

# The Case for Professional Learning to Support Equity and Personalization

---

1

**S**chool communities can grow into equity and excellence through personalizing learning. The powerful school communities in the four cases shaping this book prove it. These four Title I schools attend to the individual needs of each student, and have demonstrated increased student achievement for underserved students over 5 to 10 years.

Equity combined with high standards is their driving force. Determined to meet the needs of each student, personalization takes hold, and learning for both students *and* adults becomes engaging and effective. Significant practice shifts provide adults with daily opportunities to focus their own learning, in support of each student's success. Leaders and systems keep the efforts focused, accountable, and sustainable.

## **EQUITY AND ITS IMPEDIMENTS**

Equity requires fairness and justice, so students are challenged and supported to meet high standards regardless of their race, ethnicity, economic class, gender, language, or ability. This is the American Dream realized through public education: Anyone willing to work hard can make it. Here society generally, and education specifically, bear responsibility for enabling this concept. Historically we have paved the trails to equity with

## 2 • Growing Into Equity

Supreme Court cases, court orders, community organizing, and policies, as we continuously review what we should provide, how high we should reach, and who should be included.<sup>1</sup> Progress has been made, but continued, and in some cases worsening, inequity demands more. Current, national issues focus on high standards and college access for all students, opportunities for deep learning, formative assessment systems, and effective educators. These initiatives play out to differing effects in states and communities. Continued vigilance is required: There are no shortcuts to equity.

### Focusing on the Needs of Every and All Students

In the age of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), achievement has meant thinking about expectations for all students—groups in aggregate. In terms of federal legislation, this was a first. It focused educators on support to NCLB demographic groups. At its best, it has generated research on and systemic practices for historically overlooked groups and their needs—important steps.

These groupings also have their limits. For example, while a school's demographic data may indicate that 45% of the students are Black, they may be

- children of middle-class, college-educated African Americans;
- newcomers from Haiti with some formal schooling;
- fourth-generation African Americans whose ancestors never knew school success; or
- children from Nigeria with no schooling who only speak a little-known dialect.

**Underserved students** are likely to be

- economically poor;
- immigrants;
- racial and ethnic minorities;
- English Language Learners;
- students with special needs;
- students with areas of giftedness; or
- some combination of the above.

These examples belie the tidiness of the federal demographic group “Black.” Recognizing the multiplicity of variations within racial and other categories means attending to them in order to reverse low trends of graduation and achievement, particularly among the economically disadvantaged, English Language Learners, students with special

needs, and Black and Hispanic youth. But if we focus singularly on racial groupings and their broad descriptors, we don't fully get to know who

students are, or what will enable their achievement (Conchas, 2001; Conchas & Noguera, 2004; Conchas & Pérez, 2003).

High achievement and equity means attending to *each student*.<sup>2</sup> This is different from thinking about students in aggregate, the “*all students*” framework, and puts an emphasis on students’ individual gifts and needs. Each one counts and merits challenge and care.

#### *Equity Commitments as Aspirational or Limited*

Most educators and school communities have and believe statements about achievement for all. Yet these statements can remain aspirational, like many an unfulfilled New Year’s resolution or wishes for world peace. They are held dear in concept but are not realistically planned for or actualized over the long term. School meeting agendas, instructional plans, and professional learning days may be perpetually one or two steps away from directly focusing on equity. In the end, it is expected and acceptable that only some students do well (Hilliard, 1991).

Goals can be too low, or too narrowly defined, to accomplish high achievement for all. Political pressure and policy goals may focus disproportionately on test scores. This approach may improve overall scores without fundamentally improving student learning. At best, the efforts chip away at equity issues.

#### *Institutional Racism, Cultural Bias, and Cultural Blindness*

Individuals, schools, and systems—either actively or passively—make exceptions to the idea that all students can learn.<sup>3</sup> When biases are systemic, they exclude groups from getting access to and appropriate support for learning.<sup>4</sup> For example, a new national K–12 study shows that male Black and Latino students are suspended at rates much higher than other groups (Losen & Gillespie, 2012). Subsequently, they are more likely to be expelled, drop out, and decide that school is not for them.

All students may be treated the same, though socioeconomic, race, language, and/or culture may vary. This blindness<sup>5</sup> can never get us to equity because everyone simply does not need the same supports and opportunities to learn. The reasons behind these systemic biases and discriminations continue to be debated vigorously.<sup>6</sup> In the meantime, individual schools and the nation writ large continue to work on narrowing achievement gaps that reveal inadequate achievement of the underserved, and an American Dream that remains unfulfilled for many.

## **AN EQUITY FOCUS LEADS TO PERSONALIZING LEARNING FOR EVERY STUDENT**

A commitment to equity and excellence means recognizing that every child is a complex and compelling story, as a person and a learner. Part of educators' work is to uncover gifts. This does not negate federal groupings or working on equity in more targeted ways; it just acknowledges that they do not suffice.

### **Understand Students as Persons and as Learners**

To meet each student where they are, they need to be understood as persons and as learners. This means recognizing the fullness of their gifts; their passions; their race, class, and culture; additional aspects of context and history; their families; their beliefs and values; and their possibilities.

There is also understanding students as learners. Learning begins with who students are and what they already know. The teacher is responsible for extending and deepening learning from that point (National Research Council, 2001). Sometimes, underserved students present extraordinary gifts and needs simultaneously:

- Anna, a Cape Verdean newcomer, is three years beyond her peers in science skills and knowledge. She arrives completely new to the English language.
- Ewa, a Polish American, is having difficulty communicating orally. Literacy diagnostics don't indicate a language problem. She's a great painter. When her teacher probes, she learns that Ewa's only parent is deaf; Ewa does not talk much at home. She signs.
- Alejandro, a second-generation Mexican American, speaks English, is a natural at soccer, and works hard at his studies. His teacher is challenged to figure out the source of Alejandro's difficulty in math.

#### *Personalization*

Understanding each student as a person and learner inevitably personalizes learning. The literature on personalization, starting with Theodore Sizer's (1999) work, points to personalization facilitating strong relationships between teachers and high school students. Teachers need freedoms and supports to understand students and personalize learning. In high school they need teaching loads that allow time to form meaningful relationships with students (Yonezawa, McClure, &

Jones, 2012). Linda Darling-Hammond summarizes personalization this way:

Schools' efforts to ensure that students are well known include the construction of small learning communities; continuous, long-term relationships between adults and students; advisory systems that systematically organize counseling, academic supports, and family connections; and small class sizes and reduced pupil loads for teachers that allow them to care effectively for students. (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 246)

Personalizing education can also reveal itself through acts of instruction and assessment. Learning begins with who students are and what they know; the teacher is responsible for extending and deepening learning from that point (National Research Council, 2001). John Hattie's (2012) description of effective teaching and learning requires that teachers know each student's current academic achievement, and are poised to attend to each student's next steps in learning.

Teachers need to be aware of what each and every student in their class is thinking and what they know, be able to construct meaning and meaningful experiences in light of this knowledge of the students, and have proficient knowledge and understanding of their subject content so that they can provide meaningful and appropriate feedback such that each student moves progressively through the curriculum levels. (p. 18)

Within these relationships, daily practices focus on understanding students as persons and learners, knowing that as they change and grow, their learning itself changes over time. This involves teachers having deep knowledge of content, an understanding of what students are expected to learn in previous and subsequent grades, and abilities to effectively capture current student knowledge in assessments.

In *Growing into Equity*, the definition of **personalization includes both personal relationships with students, and classroom practices and multiple supports that recognize and attend to individual student gifts, circumstances, and needs.**

#### *Personalization Happening for Some*

There are individual teachers who understand and attend to every learner. In June, every child leaves these classrooms inspired, and often

## 6 • Growing Into Equity

having made more than a year's progress. These are often the exception, rather than the norm.

Most educators and schools personalize in limited ways for students generally, and perhaps deeply for *some* students. They may be particularly low and high achievers, with extreme or obvious gifts and needs. And there are many, many teachers trying to figure out how students between these extremes learn. As professional developers working with educators around the country, the authors experience many teachers who feel hamstrung by circumstances, capacity, policies, bureaucracy, time, and limited resources. These educators are unclear about how to have an impact that reaches each student.

### **PERSONALIZING LEARNING FOR EVERY STUDENT REQUIRES REFRAMING PROFESSIONAL LEARNING**

A commitment to equity is a quest for every student doing well and means systemic personalization. Successfully doing this requires continuously building educator skills, knowledge, and dispositions in and outside the classroom—ongoing professional learning.

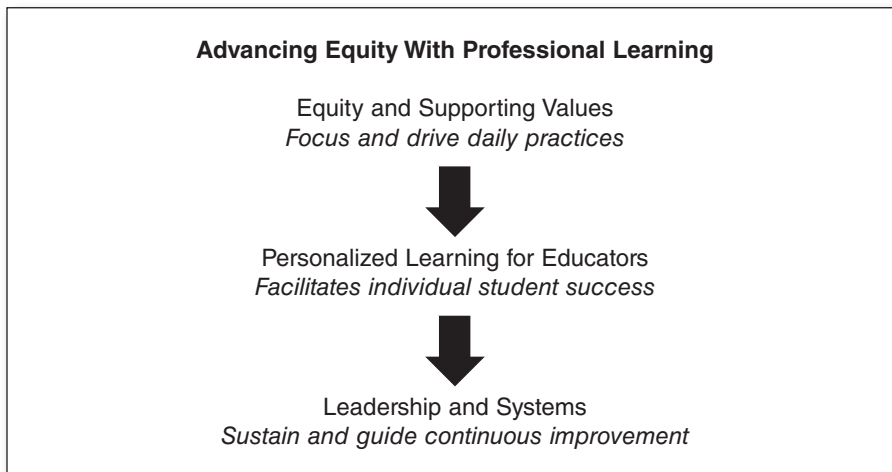
The definition of professional learning proposed in the current Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) reauthorization,<sup>7</sup> and the consensus of national educational associations convened by Learning Forward, describes preK–12 professional learning as collective responsibility to provide a comprehensive, sustained, and intensive approach to raising student achievement.

1. It aligns with rigorous academic achievement standards and local improvement goals.
2. It takes place among educators at school and is facilitated by well-prepared leaders.
3. It primarily occurs several times per week among established teams to promote a continuous cycle of improvement (Hirsh, 2009).

Ensuring appropriate time and quality for professional learning is essential. Educators need to support one another to advance learning goals for individual students and themselves. Focused, ambitious goals are not just the result of working in isolation. Educators need to support one another, collaborate in various groups, and make effective decisions

regarding student and school improvement. As they work individually, in teams and schoolwide, educators generate professional capital (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). This is not a nicety. It is essential to an aggressive equity agenda. Equity focuses and intensifies professional learning. It demands that professional learning create systematic space and scaffolding to learn and discern how students are unique as persons and as learners, and uncover individual students' instructional and other needs. Figure 1.1 on the next page offers an example of how one school with a fierce equity agenda engages professional learning experiences to support personalized learning through differentiation and integrating technology, with educators and students both advancing the cause.

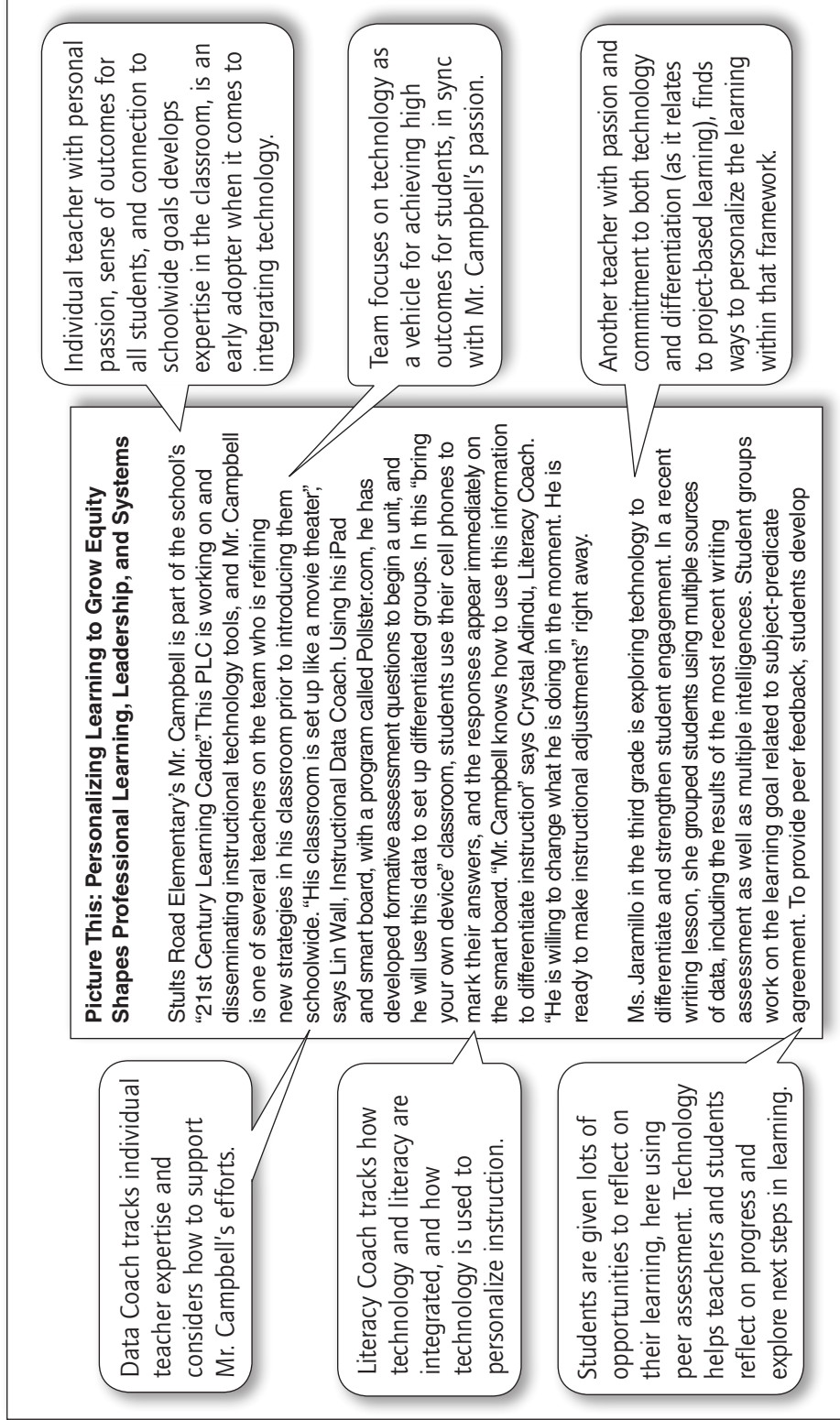
### **LEADERSHIP AND SUPPORTIVE SYSTEMS ENABLE AN EQUITY AGENDA AND PERSONALIZATION**



The example in the box above is a reminder that deep adult and student learning does not happen haphazardly. Research shows that next to instruction, school leadership is the second most important factor in improving achievement (see Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). It defines leadership as having two essential functions: “providing direction” and “exercising influence.” (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000 p. 20). Increasingly, leadership functions are distributed. There’s not one leader, but the web of leaders, followers, and their situations that shapes leadership practices (Spillane & Diamond, 2007). And there is evidence that sustained leadership over time allows for deep innovation to take hold.<sup>8</sup>



**Figure 1.1** Personalizing Educator Learning to Advance Equity





Students with passion and expertise for technology are supported to grow and share their expertise with peers and with educators who need support in using technology.

The 21st Century Learning Cadre tries out new instructional practices then helps build schoolwide capacity.

digital recordings of their written work, using an avatar they have created along with voice-recording software. Educators and students alike have the opportunity to listen to and comment on each student's written work, deepening engagement and reflection through the avatar voice program. Crystal Adindu reflects, "Ms. Jamarillo is able to use technology in a way that engages students in order to meet their different needs in all levels."

Through the new iCougars program, students are helping teach their peers and educators about technology. As digital natives, "it makes sense for the students to be there for the teachers," explains school principal Amber Leblond.

The Data Coach comments that Stults "now has teachers who are a little bit more experienced with technology, and using some of the software to process data in a more efficient way." Through a "teachers teaching teachers" PLC model, educators gather weekly to share practices and integrate them into their learning.

There are whole school meetings where PLCs gather in small groups, but also have schoolwide sharing, where teachers are expected to try out new practices and then bring their learnings back to the full group.

The district is supporting these teachers to learn how to differentiate instruction so they can support colleagues in subsequent years.

## **10 • Growing Into Equity**

For equity and personalization to transcend the realm of a few, iconoclastic teachers, the activities of professional learning have to be led, calibrated, and organized according to goals and needs. These leaders at the school level, and leaders at broader district, state, and national levels, each have opportunities to shape practices, protocols, and systems that sustain the work and ensure it remains iterative. Leaders, and the systems they shape in collaboration, allow for continued building of professional capacity as student needs become better understood, and as they change.

### **DECIDING TO DEEPEN AN EQUITY FOCUS**

Making substantial advances in an equity agenda does not happen by accident. Sometimes a critical number of educators across a school decide that they are going to reach each student in a school, even if it is hard, even if everyone has some bias or blindness, even if it has been the domain of just a couple of people or the focus has been on one or two demographic groups in the past. Even if frustrated about progress. Actually, in part, because of it. Growing into equity requires that educators commit to every student achieving at high levels, emphasizing opportunities for every student learning, and working intentionally on each student's individual gifts and needs. The realization may start as a revelation for one or more educators, in the way that certain moments sneak up on individuals and announce that things cannot go on as they have. Or it may be a case of equity and excellence pulling each other along over time, case by case, building momentum. The more dynamic the dialectic on equity practice becomes, the more inevitable the work of personalization. As it grows, the work shifts from having a system that primarily attends to one class learning, or groups learning, to a system that personalizes learning for all students.

However it starts, this shift in student learning demands a reframing of professional learning for individual educators, collaborative teams, and schools as a whole. To address a more complex understanding of each student learner, adult learners need a support system and collective expertise.

These opportunities exploit the idea of the “adjacent possible” (Johnson, 2010), where new knowledge and breakthroughs rarely come out of the blue, but are more likely to be at the edges of what is already understood and extend from there. In education now, there is a growing knowledge of how students learn, how data analysis can inform instructional improvement, and how to organize cultures and professional communities to be effective. It falls to us to reach to the edges of research, best practice, and

our own experience and wisdom to take the next step—one that helps us teach more children with greater care and competence than we ever have before. The following stories of four school communities point the way.

## **NOTES**

1. See Darling-Hammond (2010) for a comprehensive historical and national political analysis.

2. This distinction between “all” and “each” comes from a framework for systemic analysis when it was introduced as being done from the perspective of the economically poor. This analysis was developed by Dr. Ruth Rosenbaum of the Center for Reflection, Education and Action. See [www.crea.org](http://www.crea.org).

3. See Tatum, 2003, for a discussion of active and passive racism.

4. Nieto and Bode (2011) examine structural flaws in systems and how to address them at the classroom and school levels.

5. See hooks (1992) for discussion on blindness as it relates to race as “racial erasure.”

6. Cross, Bazron, Dennis, and Isaacs (1989) offer the Cultural Proficiency Continuum as a framework for understanding responses to diversity from cultural destructiveness to cultural proficiency. For more recent work on Cultural Proficiency see Robins, Terrell, and Lindsey (2003).

7. The definition of professional learning as Proposed Amendments to Section 9101 (34) of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act as reauthorized by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. For the full definition, see <http://learningforward.org/who-we-are/professional-learning-definition#.UCuSuI44yfQ>

8. See Sharratt and Fullan (2009) and Hargreaves and Braun (2012) for a discussion on the role of school and district leadership in capacity building.