COMMUNICATIONS PLANNING FOR INNOVATION IN EDUCATION

How to communicate about your blended & personalized learning initiatives

Education Elements
Learners of today. Ready for tomorrow.

The Learning Accelerator

Who should use this guide?

This guide is intended for school system leaders, including superintendents, school board members, principals and others whose commitment to communications as a district priority is crucial for success. However, the guide includes many tips and links to additional resources that others - including communications directors, technology officers, and teachers - may find useful.

Join the conversation at #PLcomms

Introduction

Teachers and schools across the country are transforming education by embracing innovation. Education leaders are recognizing the power and promise of personalized learning, whereby students receive the instruction they need, when they need it. Teachers are blending in-person instruction with technology to differentiate lessons, using real-time data to personalize learning and allow for mastery-based progression, and they are incorporating student choice and agency into instructional decisions. It is not easy, nor simple work, but these innovations are the pathway forward to meeting the needs of all learners.

Education Elements and The Learning Accelerator have been deeply involved in this work from early on, as blended and personalized learning implementation experts and catalysts. **A clear takeaway from our past work is that effective communication is a cornerstone of successful innovation in education.** In 2015, The Learning Accelerator released a step-by-step communication planning guide to assist schools that were embracing blended learning. Since then, we have been collecting feedback and tracking what's most useful. Meanwhile, Education Elements has been in the field, directly helping schools implement personalized learning and capturing best practices. This new communications guide refreshes our earlier work, streamlines the planning process, shares real-world examples, and offers up-to-date resources and artifacts.
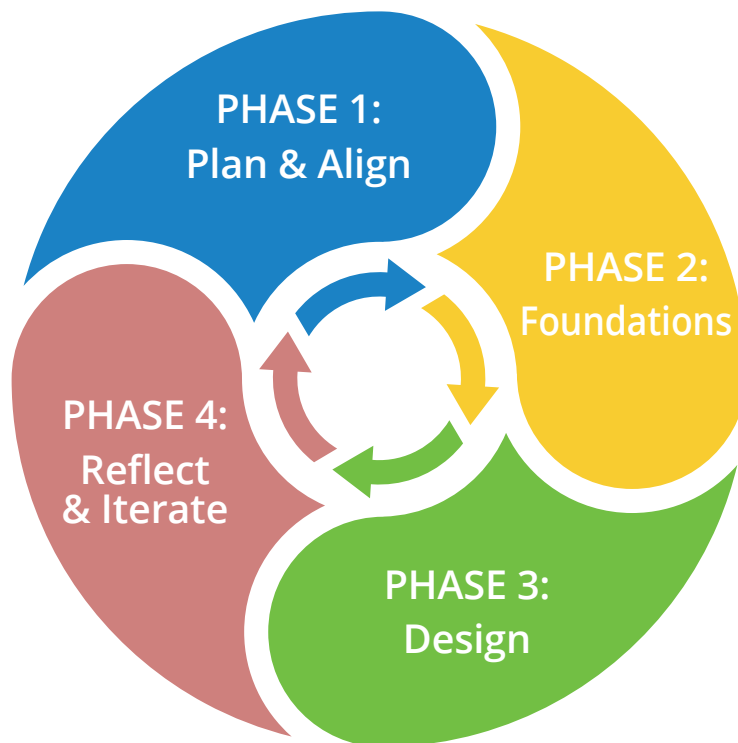
The guide clearly lays out the key steps for effective communications planning for those just beginning their journey, as well as practitioners who have been implementing for several years. Throughout the guide we have included short profiles of districts that have partnered with Education Elements and are in various stages of this work. These districts have led the way in communicating their transition to blended and personalized learning. We are grateful to them for sharing their stories and artifacts.

You'll notice that throughout this document we use both the terms "personalized learning" and "blended learning." In our work over the past few years, we've found districts prefer one or the other depending on their local context. Both terms signify a commitment to meeting students' needs. While our focus is on personalized and blended learning, these recommendations, tools, and resources are relevant for any type of large change management initiative, and for any point in the innovation journey.

Successful communications is an ongoing effort, with many small wins as well as big ones, and invariably a few missteps too. We encourage you to use this guide to customize a communications strategy for the unique needs of your district. Our hope is that you will share with us and others what works, what doesn't, and what is missing, so we can all improve our communications practices in support of transforming teaching and learning in our schools.

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PHASE 1:
Plan & Align

Creating a Culture of Communication

Whether you are just beginning to embrace innovation in your school, or if you have already begun a personalized or blended learning initiative, taking the time to systematically plan your communications strategy and align it to your student learning goals is absolutely critical.

School districts that develop thoughtful communications plans do more than just push important information out to their stakeholders. These districts build a culture of engagement, transparency, and trust that is critical for innovation both to take hold in the classroom and to be sustainable and scalable across many schools. Poor communication can lead to unmanageable expectations, confusion, and opposition to change.

If you are like most districts, you have many different priorities to juggle. There is a real risk that introducing personalized learning will be seen as "just another initiative," and therefore will be either received with confusion, apathy, or derision. Take time to think about all the messages you are sending to your teachers, parents, and community members. How do blended and personalized learning align to and complement these initiatives? How does everything fit together to accomplish your district strategic plan or vision?

Keep in mind that your efforts should not be just one-way, from you to your audiences. **Work to create two-way conversations that build true engagement with your stakeholders.**

Ask questions about your teachers' concerns. Listen to your staff's suggestions around

implementation. Discuss with your community the skills and aptitudes they think necessary for your students. Check in frequently about how things are going and if adjustments need to be made (they will!). Make your innovation implementation a shared journey of discovery by focusing on engagement.

Furthermore, acknowledge and embrace the communications channels in which your district may not be a direct participant. Know that these communications channels (teacher-to-teacher, parent-to-parent, school-to-community) are incredibly powerful and can either support or detract from your goals. **Support a culture of communication by equipping everyone with the right information and encouraging conversations outside of your direct purview.**

What are the benefits of engaged stakeholders?

- ● **Informed audiences**

- ● **Reduced resistance/opposition**

- ● **Increased resilience when faced with problems/obstacles**

- ● **Improved learning results with feedback/iteration**

- ● **Early identification of issues of concern**

Plan First, Then Tactics

We often see districts that, once they realize they need better communications, immediately jump to brainstorming about tactics ("Let's do a townhall meeting," "Let's put something out on Twitter!"). This type of creative brainstorming is great, but without being clear about the strategy behind the tactics, they are destined to fall short. Working through the steps in this guide will help you lay the foundation for your communications efforts to succeed. You need to really understand who your key audiences are, what matters to them, who they trust, and how they like to communicate, before you can come up with a list of actions. Remember: plan first, tactics later.

Set Goals

An important first step in communications planning is to **establish clear communications goals** that are deeply connected to your district's decision to innovate and its overall goals for student learning.

When adopting blended and personalized learning, districts often fall into the trap of talking more about the technology than the desired transformation of teaching and learning. Computers, tablets and other education technology devices are simply tools that educators can use to enable greater differentiated instruction, data-driven interventions, mastery-based progression and improved student engagement. Your communications goals should focus primarily on building understanding and **support for blended and personalized learning's role in achieving your district's definition of student success.**

Examples of *general* blended and personalized learning communications goals:

• Ensure stakeholders understand how blended learning provides teachers with tools to personalize learning for students, enabling mastery-based progression and increasing student engagement, growth, and achievement.

• Build understanding that innovation is key to preparing students to meet the challenges of today's global economy and the requirements of responsible citizenship.

• Build strong two-way communications channels to ensure effective listening as well as sharing, when communicating about innovation in the classroom.

Set *targeted* communications goals that reflect the unique opportunities or challenges in your school or district. Do you have teachers who are resistant to change? Community members whose support you need for upcoming funding measures? Parents skeptical of technology in the classroom? Develop communications goals that target those audiences and underscore your blended and personalized learning programs' objectives for student learning.

Sample Goals by Target Audience

TARGET AUDIENCE	GOALS FOR UNDERSTANDING	DESIRED ACTIONS
All	• Clarity around district vision and approach to personalized learning. • Ability to articulate what personalized learning is and what it is not.	• Advocate for continued presence of blended and personalized learning in the district or school.
District Leaders	• Understanding how this shift fits together with other work happening in the district and school, and how they should prioritize accordingly. • Recognizing how their work changes as a result of the shift to blended and personalized learning.	• Effectively communicate to their district team, school leaders, and the community the benefits of personalized learning. • Make appropriate changes in personal work flow based on their changing roles and responsibilities.
School	• Understanding how this shift fits together with other work happening in the district and school, and how they should prioritize accordingly. • Clarity around what actions they should continue to take and what they stop as a result of this shift.	• Effectively communicate to parents, guardians, and the community the benefits of blended and personalized learning.
Parents & Guardians	• Clarity around what this means for their child's learning, including what will change in their child's classroom and what will remain the same. • Confidence that changes are being made in the best interests of their child. • Increased understanding of and confidence in ways they can continue to be involved in their child's learning.	• Increase engagement with the school community. • Effectively communicate to the school board and the community the benefits of blended and personalized learning.
Students	• Clarity around what will change in their classroom and what will remain the same. • Increased confidence in themselves as learners.	• Increase engagement in and ownership of their learning.
Media	• Clarity around the work, including district's rollout plan and changes to instruction going beyond the addition of technology.	• Create positive earned media coverage surrounding personalized learning, including a focus on instruction rather than just the technology.
School Board and other Local & State Elected Officials	• Clarity around what implications existing or proposed policies and funding structures have on the district's efforts to personalize learning.	• Support policies and funding structures that allow blended and personalized learning to flourish. • Effectively communicate to the community the benefits of personalized learning.

District Profile

Fairbanks North Star Borough School District (AK)

[Fairbanks North Star Borough School District](#) (Fairbanks) is a school district in central Alaska serving 14,000 students across 33 schools. One of the largest districts in Alaska, Fairbanks serves a community of 7,361 square miles - larger than the state of Connecticut - that includes a sizable Alaska Native population. Fairbanks schools range in size from a very small elementary school of fewer than 100 students to a comprehensive high school of more than 1,000. In SY 2015-16, more than 40 percent of the student population was from a minority community, nearly 16 percent were students with disabilities, and 37 percent received free and reduced lunch.

Fairbanks is early in their personalized learning (PL) journey, having just started PL planning in winter 2017. However, they have gone to incredible lengths to lay a foundation for a culture of communication around this effort.

They first identified their three key messages:

• Children are unique and develop and learn at different rates

• Our current "assembly-line" education system does not meet every student's individual needs

• Personalized learning will help develop skills relevant to future work environment: critical thinking, problem-solving, collaboration, creativity

Then, they created a plan to ensure all stakeholders both received these messages, as well as had an opportunity to ask questions and provide feedback.

Actions included:

• Creating a detailed [communications plan](#) outlining key messages, activities, responsible party, and how they would evaluate the success of the communication.

• Building a [landing page](#) on their district website rich with information.

• The superintendent, Dr. Karen Gaborik, penning an op-ed for both [local](#) and [national](#) audiences describing why she believes Fairbanks students deserve personalized learning.

• Creating an [FAQ document](#) which they keep up to date.

• Keeping an internal tracking document of all the questions posed to the district to make sure everyone receives an individual response that is both consistent and thorough. The document tracks how the question came in (phone, email, website), and who provided the response.

• Inviting a district leader from outside Alaska to present an in-service keynote on how personalized learning has transformed his district.

• Inviting local public media to the district which resulted in many [articles](#), [videos](#), and [podcasts](#).

• Hosting a [community information session](#) and posting the session on YouTube.

• [Asking students](#) to provide input on their "Why PL?" statement.

• Engaging the school board, teachers union, state education commissioner, and county commissioners by inviting them to participate in the process along the way and holding meetings specifically to address their needs.

> *"We recognized early on the need to help staff, families and community members understand how a system-wide shift to a personalized learning model would support our students' success. Our communication and engagement efforts required a cross-department collaborative team to plan strategic communication and provide timely response to the developing community dialogue."*
>
> – DR. KAREN GABORIK, SUPERINTENDENT,
>   FAIRBANKS NORTH STAR BOROUGH SCHOOL DISTRICT

Fairbanks North Star Borough School District meets at an Education Elements workshop to start to define their "why" of personalized learning.

District Profile
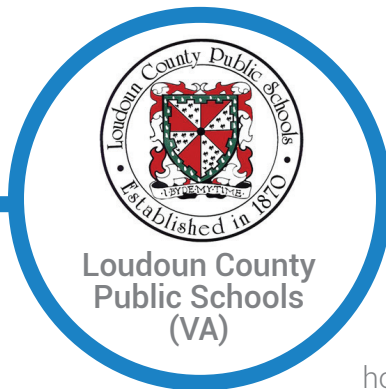
Loudoun County Public Schools (VA)

Loudoun County Public Schools (LCPS), located outside the Washington, DC metro area, is the third-largest school district in the Commonwealth of Virginia. LCPS serves approximately 80,000 students across 90 facilities.

In early 2016, LCPS in partnership with Education Elements launched work in 15 schools to transition to personalized learning. Early in the process, the LCPS district leadership team identified a few communications challenges. First, as a very high-performing school division, they would have to be clear why they were introducing personalized learning. Second, the district's instructional vision of *One to the World* aims to develop students as knowledgeable critical thinkers, communicators, creators, and contributors. The school division would need to explain how a personalized learning approach is aligned to and supports One to the World. To get ahead of these challenges, LCPS created a few central messages and supporting documents:

- Outlined in a [one-page document](#) what personalized learning means at LCPS. The document addresses school concerns head-on, answering questions such as "What does this mean for my school?" and "What are the expectations for teachers?"

- Created [talking points](#) that specifically address how personalized learning, *One to the World*, and project-based learning complement each other in the context of the LCPS mission statement.

- Created a [communications planning toolkit](#) for their principals that included a communications template, exemplary artifacts from schools in their district, and suggestions for how to continuously model and communicate personalized learning throughout the school year.

- Asked each principal to create a 'Why PL?' story and present it to their staff. In this presentation, principals were asked to provide personal stories about why they believe in personalized learning and the impact personalization has had in their life. The district provided a keynote template from which principals could work.

> "By articulating the why underlying our district focus on personalized learning, and by encouraging schools and individual teachers to connect their own motivations for personalized learning with our district's aspirations, we help create a shared vision. Our emerging shared vision provides inspiration to take risks and to persist when the work is difficult."
>
> –DR. ERIC WILLIAMS, SUPERINTENDENT LOUDOUN COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Loudoun County Public Schools used a graphic recording to show the interconnectedness of their initiatives.

Assess Resources

Assess your district's communications capacity and identify existing communications resources, as well as gaps in your capabilities and/or expertise.

This process can be as deeply thorough or as high-level as you have time for, but the important step is to **know what communications tools and resources you have at your disposal to execute your communications plan.**

Review existing communications methods and tools. What has been working well for your district and what needs bolstering? For example:

- Is your website up-to-date?

- Are you active on social media?

- Do you have reliable contact information and an effective method for engaging with parents and community leaders?

- How does information flow to your staff and teachers?

- Have you explored new school communications applications like ClassMessenger, Bloomz, Remind, or quick survey applications like PollEverywhere or Google Forms?

If you do not have a dedicated communications staff person, identify a staff member (or

hire someone) with communications experience to manage communication efforts for your blended and personalized learning initiative. This person should have strong writing and speaking skills, as well as familiarity with your key stakeholders and the communications channels they use. **Include the communications coordinator on your implementation team** and have them be responsible for developing and executing your comprehensive communications strategy. (They may be the person who conducts many of the steps in this guide for you.)

If there are budget constraints on hiring communications experts, **explore parent/community experts** who could help address gaps in communication skills. For example:

- Is there a local web-design company that would provide pro-bono assistance to improve your website or e-news blasts?

- Do you have high-school students who could help prepare content about blended and personalized learning for your social media platforms?

If budget and time allow, **consider conducting a formal communications audit**, offered by most communications firms or through organizations like the National School Public Relations Association.

Work closely with your communications coordinator to determine strategies and a timeline for filling resource gaps so that your communications efforts will be successful.

District Profile

The Metropolitan School District of Warren Township (MSD Warren) is an urban school district located on the east side of Indianapolis. MSD Warren serves approximately 12,300 students across 18, PK-12 school sites. MSD Warren credits Jimmy Fallon (yes, Jimmy Fallon!) for inspiring them to use Twitter to promote not only two-way communication between district and school teams, but also to open the way for meaningful, direct conversations between hundreds of teachers, principals, and community members.

MSD Warren began planning for personalized learning in 2014. They quickly realized that the district needed a safe space for teachers, school administrators, and district leaders to share challenges, success stories, and resources without waiting for workshops or relying on formal communications channels. Thus, the #warrenbl hashtag was born.

MSD Warren uses Twitter in a variety of different ways. The district teams use Twitter to provide reminders and updates on the personalized learning implementation process. Teachers use Twitter to share examples of how they redesigned their classrooms. Instructional specialists host tweet chats to share resources and answer questions. And principals use Twitter to celebrate their teachers and students with the wider school and district community.

Curious about how it works? Read this blog post to hear directly from MSD Warren's Director of Professional Learning Kate Schwartz (and read about the Jimmy Fallon connection), and check out the #warrenbl hashtag.

> "When teachers and school leaders are redesigning classrooms and instructional models, they have questions, concerns, ideas, and yearn for collaboration. Twitter has provided a platform for teacher-to-teacher communication that has been invaluable to our PL implementation in Warren Township. Gifting teachers with the power to connect at anytime, a platform to build confidence, and a tool to share resources has not only propelled our implementation forward, but also generated excitement, collaboration, and a genuinely supportive community."
>
> –KATE SCHWARTZ, DIRECTOR OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING, MSD OF WARREN TOWNSHIP
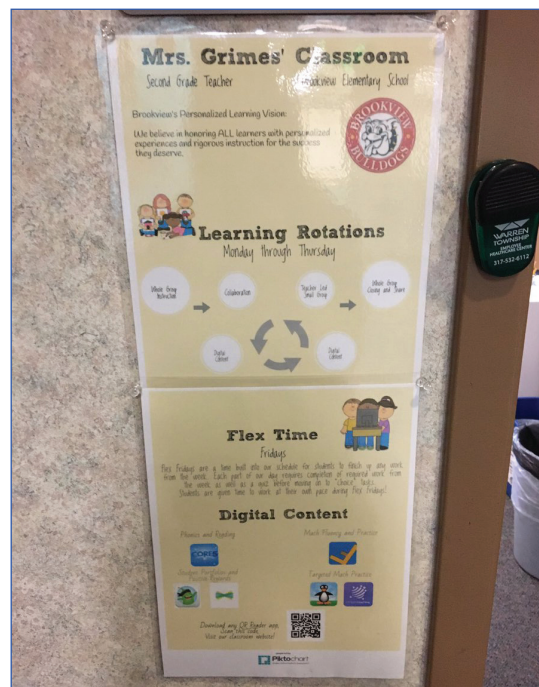
Example of a classroom artifact shared on the #WarrenBL Twitter feed.

District Profile

Fulton County Schools (GA)

Fulton County Schools (FCS) is the fourth largest school system in Georgia, and one of the largest in terms of its geographic footprint. FCS serves 96,200 students, 101 schools, and more than 10,500 full-time employees.

A true pioneer, FCS is on track to become one of the largest districts in the country to bring personalized learning to all of their schools and students. Since spring 2015, all schools have gone through a process to develop personalized learning instructional models, professional development plans, and communications plans - no small feat for a district this size!

In a district covering 534 square miles and divided into multiple learning communities, district-wide communication can be difficult. FCS tackled the challenge through several venues:

- They created a detailed Personalized Learning website and school roll-out dashboard.
- They set up meetings and webinars for schools that were earlier in the process to share successes and challenges with later schools; they videoed testimonies from these school leaders for schools that couldn't attend.
- They leveraged social media through a frequently used Twitter hashtag, #personalizeFCS, and created a bi-weekly Learning Gets Personal newsletter.
- To ensure that personalized learning remained in the forefront as teachers transitioned from one school year to the next, the district centered their 2016 two-day summer conference on the theme "Sailing into Personalized Learning." More than 300 teachers attended sessions organized around their seven principles of personalized learning.

FCS also celebrated staff and schools who creatively communicated their commitment to this work:

- Dolvin Elementary School created an infographic to explain what personalized learning means and does not mean at their school.
- River Trail Middle School teacher created an interactive guide to explain her classroom setup with images and videos.
- Bear Creek Middle School overlaid digital tool usage data with their school map so that teachers and visitors would know exactly where to go to see effective practices in action.

> *"By creating a district-wide plan that allows schools to customize their personalized learning instructional models, professional development plans, and communications plans to meet the unique needs of their students and staff, we have fully leveraged the creativity of our school leaders and teachers."*
>
> —AMY BARGER, ASSISTANT SUPERINTENDENT OF LEARNING AND TEACHING, FULTON COUNTY SCHOOLS


Fulton County Schools teachers go deeper in personalized learning during the 2016 Summer Summit "Seas the Day!" (Credit: Fulton County Schools, #fseas16)

PHASE 3: Design

Stakeholder Audiences

Phase 3 is the core of your communications planning effort and includes identifying your key audiences, determining the best messengers for reaching your audiences, drafting targeted messages, and deciding on the tactics to deliver those messages. We've developed a [Blended & Personalized Learning Communications Planning Worksheet](#) to help guide you through these steps and we discuss each element in this section.
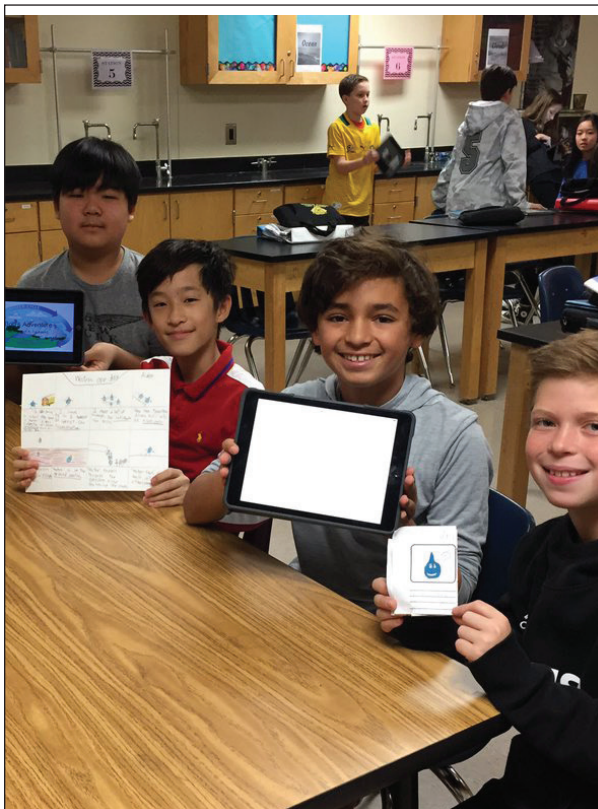
At the heart of effective communications is knowing your audience. Taking the time to identify and understand your key stakeholders, what they care about, and how best to reach them, is critical to successful communications.

• **Identify your stakeholder audiences.**

  – Internal: Teachers, students, principals, administrative staff including IT directors

  – External: Parents, community/local business, media, funders/foundations

• **Know your audiences.**

  – Deploy regular surveys or other tools to better understand your audiences

  – What are each group's top issues, concerns, values?

  – What special communications needs might they have? Language? Access to technology/email?

• **Identify the best methods to reach your audiences.**

  – Email, phone-calls, local news, website, social media, meetings, newsletters, op-eds, PTA meetings, etc.

  – Regular surveys can keep track of shifts in these preferences

• **Build alliances with influential groups to help communicate with key audiences.**

  – Teachers unions

  – Chambers of Commerce

  – Community development organizations

  – Faith-based organizations

Key Messengers

Although the Superintendent is the "official" messenger for the district, identifying and **preparing other trusted messengers** to deliver key messages about your personalized learning program is essential.

- **Identify the most trusted messengers for each audience.**

  – Students are always the best messengers! Whenever possible, share students' voices and stories

  – Teachers and principals are good messengers for parents

  – Principals and district leaders are good messengers for the community

  – Respected community leaders are also strong third-party endorsers/influencers for the broader community

Key Messages

Once you have clearly identified your audiences and the best messengers to reach them, you can begin to craft your key messages. What is the information you want to impart to meet your communications goals? What do you want to say that engages your audience and promotes a conversation?

Key messages must be customized for each district, but there are specific approaches to messaging about blended and personalized learning that we believe are critical:

- **Always tie your communications back to your student learning objectives!** Technology will be part of the story, but whenever possible, stress the benefits to students and teachers first and foremost.

- **Keep it simple.** Define your innovation in an easy to understand, non-jargon, accessible way.

- **Capture and share the authentic voices of teachers and students** in explaining the benefits of blended and personalized learning.

- **Storytelling.** Deliver your key messages through visuals, video and vivid language. In your stories, use real-life characters (students and teachers) and a compelling plot to translate your messages into an inspiring story that your audiences will remember and respond to.

- **Show how personalized learning is not just a "shiny new thing."** Decades of research has shown the benefits of personalization and differentiation, but now we can do this work at scale through the integration of technology.

- **Stress that innovation is a journey,** and model the behaviors we want our teachers and students to have (resilience, creativity, grit).

Big Picture Messages

Articulating a clear message that captures the core reason behind your blended and personalized learning program is enormously helpful in building understanding and support for your efforts. Sometimes called an "elevator pitch," this big picture, aspirational message should work for all audiences and appeal to the heart as well as the head.

Sample Messages

- All students deserve an education that prepares them for college, career and global citizenship. Our school district is committed to using blended and personalized learning to provide teachers and students with the tools to reach their full potential and succeed in the 21st Century.

- The world our children face is rapidly changing, requiring new skills and preparation to be ready for college, career, and citizenship. Educators need the tools to personalize learning for our students, increasing their engagement, growth and achievement.

- There are exciting shifts occurring in schools across America, as educators respond to the challenges and opportunities our children face in the 21st Century. Our school district is providing teachers and students with powerful new tools that enable personalized, student-centered learning by blending the best of face-to-face instruction with new technology.

Targeted Messages

The next level of messages reflect the key reasons why you are implementing personalized learning and explain its benefits. Segmenting these messages by audience will ensure the information you are sharing is the most compelling. The sample messages below are tailored for communicating with a general audience, teachers, students, parents, and community members:

Target Audience: General

- Personalized learning means that students get the instruction they need, when they need it.

- Personalized learning is most successful at scale when technology is used effectively, classrooms are redesigned, and districts have a clear plan for supporting schools through the transition.

- Blended learning is the integration of in-person learning with technology to enable real-time data use, personalized instruction, and mastery-based progression.

- The core four elements of blended learning include small group instruction, integrated digital content, data-driven decisions, student reflection.

- Decades of research has shown that differentiated instruction (where teachers observe and understand the differences and similarities among students and use this information to plan instruction) and increased small-group, targeted time with teachers benefits student achievement. Blended learning allows these practices at scale, so teachers can reach each child exactly where they are for optimal learning.

Target Audience: Teachers

- As teachers, you now have powerful tools and strategies to help you differentiate instruction and personalize learning for each student.

- Digital content frees up time for small group instruction and provides better data to make instructional decisions. "Teaching to the middle" becomes less likely as you can reach every student effectively and efficiently. Real-time data and instant feedback on student progress allows you to intervene quickly to ensure a student is mastering a concept. You can also provide pathways for accelerated learning for students who are ready to move on sooner than others.

- In a personalized environment, teachers are designers of their own classrooms, and therefore have the opportunity to innovate, learn new skills, and develop themselves as professionals.

- We are committed to being a personalized learning district. That means we are not only personalizing learning for our students, but also for our staff. We want to make sure your needs as teachers are being met, and therefore will be moving towards providing more personalized professional learning opportunities.

- Personalized learning is not a new concept - we know you as teachers try to meet the needs of your students every day. What is new is our district's renewed commitment to personalizing learning at all levels, as well as a focus on making sure you are supported with the most effective resources, strategies, and tools.

Target Audience: Students

- As a student, personalized learning lets you learn at your own pace and move on when you have mastered the subject matter.

- You can take ownership of your learning. With real-time data on your progress and choice in how you learn material, you will build other non-academic skills like resilience, self-motivation, and self-confidence.

- You'll notice that we'll be spending our class time a little differently. We will still spend time

learning together as an entire class, but we will start to spend more time in small groups. This will enable me [teacher] to spend more time with each of you, and will give you a chance to work independently and with each other. I think you'll enjoy learning this way, and I'm excited to try this with our class!

Target Audience: Parents

• In a personalized learning setting, children of all abilities and socio-economic levels get the customized support they need and deserve, increasing levels of student engagement and success.

• The student-teacher relationship is one of the most important factors in student success, but teachers too rarely have the time for one-on-one interaction with students. Blended and personalized learning enables more one-on-one and small group interaction between teachers and students and provides regular feedback to teachers, allowing them to closely monitor your child's progress.

• With blended learning, students build the types of technical skills that are increasingly necessary for college and career-readiness. Learning these skills at school helps address the digital divide.

Target Audience: Community

• With high-quality blended and personalized learning, students will be less likely to "fall through the cracks" and graduate without key knowledge and skills. Teachers will know exactly when each student has mastered educational standards and will be able to intervene early with students who are struggling to reach mastery.

• Colleges and corporate leaders are demanding graduates have 21st Century skills to succeed in higher education and the global workplace. Blended learning helps build skills in using technology, but also in communications, team-building, creativity, and problem-solving.

• Personalized learning helps us create well-rounded citizens who are prepared to contribute in the workforce or succeed in higher education.

The final step is to customize your messages with relevant statistics, classroom examples or calls to action that are important specifically to your district's blended or personalized learning program.

Tactics

Depending on which stakeholder audience you are trying to reach, embed the appropriate key messages in any and all of the following communications vehicles:

- Speeches
- Presentations
- **Community events**
- Videos

- Letters home
- **Parent conferences**
- Op-eds
- Blog posts

- Social media posts
- FAQs
- Newsletters
- E-blasts, email

- Interviews
- Board meetings
- **Web-copy**

Tactics Spotlight: Check out these great examples of communication tactics in action.

Community Events

[Exhibition Night at Lindsay Unified School District](#) - Learn how teacher Brandy Quintero creates opportunities for her students to deliver public presentations on their work, developing students' real-world communications skills while concurrently showing parents and the community innovations happening in the classroom.

Parent Conferences

[Families as Learning Partners at CICS West Belden](#) - Watch how teachers flip the traditional parent conference to better engage families in the school's blended and personalized learning program.

Web-Copy

[Community Wi-Fi Project at Lindsay Unified School District](#) - See how LUSD used its website to communicate about its home internet access program. The site includes an easy-to-read infographic, videos, presentations, and a parent guide in Spanish.

Tips for Two-Way Communications

Be sure to always include an opportunity and mechanism for feedback and discussion. Remember, you want to work for increased engagement, not just one-way information flow.

Remember, ask and listen.[1]

- **Surveys:** Add questions to existing surveys of parents, educators and community members or use free or low-cost survey tools easily found on the internet.

- **Focus groups:** Plan a segment of existing meetings (e.g. PTA or teacher meetings) to ask a few key questions or bring a group or groups of key stakeholders together to ask questions and listen to answers.

- **Capture conversations:** Track feedback and follow up with people.

- **Use technology to talk and listen:** Adding a comment box and a sign up for social media feeds and other announcements at the bottom of an e-newsletter or a specific email address on a letter may seem small but they are ways to solicit input and let people know you are listening.

- **Meet people where they are – literally and figuratively:** Look for opportunities to talk to people in formal and informal settings – everywhere from PTA meetings to the grocery store. And remember that not everyone is at the same place in terms of understanding blended or personalized learning. Be ready to provide background information to support your perspective.

- **Make sure listening is not a one-and-done activity:** Make the "listening tour" approach a constant in your interactions with key stakeholders. Listen to what people are saying and use that feedback to inform your work.

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[1] Adapted from *Looking Back to Move Ahead - M2 Communications.*

District Profile

Romulus Central School (NY)

[Romulus Central School](#) (Romulus) is a small district in upstate New York serving 400 students across two schools located in one building.

While Romulus had been a tech-rich district for several years, in SY 2016-17 they began moving towards a blended model as a way to personalize learning. The school is the "heart of the community," and district and school leadership wanted to make sure they could expose students to opportunities that any larger district would provide, including allowing students to create, think critically, and use technology in a meaningful way.

During the planning process, the Romulus PL leadership team — comprised mainly of teachers — wanted to make sure to focus on communicating to students. "Students had been experiencing Personalized Learning in their classrooms with the implementation of the Core Four by some of our teacher leaders," said Lynn Rhone, Principal. "But to this point they had not been able to connect those changes and actions to the Core Four. We thought if we could capture some of the things they were loving about school and make the connection for them - it'd be a great introduction to PL."

To do this the district enlisted their BOCES partners to videotape students in pilot classrooms. Students explained what they did in their blended classrooms, how this was different than school before, and how they felt about the new way of learning. [Check out the video here!](#)

Romulus Central School district leaders and teachers gather for a Foundations workshop to discuss personalized learning.

> *"Our students are setting individual goals and monitoring progress toward those goals; they have a very active role in their education. Romulus students are working towards an education that sets a style and pace that is most effective for them as individuals while achieving high academic standards. These are the things we wanted to capture in this video to help students understand the shift to personalized learning. In the end, our work must always reflect what is best and right for our students."*
>
> – LYNN RHONE, PRINCIPAL, ROMULUS CENTRAL SCHOOL

District Profile

Charleston County School District (SC)

Charleston County School District is South Carolina's second largest school district and serves more than 50,000 students in 86 schools and programs. Charleston introduced personalized learning to three schools in the beginning of SY 2016-17, and teachers started implementing personalized learning instructional models in spring 2017.

Though early in their journey, Charleston schools have embraced the spirit of personalized learning by focusing on communicating with their students, including:

- Over 30 district leaders and teachers participated in the Shadow a Student Challenge to show empathy for the student experience. The district created a landing page to share tweets, quotes, and pictures from the experience. "The Shadow a Student Challenge inspired district staff to see school through students' eyes," said Kevin Eakes, PhD, Office of Teacher Effectiveness. "This was an invaluable experience that is already informing how our leaders recognize and reimagine schooling."

- To celebrate the "launch" of personalized learning, administrators, staff and teachers at Chicora School of Communications dressed as pilots, flight attendants, TSA agents and passengers to show students that they were "taking off" to new heights together! The school created a video to document their launch day and kicked off their Twitter handle #FlyHightoPL, sharing photos and celebrations from the day.

- The School PL Leadership Team at Sanders Clyde Creative Arts School have dedicated time to align their messaging around personalized learning and how *Capturing Kids Hearts* by Flip Flippin supports it. "Teaching is based around trust, which is built through relationships," said Whitney Wilson, Instructional Facilitator at Sanders Clyde Creative Arts School.

> *"I had a great day shadowing an 8th grade Nighthawk at Northwoods Middle School. I met students who eagerly shared about their plans for high school and beyond. Hearing their aspirations and plans reminded me that each decision I make in my job will ultimately impact real students. It was a great day!"*
>
> —EMILIE WOODY, DIRECTOR OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT, CHARLESTON COUNTY SCHOOL DISTRICT

Staff at Chicora School of Communications in Charleston County School District dress the part as pilots and flight attendants for their personalized learning launch day! (Credit: #FlyHightoPL)

Success Metrics & Early Wins

How you determine if your communications efforts are succeeding depends on what goals you set in your strategy. If parent or community awareness was a goal, consider doing a survey at the beginning of your implementation efforts and again periodically thereafter to gauge effectiveness. Similarly, a teacher "listening tour" at the beginning and mid-way points of your implementation efforts can highlight communications successes or problems.

Other metrics of success to consider:

• **Number of positive news stories** about your personalized learning initiative in local media

• **Number of parent/community meetings** that showcase blended and personalized learning examples

• **Number of "stories" with teachers and/or students** showing personalized learning in action shared with key audiences and posted on the school/district website

• While harder to quantify, the **lack of opposition or expressed concern** over your blended or personalized learning initiative is another sign of success

Additionally, pay attention to and celebrate early signs of communications progress. Did one school come up with a really great personalized learning infographic? Tweet it out! Are more teachers sharing lesson plans and lessons learned across schools? Publicly celebrate these teachers in a district newsletter, and keep a running count of how often this sharing occurs. Did a principal run a parents' night with great success? Ask her to share

out at the next principal all-hands meeting. By keeping a consistent focus on praising communications efforts and sharing effective practices, you show gratitude to those leading this work at different levels and solidify your commitment to being 'all in' together.

> *"Be iterative. Constantly go back to check and adjust to ensure understanding."*
>
> —LINDSAY UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT'S DIRECTOR OF TECHNOLOGY AND 21ST CENTURY LEARNING, JOE VAGT, EMPHASIZING THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING DILIGENT WITH COMMUNICATION.

District Profile

McKinley Middle School in Racine Unified School District (WI)

[Racine Unified School District](#) (RUSD) is the fifth largest school district in Wisconsin and serves more than 20,000 students across 33 schools.

RUSD middle schools launched personalized learning in spring 2016. Each school was asked to designate a handful of teachers as "blended learning champions" who would pilot a new instructional model in the spring semester. Now in their second year of PL, the district has made a concerted effort to expand communications efforts not only to teachers across all five middle schools, but also to parents whose students will experience more blended classrooms this year. To this end, RUSD asked all middle schools to address blended learning at their parent nights.

The leadership team at McKinley Middle School - a Title I school implementing both blended learning and the International Baccalaureate (IB) program - decided that rather than talking to their parents about blended learning, they would model the student experience. McKinley parents progressed through a rotational model where they learned in small groups through different modalities, including an independent, collaborative, and direct instruction station.

"We wanted parents to have experience with the style of teaching and learning happening in classrooms throughout our building," said Denise Saverine, IB Coordinator at McKinley. "This year's parent night was more engaging. The students and families enjoyed the variety of activities, and parents were able to experience blended learning first hand."

School leaders credited their "blended learning champions," the teachers who piloted blended learning last school year, with stepping up to facilitate sessions and plan engaging activities. School leaders saw a notable difference in this parent night and plan to run future parent events in this format.

"This was our first attempt at offering a blended learning format for our family night," said Katie Malovec, Instructional Educator Effectiveness Coach at McKinley. "The parents who attended enjoyed learning the same way their students do and were provided with resources to take home to continue to support their child's learning."

Check out their [agenda](#) and [student video](#) here!

> *"We are constantly building a bridge between parents and our school community to ensure student success and engagement. Since we are a Title I school, we have additional parent involvement responsibilities and it is our mission to ensure our parent events all use blended learning to engage our parents."*
>
> – KATIE MALOVEC, INSTRUCTIONAL EDUCATOR EFFECTIVENESS COACH, MCKINLEY MIDDLE SCHOOL, RACINE UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

McKinley Middle School students work together on their computers while a teacher leads a small group. McKinley shared videos and photos like these at their parent night, as well as walking parents through a similar blended rotation model.

District Profile

Yuma Elementary School District One (AZ)
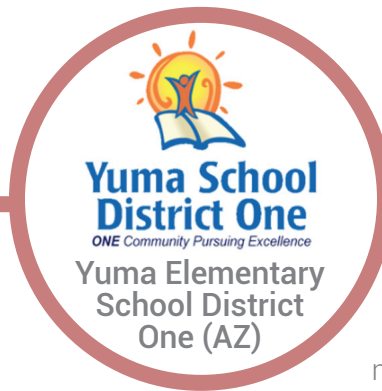
Yuma Elementary School District One (Yuma) is the largest elementary school district in Yuma County with just under 9,000 K-8 students across 17 school sites.

Yuma launched personalized learning across all 17 schools in SY 2015-2016. Yuma's communications approach was influenced by their unique context. Yuma is located on the southwestern tip of Arizona on the Mexican border and has a rich heritage of Hispanic, Anglo, and Native American influences, as well as a large number of military and migrant families. The district prides itself in being "Yuma One" - in other words, marching in the same direction together as a district and community. Additionally, their personalized learning work was funded by a community bond that paid for devices, digital content, and professional development to support all students and teachers. The district team knew they needed to create a sense of excitement and inclusion both inside schools and in the larger community.

To do so, Yuma took a few different approaches:

- Yuma's website prominently featured a "Countdown to Personalized Learning" clock that indicated the day for their scheduled launch date, the first month of the school year.
- Yuma brought students and teachers to present to the school board every month for the first year of personalized learning so that board members could hear directly about the impact of personalized learning. They continue to do this in their second year of implementation.
- Yuma rented a series of billboard ads about personalized learning as a way to alert the community to the new technology that would be in schools. This was meant to keep and attract families who had been moving out of the district to attend neighboring schools with more 21st century learning opportunities.

- The district worked with both English and Spanish news outlets to share stories of personalized learning with the community, including an interview with Telemundo.
- The district created a [website](#) for personalized learning.
- The result of these communication efforts was a high level of engagement and buy in from families. In fact, Yuma families agreed to seven early release days so that teachers could participate in professional development that centered around the [Core 4 of personalized learning](#).

For more information about the Yuma implementation check out these resources:

- [Video](#) on Yuma's PL Rollout
- [Case study](#) from the Lexington Institute
- [Website](#) on personalized learning in Yuma

Yuma Elementary School District One sponsored billboards around the city celebrating the district's move to personalized learning. (Credit: Yuma Elementary School District One)

Issue Spotting

Engaging with your stakeholders is an ongoing effort and it pays to try to **spot issues ahead of time** that may be of growing concern. Implementing blended and personalized learning could cause apprehension for certain audiences and districts should be prepared to help address those fears or misunderstandings.

Establish strong two-way communications to help you spot issues and be prepared. Listen to worries that bubble up in meetings or community forums. Ask teachers and principals what concerns they are hearing from parents, or from teachers and staff. Reach out to other districts that are personalizing learning and learn what surprising issues came up for them. Use formal surveys and informal conversations to listen for topics that you may need to address sooner, rather than later. Consistently reflecting on your communications efforts, trying new things and learning from mistakes (and successes), adds to a strong culture of communication and innovation.

CONCLUSION

Effective communication is a cornerstone of successful innovation in education. As we have discovered through our work in blended and personalized learning, schools that take the time to develop a culture of communication and deeply engage with their key stakeholders in order to celebrate their stories are fundamentally more successful in the long-run. Readers of this guide may be at the beginning of their journey, or well on their way to personalizing student learning, but it is never too late to build a communications strategy that will help you achieve your learning goals for students.

SHARE

Please share with us and others what works, what doesn't, and what is missing, so we can all improve our communications practices.

Join us at #PLcomms

Appendix A: COMMUNICATIONS PLANNING TOOLS

Quick Starts

COMMUNICATIONS "QUICK START"

Suddenly find yourself in need of a quick communications plan? Ask yourself the following:

• What's my goal?

• Who is my audience?

• What is my message for this audience? Is there a story?

• Who is my messenger for this audience?

• How do I reach my audience? How do I deliver my message and engage in dialogue?

• How do I know I succeeded?

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Ready to develop a FAQ? Be sure to include answers to the following questions:

• What is personalized learning?

• What is blended learning?

• Why are we implementing this? What are our goals for our students?

• What are our goals for our teachers?

• What are the benefits?

• What is the pilot process?

• Who will be involved?

• What is the timeline?

• Where do I go to learn more?

• How can I provide feedback? Get involved?

Communications Planning Concepts: Cause Clarify Videos

How to Identify Audiences

How to Choose a Messenger

How to Create Your Core Message

Blended & Personalized Learning Communications Planning
WORKSHEET

AUDIENCES: Who are your key audiences for communications and engagement outreach? Why do they matter?	GOALS: What do you want to achieve with your communications and engagement efforts?	MESSENGERS: Who are the best messengers for your messages and audiences?	MESSAGES: What are your key messages for each audience?	TACTICS: What tactics will you use for communications and engagement? How will you execute your tactics? When will you execute them?

For more communications planning tools visit www.learningaccelerator.org

Appendix B: DISTRICT EXAMPLE INDEX

District Communications Plans, Toolkits & Messaging Docs

- Communications Plan, Fairbanks North Star Borough School District (AK)
- Communications Toolkit, Loudoun County Schools (VA)
- Messaging Document, Sanders Clyde Creative Arts School, Charleston County School District (SC)
- Building Public Understanding for Student-Centered Learning: A Toolkit for Change Agents - Nellie Mae Education Foundation

Websites

- External Landing Page, Fairbanks North Star Borough School District (AK)
- External Landing Page, Horry County Schools (SC)
- External Landing Page and Rollout Dashboard, Fulton County Schools (GA)
- External Landing Page, KIPP LA (CA)
- External Landing Page, District of Columbia Public Schools (DC)
- Shadow a Student Challenge Website, Charleston County School District (SC)
- Internal PL website, Yuma Elementary School District One (AZ)

- Lighthouse Schools, Baltimore County Public Schools (MD)
- Community WiFi Project, Lindsay Unified School District (CA)

Superintendent Op-eds, Blog Posts, & Videos

- Personalized Learning Can Make Education Better, Dr. Karen Gaborik, Fairbanks North Star Borough School District (AK)
- It's Time to Personalize Learning in Alaska, Dr. Karen Gaborik, Fairbanks North Star Borough School District (AK)
- A Successful Personalized Learning Initiative: Lessons Learned, Dr. Dena Cushenberry, MSD of Warren Township (IN)
- Why We Chose Blended Learning, Dr. James Bailey, Uinta County School District (WY)
- The Journey to Personalization: Two School Districts, Two Timely Questions, Dr. Scott Muri, Spring Branch ISD (TX)
- The 'One Initiative' Initiative, Don Bavis, Marion Central School District (NY)
- Don't Throw the Bucket Overboard, Don Bavis, Marion Central School District (NY)
- Pine Valley Superintendent Discusses Personalized Learning, Pine Valley Central School (NY)

District Videos

- [School Leader Testimonies](#), Fulton County Schools (GA)

- [District Stories: Creating a Culture of Innovation](#), MSD of Warren Township (IN)

- [District Stories: Rolling Out Personalized Learning](#), Syracuse City School District (NY)

- [District Stories: Getting Digital Content Right](#), Fulton County Schools (GA)

- [District Stories: Helping Teachers Succeed](#), Yuma Elementary School District One (AZ)

Twitter Hashtags:

- [#warrenbl](#), MSD of Warren Township (IN)

- [#personalizefcs](#), Fulton County Schools (GA)

- [#FlyHightoPL](#), Chicora School of Communications, Charleston County School District (SC)

Student Videos

- [Personalized Learning at Centennial High School](#), Fulton County Schools (GA)

- [Personalized Learning at Romulus Central School,](#) Romulus Central School (NY)

- [Launch Day Video: Jarvis Middle School](#) and [Launch Day Video: Fisher Elementary](#), Central Valley School District (NY)

- [Student Testimonies, McKinley Middle School](#), Racine Unified School District (WI)

District Communications

- [FAQ](#), Fairbanks North Star Borough School District (AK)

- [One-Page Messaging](#) and [Talking Points](#), Loudoun County Schools (VA)

- [Biweekly Newsletter](#), Fulton County Schools (GA)

- [Two-Day Professional Learning Agenda](#), Fulton County Schools (GA)

- [Explaining the Principles of Personalized Learning](#), Fulton County Schools (GA)

District Case Studies

- [From Good to Great Through Personalized Learning](#), Loudoun County Public Schools (VA)

- [Personalizing Educational Excellence in the Arizona Desert](#), Yuma Elementary School District One (AZ)

- [Middletown, NY Personalizes Learning To Narrow Achievement Gaps](#), Enlarged City School District of Middletown (NY)

School Videos, Infographics & Guides

- [Dolvin Elementary School](#), Fulton County Schools (GA)

- River Trail Middle School Classroom Guide, Fulton County Schools (GA)
- Bear Creek Middle School Digital Tool Usage & School Map, Fulton County Schools (GA)
- Chicora School of Communications PL Launch Day Video, Charleston County School District (SC)
- School Vignettes, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (NC)

District Staff & Teacher Voices

- Tweeting Our way to Collaboration and Personalization, MSD of Warren Township (IN)
- My PL Journey, ISD 197 (MN)
- We Came, We Saw, We Blended, Enlarged City School District of Middletown (NY)

Parent & Community Communications

- Parent Night Agenda, Racine Unified School District (WI)
- Exhibition Night, Lindsay Unified School District (CA)
- Families as Learning Partners, CICS West Belden (IL)

Media Coverage

- Fairbanks North Star Borough School District: articles, videos, podcasts, and community information session
- Fulton County Schools Launches 3-Year Personalized Learning Transition, Fulton County Schools (GA)
- District One sees positives in personalized learning plan, Yuma Elementary School District One (AZ)
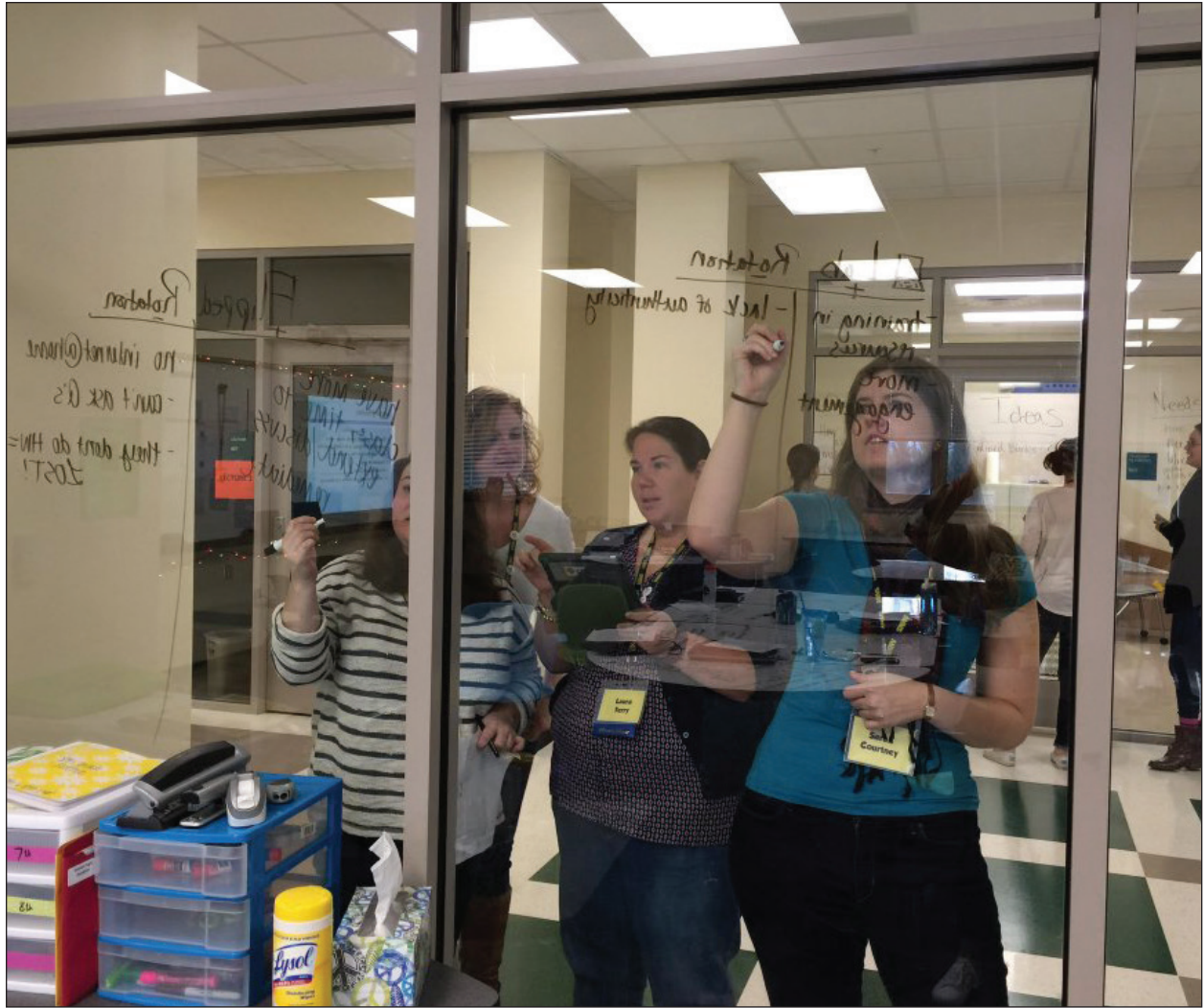
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