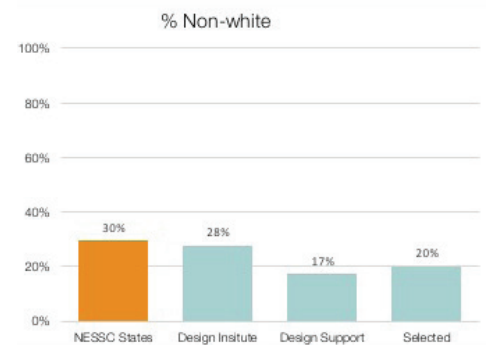
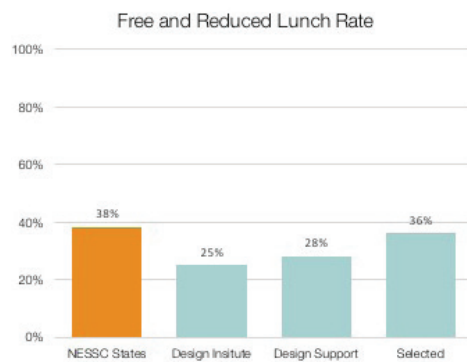
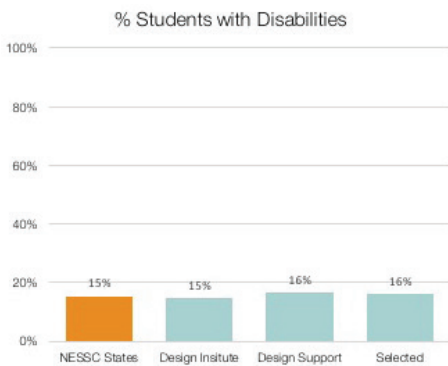
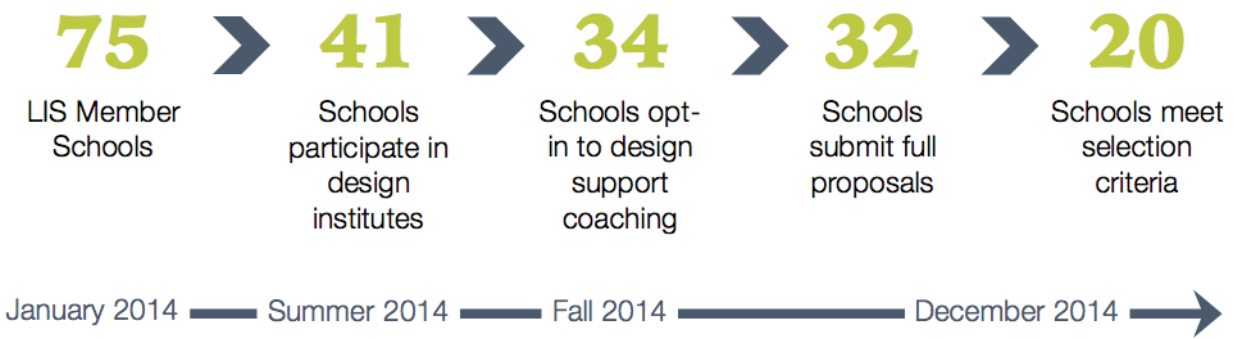
What We Provided

While Cohorts 1 and 2 received comparable levels of support across the duration of the project (see Table 1), the level of coaching intensity varied depending on where the school was at in its transformation process. Cohort 1 schools received intensive coaching support focused on the core components of a high-performing personalized-learning system in year one, which tapered off in year two as the school increased its capacity to carry out this work on its own. Cohort 2 schools, by contrast, received lighter-touch coaching focused on establishing foundational organizational structures and policies in their preparation year. This was followed by enhanced coaching support in year two as Cohort 2 schools began to engage in core components of implementation.

In all cases, the coaching relationship began with a comprehensive assessment of school capacity, resources, and preparedness. GSP uses an integrated, whole-school coaching model; our goal is always school-wide transformation aligned

⁷ Monmouth Middle School (serving grades 5-8) broke away from Monmouth Academy (serving grades 9-12) in 2015, bringing the adjusted number of schools participating in the NESSC NextGen Personalized Learning Initiative to 21.

NESSC Personalized Learning Initiative



	Total Enrollment (2014-2015)	American Indian or Alaska Native	Asian or Pacific Islander	Black or African American	Hispanic/ Latino of any race	Two or More Races	White
Alan Shawn Feinstein Middle School	1149	*	*	17	32	14	1078
Cabot School	178	*	*	*	*	*	169
Central Falls High School	742	*	*	86	545	34	70
Cumberland High School	1283	*	25	34	104	45	1075
Deer Isle-Stonington High School	113	*	*	*	*	*	*
Great Bay Charter School	113	*	*	*	*	*	102
Hall-Dale Middle School & High School	541	*	*	*	*	*	*
Harwood Union Middle/High School	519	*	*	*	*	*	498
High School in the Community	282	*	*	116	121	*	38
Manchester School of Technology	845	*	15	42	99	16	670
Metropolitan Business Academy	391	*	*	152	136	*	89
Monmouth Academy	221	*	*	*	*	*	*
Monmouth MS	227	*	*	*	*	*	*
New Fairfield High School	933	*	13	*	57	16	836
New Fairfield Middle School	629	*	13	*	39	14	554
New Haven Academy	264	*	*	164	64	*	27
Noble High School	1080	*	*	*	*	*	*
Pittsfield Middle/High School	269	*	*	*	*	*	258
Ponaganset High School	651	*	*	*	*	*	633
Richmond Middle/High School	163	*	*	*	*	*	*
Twinfield Union School	388	*	*	*	*	19	349
Total	10981	0	66	611	1197	158	6446

* Data suppressed for confidentiality

with *Global Best Practices*, even when schools opt for coaching services, technical assistance, or professional development that primarily targets a smaller number of staff. Similarly, while coaching support looks different in each school, all coaches have the primary role of keeping the school community focused on achieving its goals regardless of obstacles or setbacks encountered along the way.

Outcomes of the NESSC NextGen Personalized Learning Initiative

This report focuses on establishing what changed in schools as a result of participating in the NESSC NextGen Personalized Learning Initiative. While student impact is the ultimate goal of this work, the causal pathway from school change to student achievement cannot be fully explored within the grant implementation period covered here. It will take time for students to experience the changes introduced by the Initiative, and for those experiences to influence students' learning outcomes as measured by common metrics (e.g., standardized test scores, school- or district-based performance assessments, or graduation rates).

Table 1: The NESSC NextGen Personalized Learning Initiative provided schools phased support.

	Application Year	Year 1	Year 2
Cohort 1 (12 Schools)	Design	Implementation	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Design Institute 4 days coaching 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 60 days coaching \$25,000 Principals' PLG LIS Meetings NESSC Conference PLG Facilitator Training 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 20-30 days coaching Principals' PLG LIS Meetings NESSC Conference Teaching + Learning Institute Celebration Event
Cohort 2 (8 Schools)	Design		Implementation
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Design Institute 4 days coaching 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 30 days coaching \$25,000 Principals' PLG LIS Meetings NESSC Conference PLG Facilitator Training 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 40 days coaching Principals' PLG LIS Meetings NESSC Conference Teaching + Learning Institute Celebration Event

By establishing an initial understanding of what was accomplished at the school level, this report sets the necessary foundation for eventually identifying the contribution of the Initiative to student impact indicators. Anecdotal evidence collected over the course of the Initiative also suggests how the adoption of practices including proficiency-based learning and multiple learning pathways have informed teacher practices in ways that have already begun to transform how students understand their own learning.

The NESSC NextGen Personalized Learning Initiative envisioned school transformation toward personalized, proficiency-based learning as a systemic effort, requiring synchronized changes in multiple domains (i.e., 21 defined activities aligned to the 20 dimensions of *Global Best Practices*⁸; see Appendix III). This type of complex transformation cannot be assessed by a single measure. Instead, it depends on the synthesis of multiple data points and perspectives. In addition to schools' own documentation of the completion of defined activities, we examined their *Global Best Practices* self-assessment scores from the Design (August 2014) and Implementation (June 2017) phases of the Initiative. We also asked school leaders and coaches to describe their experience and identify the most significant change that they perceived as a result of this work.⁹

Sequencing technical and adaptive changes

Achievement of the common activities defined by the Initiative according to each school's unique benchmarks was consistently tracked throughout the grant period using a combination of self-assessments, school reporting, and periodic documentation by GSP coaches. All participating schools reported making progress across all 21 defined activities. 17 schools reported that they had achieved at least half of the defined activities, while 9 of these same schools reported that they were 70% complete.

The slower progress of three of the five schools reporting more limited uptake can be partially explained by a change

of principal that occurred mid-way through the grant period. New principals and GSP coaches alike reflected that schools lost momentum when they experienced a change in leadership. New leaders experienced steep learning curves, both to familiarize themselves with the school and to learn about their school's participation in the Initiative. Not having taken part in the decision-making process to join the Initiative, new principals found themselves in the challenging position of being expected to lead the work. Leaders and coaches both cited lack of capacity and focus as challenges to inducting new principals to the work of the Initiative. Bi-monthly Principal Professional Learning Group (PLG) meetings were emphasized by some new leaders as particularly beneficial in this regard. One new principal noted, for instance: "Seeing the struggles of the position through the eyes of people who have been doing it longer than I have has been really helpful."

Grouping activities by rate of completion gives some indication of the sequencing of activities adopted by schools in pursuit of personalized, proficiency-based learning (see Table 2). All five activities identified as complete by at least 18 of the 20 participating schools qualify as technical challenges with known solutions that can be implemented relatively easily (e.g. participation in training, purchasing computing devices or internet bandwidth). These types of changes are often relatively easy to check off the list, but on their own, are usually insufficient for inducing transformative change.

All five defined activities for which schools reported the lowest rates of completion qualify as adaptive challenges. Unlike technical changes, adaptive challenges do not have a known solution.¹⁰ Moreover, they depend on the engagement of multiple stakeholders, rather than the benevolent wisdom of an expert. The activities with the lowest rates of completion require new behaviors on the part of school leadership and staff as well as colleagues at other schools, students, and parents. Coaches sometimes played a coordinating role, identifying different strengths and areas for growth across the school system. In doing so, they helped schools identify focused areas of work that would support broader transformation efforts. As one principal from Vermont explained: "It's been good to have

8 In 2016, the Great Schools Partnership published a revised 2nd Edition of *Global Best Practices* that includes two additional dimensions in a new category dedicated to district-level practices.

9 For an overview of the Most Significant Change method and resulting stories, see Appendix IV.

10 See, for instance, Ron Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1998).

Table 2: Activities with the highest rates of completion tend to be more technical in nature while the activities with the lowest rates of completion required adaptive change.

NESSC NextGen Personalized Learning Initiative Defined Activities	# of Schools That Completed the Activity*
5 Activities with the Highest Completion Rate	
(3) The school must have adequate bandwidth to support access for all students.	20/20
(4) School must have trained Professional Learning Group facilitators.	20/20
(21) The Principal participates in a monthly meeting (in-person, virtual, and/or phone-call) with other principals in the LIS in a Professional Learning Network sharing successes, discussing and addressing challenges, and learning with and from one another. The superintendent assures that the principal will have the time and support to meet this requirement.	20/20
(12) Every student has access to an electronic computing device (either via a bring your own device policy or provided by the school).	19/20
(1) The school has clearly defined graduation learning standards that lead to college and career readiness (and is on track to adopt these for the start of the 2015-2016 school year).	18/20
5 Activities with the Lowest Completion Rate	
(18) The school has implemented a system of comprehensive interventions and supports that provides support to every student.	10/19*
(16) The principal and other educators in the building regularly visit classrooms and collect data about the extent to which instructional practices are aligned with personalized learning and share and analyze data on the overall instructional patterns with the full faculty at least twice a year.	11/20
(7) Students are empowered to make demonstrable decisions about how, when, and where they engage in learning within classrooms and in other settings.	10/20
(8) Every student completes and submits an application to college, the armed services, career or trade licensing program, certificate-producing training program, or equivalent.	5/17**
(17) The school has a formal process to share information on student learning between middle and high school teachers.	6/19**

* One school marked this activity N/A

** This activity did not apply to the three middle schools

somebody coming in and keeping us on track. And also letting us know that what feels insurmountable is okay. You don't have to have all of the answers right now. Focus back on teaching and learning. Focus back on what matters to kids. The rest will start to fall into place."

We return to this observation when discussing our lingering questions, below.

"Part of our role was having individual, informal conversations with teachers just to ask, 'What's going well for you? What are your challenges right now? And what do you wish you could learn about?' Understanding what teachers needed informed conversations that we would have with the leadership team."

– GSP Coach

A closer look at three commonly experienced outcomes

Each school's experience of this work is unique. *Global Best Practices* self-assessment scores and varying rates of completion across the 21 defined activities clearly demonstrate that different schools are at different places. The steps that they took as a result of participating in the Initiative reflect those differences. That said, triangulating the available data reveals some cross-cutting experiences and areas of growth. Three commonly experienced changes are summarized here.

1) Systems and Structures to Support Proficiency-Based Learning

Schools consistently identified the creation of systems and structures to support proficiency-based learning as a primary outcome of participating in the Initiative. Approximately 75% of schools indicated that they had completed the defined

activities associated with creating proficiency-based learning and assessment systems. Improvements along these dimensions were similarly documented in *Global Best Practices* self-assessment scores (see Appendix II).

When asked to reflect on their experience of participating in the NESSC NextGen Personalized Learning Initiative, both school leaders and GSP coaches described structural shifts within a systems-change model as a primary focus of their work. Notably, the ways in which schools discussed their experience of creating these structures blurred the boundaries between technical and adaptive work. Schools recounted how designing a standards-based grading system often started out as a technical initiative, focused narrowly on the identification of performance indicators and scoring criteria. However, many schools ultimately experienced creating systems to implement proficiency-based learning as an adaptive change process, noting the interconnectedness of graduation standards, assessments, and the instructional practices employed by teachers. The most significant change story 'Systems' captures the holistic experience of implementing structures supportive of personalized, proficiency-based learning (see Appendix IV). Revising graduation standards and assessment practices initiates a chain reaction that touches other elements of the school system ranging from curriculum design to student habits of work and parent expectations.

As with so much of this work, the best examples come from schools that have wrestled with the work and, in so doing, translated abstract concepts into concrete practice. One school leader from Vermont discussed changes in systems and structures by focusing in on the ways in which teachers talk about their practice and discuss student work. The ninth grade team in particular shows signs of promising practice in how they have reimagined their team meeting time:

It's not all of the same players anymore, but the structure of these meetings have changed. [Now, teachers] look at student work and they try to strategize. They do a lot more planning together, talking about trying different strategies in the classroom and being more open to being in each other's classrooms. It really has taken that shift.

The same school leader then went on to describe a broader change across the school in how teachers support each other in honing their instructional practice:

We did put in a structure a couple of years back, three years ago, I guess, around learning communities. We have interdisciplinary learning communities that run like professional learning groups. They meet twice a month and each team is just really starting to figure out how to utilize that time in a really focused way that's specific to teaching and learning. Initially, we used some of that time to lay the foundation for building a personalized, proficiency-based learning system. Now the teachers are really starting to lead their interdisciplinary learning communities themselves, and are using protocols to unpack dilemmas or look at student work. That evolution took some time. Initially, the old-school people were a little bit disruptive when we tried to follow protocols. Now, teachers are actively coming to these groups. They want to do this. So that's really taking shape.

This example of how a school has persevered to establish structures and systems that support professional learning for teachers within and across teams illustrates the dual technical/adaptive nature of driving school transformation. The establishment of professional learning communities or common teacher planning time is a technical shift that can be mandated by administrators and designed into the school schedule. How teachers and leaders alike use this time determines whether the activity will have a technical or adaptive effect on broader school transformation efforts.

2) Student Voice and Choice

Creating more voice and choice for students about how, when, and where they engage in learning was highlighted by a minority of participating schools as the most significant change to result from their participation in the Initiative. This theme is interesting because it demonstrates how schools can experience the work of transitioning to a personalized, proficiency-based system as resulting in significant achievements while still openly acknowledging those same achievements as areas for continued growth. Creating opportunities for student voice and choice can entail a seismic shift from traditional expectations

about what teaching and learning should look like.

School leaders that identified increased student involvement in the instructional component of their own learning as their most significant change were also quick to point out that it has been a difficult journey. The most significant change story in Appendix IV describes this work as *incremental, cyclical, and responsive*. These descriptors again hint at the need to integrate technical solutions (e.g. an established process for endorsing and assessing learning opportunities that occur outside of a traditional classroom environment) and more adaptive behavioral or attitudinal shifts (e.g., students taking initiative for designing their own learning).

Half of the schools participating in the Initiative reported some improvement along the Multiple Pathways dimension in their final *Global Best Practices* self-assessment. A quarter of schools reported no change. The remaining quarter scored themselves lower on their final assessment than they had previously, potentially reflecting improved or more nuanced understanding of what introducing opportunities for greater student voice and choice entails. Moreover, only half of the schools participating in this Initiative indicated they completed activities related to empowering students to make decisions about how, when and where they engage in learning. These findings are again consistent with an adaptive change process, where the nature and scale of the challenge continues to emerge even as you are taking steps to address it.

The school leaders that discussed the changes they have made toward establishing multiple learning pathways, described different approaches toward achieving a common end. At a participating school in Maine, multiple learning pathways show up in how students choose to demonstrate proficiency:

There will be at least two anchor competencies or standards that go with any design question [in our Applied Learning model]. Additionally, students will have the opportunity to choose other standards that they would like to demonstrate through that design question. So, if a student is partially proficient on a particular standard he may think: "Hey, I can use this project to reach proficiency through this design question." Meanwhile, another student may have already reached

proficiency in that same area, but is going to look at the design question and think: "Hey, I think I can move beyond proficiency with this design question by going deeper in my learning."

In this example, the creation of multiple learning pathways encourages students to take ownership over their own learning by accommodating different approaches to addressing a common design question.

A participating school in Vermont implemented multiple learning pathways in a way that emphasizes student choice of learning content within boundaries that establish common learning standards. In the words of this school leader:

When I first showed up, the number one complaint I would get over and over again from kids and adults was the lack of electives. That is not what I get anymore... Even though we're not offering any more electives, that theme has gone out the window because of the themed skill-based approach that we have adopted. There is a lot more freedom for kids to say, "Here's what we want." For example, if we're working on responding to a text in English class, the text doesn't have to be the same for everybody. Or if we're working on a certain project in history, students are not all studying the same thing. So, maybe you're learning about World War II, but you're learning about it from five different projects that five different groups did.

For small schools like this one, this approach to implementing multiple learning pathways created choices for students without adding new elective courses. Sustaining a program like this, however, requires a shift in mindset on the part of both teachers and students. Teachers have to be willing to let go of control over certain aspects of student learning (e.g., allowing students to select from different texts), while students need to understand that some aspects of their learning will be self-directed (e.g., determining how a group project aligns to the overall class objective).

3) Establishing a Shared Mission and Vision

Drafting a mission statement is a technical solution for providing a school direction. Living that mission at the school

requires an adaptive response from all members of the school community. *Global Best Practices* describes three distinct areas of effort required for establishing a shared mission and vision: (1) clearly articulating a mission and vision that exemplifies the shared principles and ideals of the school community, (2) obtaining endorsement of the mission and vision from the school community, and (3) using the mission and vision to guide action planning and decision-making processes. Several schools identified getting everyone on the same page as the most significant change to occur as a result of participating in the Initiative. School leaders consistently noted the absence of a tried-and-true model of personalized, proficiency-based education that they could easily communicate to staff, students and other stakeholders. Getting everyone on the same page was, therefore, an important part of the school transformation process. As noted above, sometimes this entailed finding opportunities for integrating piecemeal changes under a unifying umbrella. In other instances, establishing a shared mission and vision was a process of articulating what it means for personalized, proficiency-based learning to be a core feature of how the school functions.

Again, the challenge of establishing a shared mission and vision requires both technical and adaptive work. The Design Phase of the Initiative required all schools to develop action plans aligned with a clear vision for implementing personalized, proficiency-based learning that would provide the overarching vision for their transformation efforts, an example of technical work. Breathing life into those plans, however, is an adaptive process. Not surprisingly, perhaps, schools reported variable rates of completion for the activities corresponding to this theme, such as the school board taking steps to support proficiency-based graduation. GSP staff also noted anecdotal differences in how schools transitioned from the 4-day Design Institute back to their school setting. There seemed to be more appetite for engaging in adaptive work where schools leaders were able to build and sustain collective buy-in to the overarching vision. Where action planning at the school looked more like creating an itemized checklist, the subsequent work tended to look more technical.

One aspect of establishing a shared mission and vision for personalized, proficiency-based learning entails coming to

terms with the issue of grading. Both coaches and school leaders shared examples of challenges they experienced in creating common expectations and grading practices across teachers. These same expectations and practices also need to be understood and internalized by students and their parents. One school leader from Vermont described the shift that accompanied a shared vision for grading student work this way:

I think that how it probably used to look was, "Here's the score that you got. This is your grade. This is what you need to do if you want to get a better grade. If you want to get an A, maybe you need to do this, that, or the other thing." Whereas now, it's more of a criterion-based conversation. Students are actually using the language, such as: "So if I need to do a better job citing evidence, do you have models [I can look at]..." It's really about using that language and having a better understanding, in specific terms, of what students need to do to improve their learning. I think students can articulate their strengths and challenges more specifically, and in terms of the skills and content. Whereas before, I don't think they could do that.

Once again, this example points to distinctions between technical and adaptive change. Implementing a proficiency-based grading system is a technical process of defining scoring criteria. Students taking ownership over the results of their learning—and areas for improvement—entails an adaptive change in the mindset and behavior of students and teachers alike.

Supports + Barriers

Schools consistently identified GSP coaching support and opportunities to connect with other schools immersed in the same work as the most valuable aspects of participating in the Initiative. Both responses point to the adaptive nature of school transformation efforts, particularly the challenge of disrupting entrenched behaviors and ways of working. Schools described the value of working with their GSP coaches variously as "helping us keep our nose to the grindstone in implementing student-centered learning practices" and "having our coach there ... kept us pushing on—and on target—when we got busy

and off track."

With respect to networking opportunities, leaders identified a range of supports that they found valuable depending on their specific needs. School leaders found particular value in opportunities to share and collectively solve real dilemmas. Nearly half of the school leaders participating in the Initiative said that the bi-monthly Principal Professional Learning Group (PLG) meetings helped to 'normalize' their fears and concerns, leading to a feeling that they are not in this alone.

A similar number of school leaders also noted the value of school visits, in the role of both visitor and host. The 21 interviews surfaced 15 distinct practices/innovations that had been transferred from one school to another, spanning topics from transcript design and digital portfolios to scheduling intervention blocks and optimizing advisory time. Several school leaders emphasized the importance of finding the "right match" or other schools "like mine" when planning site visits or adopting practices from elsewhere. As one school leader from Rhode Island explained: "We've kind of taken things in bits and pieces and mashed them all together in a way that works for us. We reached out to at least two different schools. And our coach provided resources and materials. It certainly wasn't something that could have been done without the research and the connections that we had through the LIS."

During the Design Phase of the Initiative, we also asked schools about the barriers they perceived and/or experienced in taking on this work. Notable themes include:

- Difficulty identifying appropriate supports and interventions for students, particularly where there is a lack of shared academic expectations and/or there is a stigma attached to revision and remediation;
- Staff turnover and uneven capacity;
- Uncertainty about how to effectively use data to differentiate and personalize learning;
- Lack of funding, especially to cover the cost of time required for teachers to engage in necessary collaboration and professional development; and
- Challenges related to equity and diversity, including lack of diversity among staff.

These same themes re-surfaced in interviews with school leaders as the Initiative began to wind down. While tailored coaching support and grant funding provided through the Initiative helped alleviate some of these tensions in some schools during the implementation period, the underlying challenges that leaders perceived in doing this work remained.

As we continue to pursue this work in partnership with schools, we are also continuing to iterate within the NESSC League of Innovative Schools (LIS). Drawing from improvement science, we are identifying new ways to help schools refine their collaborative learning communities in ways that accelerate improvement by facilitating real time school-to-school communication and problem solving. We are also collaborating with teacher preparation programs to create a pipeline for teacher candidates to engage with the LIS while completing their programs of study and during their first three years of employment (even if the school at which they work is not yet an LIS member).

Sustainability

From the outset, the NESSC NextGen Personalized Learning Initiative adopted a two-pronged approach to sustainability. While GSP coaches provided schools with resources, encouragement, and focused support, it was always up to school leaders and their staff to do the hard work of implementing changes in their schools and classrooms. The ownership that schools feel for this work will be critical for

"We would have been doing this anyway on our own. We had made a decision about moving in this direction and GSP supported it, augmented it, helped us do better and move more quickly. We made the shift. GSP has really helped us do the work."

– School Leader, Connecticut

maintaining momentum now that the grant has concluded.

Additionally, the Great Schools Partnership will continue to support these schools through their continued involvement in the NESSC League of Innovative Schools (LIS). Between 2014 and 2017, the LIS grew from 75 to 123 member schools. These schools have voluntarily committed to collaborate with each other, to implement personalized learning, and to serve as exemplars in meeting the needs of all students.

Our scale-up strategy for the Initiative always hinged on fostering intentional, collaborative learning structures across the sub-set of participating schools as well as across the LIS more broadly. When we asked schools participating in the Initiative how the LIS could best continue supporting their efforts, responses showed strong alignment with this strategy:

- Continue to offer opportunities for learning and sharing across schools (e.g. workshops, webinars, school visits); Continue to offer Principal Professional Learning Group opportunities; and
- assist in creating coherence across states and the region, including interpretation of state policies.

These priorities are consistent with the ongoing iteration of the LIS described above and are embedded in our organization's 2017-2018 strategic plan.

Questions for Ongoing Work

- **How might short-cycle feedback loops on instructional practice help accelerate changes related to student agency and learning at the classroom level?** In retrospect, coaches wondered whether the work would have progressed differently had the MOU with schools placed greater emphasis on coaching support for instructional practice. Despite efforts during the Design Phase of the Initiative to establish expectations around instructional practice and Implementation Phase activities intended to support instructional conversations (e.g., the establishment of professional learning groups in schools), organizational design challenges often overshadowed conversations about instructional improvement. We had

hypothesized that taking time to establish a shared vision for the personalized, proficiency-based learning system would lead to increased buy-in and understanding from staff. However, this process took longer than we had anticipated and had the unintended consequence of delaying emphasis on shifts in instructional practice. Reflecting on this experience, coaches often brought up the difficulty of getting in to classrooms to observe instructional practice, especially early on in the Initiative. What leverage points or alternative ways of framing the work might enable coaches to access classrooms earlier? And how could they use those opportunities to create intentional, short-cycle feedback loops to demonstrate changes in student learning?

"It's just a huge challenge because you've got kids that are all at different places in where they're meeting the standards, so that's extremely challenging for all of our teachers."

– School Leader, Maine

- **What data would help explain why schools and teachers are realizing particular student learning results?** While the implementation of proficiency-based learning provides significantly richer student achievement measures, it does not provide information about how to enhance and improve this learning. We need to develop methods for measuring, understanding and improving instructional and organizational practices that support student achievement. Effective student intervention systems might provide one line of future inquiry. We have seen promising signs that when schools have used their transformation toward personalized, proficiency-based learning to also create effective intervention systems, they are better able to identify where students are struggling and provide timely, targeted support. We believe that monitoring multiple measures of student learning is essential to this effort, but

there is more to learn about how schools have effectively put this into practice.

- **What is the role of the ecosystem in supporting systems change?** How might building networks-within-networks support the spread and scale of innovative practices? This work has elevated questions about the role of ecosystems in supporting change at three overlapping levels: (1) the state or regional ecosystem, (2) the networked inter-school ecosystem, and (3) the intra-school ecosystem including school faculty and other community stakeholders.

The NESSC NextGen Personalized Learning Initiative was intentionally designed and implemented in order to capitalize on the regional ecosystem fostered by a five-state partnership. We are still learning how guidance and support from the Consortium leads to policy conditions and a broader enabling environment supportive of personalized, proficiency-based learning. It is becoming clear, however, that there is an important connection between policy and practice that depends upon the synchronization of change occurring in both domains. State policies with limited exemplars or supports in practice have a decreased chance of successful implementation. Likewise, innovative school practices may not be sustainable if changes in policy do not keep pace. In other words, the ecosystem supports—and is supported by—changes at the school and district levels. As commitment to personalized, proficiency-based learning continues to grow across the region, we will use these findings to inform and adjust the ongoing work of the NESSC.

As we continue to re-imagine the NESSC League of Innovative Schools (LIS), we are increasingly thinking about the network as an ecosystem of flexibly interconnected schools. As noted elsewhere in this report, schools participating in the Initiative consistently expressed appreciation for the critical feedback and sharing of promising practices that they experienced through LIS events. Several school leaders, for instance, noted the value of talking through implementation challenges in Principal Professional Learning Groups, which were open to all LIS principals. It is less clear, however, how much

of the collegiality they experienced came from learning alongside other school leaders on the same accelerated trajectory identified by the Initiative. Would this quality of experience be replicated in a group of school leaders at very different stages in the transformation process, or where they were pursuing different change trajectories? We intentionally designed a cohort model of implementation, with the expectation that staff from participating schools would learn from each other as they charted a common course. While significant emphasis was placed on schools being part of a network through the LIS, less explicit attention was paid to how schools participating in the Initiative could form a network-within-a-network. This is a notion that we are continuing to explore. Finally, schools are ecosystems unto themselves, with complex interrelationships between staff, students, administrators, families and other community stakeholders. The adaptive nature of much school transformation work highlighted the importance of fostering an enabling environment at the level of the individual school. School leaders and coaches both reflected on challenges that accompanied getting everyone on board. In some places, struggle was around consistent uptake of new teaching and learning practices across staff. In other schools, the more pronounced challenge was making sure that students and their parents fully understood the school's vision for student learning. Better understanding the ecosystems in which school transformation happens at all three levels (i.e. the regional policy environment, the system of networked schools, and within each school) could improve our knowledge of both school transformation processes and which strategies can be leveraged in different contexts to impact student learning.

- **What support is needed to help stakeholders at all levels of the system understand their role and opportunities for agency?** Personalized, proficiency-based learning requires leadership at all levels. But we cannot assume that teachers, students, parents, principals, district administrators and other stakeholders will automatically step into those roles on their own. What supports are most effective at connecting people with processes to support

intentional and interconnected approaches to systems change? We have started to explore these questions by establishing an intentional learning agenda about network theory and design principles.

- **Would schools make more progress toward adaptive change if they focused on a limited number of requirements?** Are different types of support required for schools concentrating on adaptive vs. technical changes? The implicit approach of the Initiative was to push change across all dimensions of the system simultaneously. While this worked for some schools, particularly those who had started this work prior to the grant, others struggled to fully implement the defined activities and focused primarily on instituting technical changes. Is it possible to identify fewer, contextually strategic dimensions of (adaptive) change, focus attention there, and create ripple effects across the wider system? Are there technical dimensions of school transformation that must be addressed prior to or in conjunction with adaptive changes? And does this sequencing vary from context to context? If so, can we identify appropriate combinations of changes and supports tailored to specific contexts that optimize the chances of success?

"You have students who come out of middle school with a very traditional grading system. We spend a whole year with them and their families in 9th grade trying to help them understand that – without being too brutal about it – they're probably under-prepared."

– School Leader, Connecticut

Appendix 1: Data Collection

This report draws on multiple data sources to assess the effect that the NESSC NextGen Personalized Learning Initiative had in participating schools. Student impact is the ultimate goal of this work. However, the causal pathway from school change to student achievement cannot be fully explored within the grant implementation period covered here. It will take time for students to experience the changes introduced by the Initiative, and for those experiences to influence students' learning outcomes as measured by common metrics (e.g., standardized test scores, graduation rates). Indeed there is no discernable trend in the available graduation data for students graduating in 2014 when the Initiative began and in 2016 when it ended.

The data used in compiling this report focuses on establishing what changed in schools as a result of participating in the Initiative. Data pertaining to different measures of school change were collected throughout the implementation period. Triangulating these different data snapshots allows us to paint a more nuanced picture of how change occurred in schools—and how work undertaken as part of the Initiative contributed to those changes—than could be discerned from any single snapshot. An overview of these data sources is provided below.

Global Best Practices Self-Assessment Scores

This practical, action-oriented tool defines in detail the characteristics of effective 21st century education, and applies them to the creation of new models of teaching, learning, and leading in today's secondary schools. The tool is organized into four strands: Teaching & Learning, Organizational Design, School Leadership and District Leadership. Each strand encompasses a number of dimensions with illustrative descriptions of what school practices might look like along a transformation continuum. Rather than give school leaders and teachers a simple list of recommendations, *Global Best Practices* offers a practical, step-by-step process that schools can use to assess their relative performance in key areas and shape their school-improvement plans.

All 21 schools participating in the Initiative completed two self-assessments using *Global Best Practices*. The first self-assessment took place during the Design Phase and serves as a baseline account of the schools existing practices at the beginning of the Initiative. Schools completed a second self-assessment as the Initiative wound down in 2017, providing an end-point account of those same practices. A comparison of average baseline and end-point *Global Best Practices* self-assessment scores can be found in Appendix II.

The primary users of *Global Best Practices* self-assessment data are school leaders and teachers themselves. In repurposing the data for inclusion in this report, we acknowledge that schools might perceive themselves—and the benchmarks—slightly differently. We also recognize that schools' interpretations of *Global Best Practices* dimensions can shift over time and as they gain deeper understanding of what the work of transformation along a particular dimension entails. It is, therefore, neither surprising nor concerning that the average self-assessment scores reported for a handful of dimensions were lower at the end of the Initiative than they were at the outset. For instance, as schools understanding of Shared Leadership evolved, it is understandable that their perspective of their own practices would become more critical.

Global Best Practices data are also particularly relevant to our understanding of how work undertaken through the Initiative contributed to broader school transformation efforts because they directly informed schools' action plans associated with this project.

Interviews with School Leaders and Coaches

Between February 14, 2017, and March 14, 2017, the Great Schools Partnership Director of Research & Evaluation conducted semi-structured interviews with the current leaders at all 21 participating schools as well as all 26 GSP Coaches who had contributed to this work. The aim of these interviews was to elicit the perspectives and experiences of participants pertaining to each school's unique

school transformation goals. Questions asked specifically about (1) the most significant change experienced at the school, (2) the role of coaching support in achieving this change, and (3) the role of networking through the NESSC League of Innovative Schools (LIS) in achieving this change (for the interview protocol, see Appendix VII).

All interviews were recorded with the permission of the interviewee, transcribed, and coded using a process coding protocol.

Interview data was used primarily to identify common Most Significant Change stories (see Appendix IV) and to add nuance to our analysis of outcomes identified using other data sources.

Final Reports Submitted by Participating Schools

All participating schools were required to submit a final report, including:

- 2017 *Global Best Practices* self-assessment scores
- A completed Implementation Grid noting whether activities defined by the Initiative were complete or in progress, and
- Responses to three short-answer questions:
 1. *What was the most valuable aspect of this initiative?*
 2. *What are your anticipated next steps to further support the implementation of personalized learning in your school?*
 3. *How can the NESSC League of Innovative Schools continue to support your continued school improvement?*

Again, these data points have been analyzed alongside data collected throughout the Initiative in order to identify the themes and outcomes discussed throughout this report.

Site Visits

Between October 31, 2016, and December 4, 2016, teams composed of at least two GSP staff members conducted site visits at all 32 schools that has submitted a proposal. Site visit teams engaged in a range of activities including classroom observations, focus groups with students and teachers, and conversations with building and district leaders. Focus groups followed a standard protocol aligned to *Global Best Practices* (see Appendix VI). This data was used primarily in the decision-making process for identifying the final cohort of 21 schools. Additionally, this data was shared with GSP coaches to inform their work with the 21 schools selected for participation in the Initiative.

Interview Protocol

- Introduction and thank you
- Purpose: To better understand your experience of the NextGen work
- Data Use: We will use this to complement GBP scores and other data collected throughout the implementation process; candor is appreciated. We will also engage in collective sensemaking at the Celebration event in May event
- Questions before we get started?
- Consent to record the call so I can pay attention to the conversation instead of taking notes

Q1: Can you tell me about the most significant change that has occurred in your school as a result of participating in this program?

- Why do you consider this the most significant change?

- What is the significance of this change for staff?
- What is the significance of this change for students?

Q2: Were any particular aspects of coaching support instrumental to achieving this change?

- What (e.g. practice, holding space, reflection/thought partnership, coaching style)?
- Why?
- Can you give an example?

Q3: How important was networking with other schools through the LIS and/or peer-to-peer learning to achieving this change and your broader school transformation effort?

- Why?
- Can you give an example?

Appendix II: Most Significant Change Stories

Most Significant Change¹¹ is one approach to participatory monitoring and evaluation that includes stakeholders in making sense of the changes to result from a project or program. Ideally, this process would be initiated at the beginning of a project, with multiple touch points for learning about change over the duration. Stories collected at the field level are then systematically analyzed and reviewed by stakeholders to determine which of the changes captured should be designated as most significant.

We used a condensed version of the Most Significant Change process here as a way of discerning how school leaders and their coaches perceived the impact of their work as the NESSC NextGen Personalized Learning Initiative wound down. The 47 individual change stories were then coded, analyzed, and consolidated into the six composite stories of change below.

All of the stories are composites of stories heard during multiple calls. Like the disclaimer at the end of a movie: "The events depicted in this movie are fictitious. Any similarity to any person living or dead is merely coincidental." No story is the direct telling of a single school's experience, but hopefully there's something in most or all of the stories that resonates with every school's experience.

At the Celebration event in May, all participants present engaged in a Most Significant Change ranking activity to discuss which of the six changes struck them as most significant. The purpose of this activity was to provoke conversation and reflection, rather than to identify the single most significant change.

Vision + Mission

The biggest shift at our school is that we now have a shared vision and mission for our PBL work, and staff are really taking collective responsibility. It has taken a lot of effort to get all of us (or at least most people) on the same page in terms of what personalized proficiency-based learning actually means and how we are going to approach it at our school.

We'd been working on some of the pieces for a while already, like project-based learning, a one-to-one computer environment, and making connections with the community. But we had taken sort of a shotgun approach: we'd been doing all of these things, but they were scattered. There wasn't a manual for making this shift, and there wasn't really anywhere to turn to for help - someone who had it down. We visited some schools that we thought could be a resource, but we found that they were right in the middle of the battle themselves.

The NextGen grant helped us pull all of the pieces together in a way that makes sense and provides focus. We have developed a shared vision of not only where we are currently, but where we want to go in the future. We've gained clarity about what it is we really value in both our students and the experiences that we offer them.

By creating opportunities for our staff to come to consensus around these ideas, we've made personalized proficiency-based learning a core part of how we work, not just a feature of the school that we have to talk about and explain to people. It's really a foundational part of how we do business now. For teachers, I think there's a little bit less anxiety because they can see how the pieces fit together.

¹¹ Rick Davies and Jess Dart, "The Most Significant Change (MSC) Technique: A Guide to Its Use," The Lens (CRPE blog), April 2005, <http://www.mande.co.uk/docs/MSCGuide.pdf>.

PLGs

We've had a huge change with our staff and moving into PLGs. Our teachers are starting to get into some great conversations, whether they're considering how well a lesson aligns to our standards, looking collaboratively at student work, or reviewing our data. More to the point, teachers are taking the feedback from their PLG groups and applying it to what they're doing in their classrooms with their students.

The culture at this school has always been awesome, but we didn't have dedicated professional learning time before. Over the course of the grant, we've had a lot of starts and stops with our PLGs. To be honest, we probably only persisted because it was a NextGen requirement. But it feels like in this last half of the last year of the grant our PLGs are taking hold and we're really using that time well. People went from the dread of doing a protocol to seeing them as useful. That's changed. It's almost like we've been trying to get there for a while, and suddenly we've arrived. Suddenly the PLGs make sense to people, or are starting to make sense to people.

Now, we're consistently having at least one PLG per month. It has taken time for our teachers to get to a place where they're ready to share their work and to look at student work together. That in itself has been a huge step forward. Thanks to the PLG facilitator training we have a group of really good facilitators that are now able to function at a pretty high level without a ton of coaching.

There have also been times when we have used a protocol organically to help process a situation, run a meeting, or propose some new idea. That's worked pretty well. Ultimately, we've gotten people together. We've gotten people talking more deeply about learning.

Language of Proficiency

The most significant change for us has been the shift in how we talk about teaching and learning, both among teachers and with students and families. I'm able to have conversations with teachers that revolve around students at the center of learning, rather than teachers being at the center. Teachers are starting to see value in getting out of their content area and working across disciplines because we've built a shared, coherent understanding of what students need to know.

Conversations between teachers across disciplines have been really important. Initially, we all thought there was more coherence across our staff than really existed. Fissures became apparent when we started to ask: "How can we tell when students have learned what we want them to know?" The conversations were phenomenal. They were rich. They were challenging. Instead of immediately planning an activity, teachers are now asking: "What do these kids need to show me and how can I get them there?" This is a really big step forward.

Students are also able to articulate their strengths and challenges more specifically in terms of skills and content, whereas before I don't think they could do that. I've heard the language of proficiency infiltrate conversations that happen between students and teachers. Instead of teachers saying "Here's the grade that you got," now it's more of a two-way, criterion-based conversation. I hear it from parents, too. Instead of "Can I get a few more points for my kid?" they're saying "My son received a 2 on this, can you send me a piece of work so I can see what a 3 looks like?"

The school has really come to life in the past four or five years since we started doing this work. It's about using the language of proficiency and having a better, more specific understanding of what teachers and students can do to improve learning.

NESSC Personalized Learning Initiative

Systems

The biggest change at our school is having systems in place to fully implement personalized proficiency-based learning—and all of the implications that come with that. It's taken significant work. We had been working on standards-based grading for a while, but the tools we have now to articulate and assess what students need to know are far superior to anything we had before.

Everything is interconnected. We started with graduation standards, but then realized we would also have to re-think assessments. This meant that we had to develop competencies and indicators for every content area (and scoring criteria for the indicators), to ultimately align curriculum with the proficiency standards. We've also untangled how we assess students' work habits from how we assess mastery of skills. Teachers have had to make a big mental shift - all of this really impacts their instruction - but now we are using common standards throughout the building.

We've fine-tuned our support system to address the needs of both kids who aren't getting the content and kids who don't have the habits to support achievement. Timely verification of whether kids are meeting the scoring criteria also had to be built into the system. Teachers use data to know where students are at, and make sure appropriate supports exist for the kids who might be falling behind. We're able to see students as individuals with different strengths and weaknesses. It's not one size fits all anymore, and that was a huge change for our school.

The real success story is that we'll continue to chip away at it, little by little. For a long time we were swimming in the dark, but in the past couple of years the lights have come on. We constantly ask ourselves "What do we value in our kids, and what do we absolutely want them to leave here with?" Then we make sure that we have the systems in place to make that a reality.

Voice + Choice

For us, the most significant change has been the incremental steps we've taken to provide more opportunities for students to exercise voice and choice at our school. This is very, very different for us. And it's been difficult. We're still figuring it out. But gradually students are becoming more involved in the instructional component of their own learning - with teacher support, of course - using a menu of choices.

Honestly, at first it felt like 'voice and choice' or 'multiple pathways' was some unattainable thing. We knew that it was important, but found it hard to understand. We wanted someone to show us what it looks like. Now we've come around to understanding that 'voice and choice' is attainable, but it's not about just offering more electives either. There are small ways, and more significant ways, that we can increase voice and choice to enhance student agency in learning.

We went around and around in circles, and finally realized that it takes baby steps. So one of the things we've tried to do is move away from, say, 'my way or the highway world history' or 'my way or the highway biology'. If we're working on responding to a text in English, the text doesn't have to be the same for everybody. We've also started crediting outside-of-school experiences that have been matched to academic standards, whether it's scouts, an internship with a local business, or studying poetry with someone in our community.

It's been hard for our teachers, and sometimes things don't work as well as we thought they would. We've created a committee to try to get more voices in the conversation and share ownership across the staff. We're starting to see more teachers restructuring their classrooms and pushing kids in new directions. Basically, our ethos is: "Let's not just keep them in school, let's keep them engaged and make it relevant."

Awareness of Capacity

Our most significant change has been an awareness by administrators and teachers that our staff has a lot of capacity. There are people here who can take responsibility and lead things effectively. We've given teachers time and authority to make decisions about what personalized proficiency-based learning looks like at our school. And as administrators, we've tried to support decisions made by staff as best we can. This is really accelerating our work.

It would help to give some context of what it was like before. It's almost like we were in complaining mode when we gathered for staff meetings. The principal would get up and talk about field trips, supplies, or the budget. About halfway through last year, we really shook things up. Now, people from across the staff take ownership of different parts of the work. For instance, two of our math teachers really like untangling the knots around calculating GPA. Another teacher has tackled the issue of transcripts. Staff gravitate toward certain things and say, "That's something I like. Can I take it on?" There's a broader perspective that's shared when we bring things back to the entire faculty. We're able to reach consensus much more quickly.

We're also gradually increasing student involvement in some of the management aspects of our school. We're wrestling with what it means for students to roll up their sleeves and work alongside teachers and administrators to talk through where we want the school to go and what we want things to look like.

One person by his/her self doesn't have huge impact. You can communicate ideas, but they get diffused and disappear if there isn't buy-in from others. Our distributed leadership structure is going to be a vital piece of making sure that the work continues going forward.