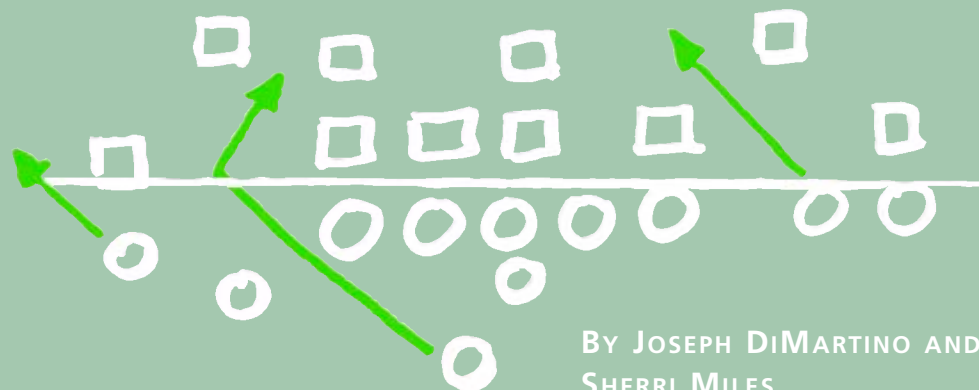


Strategies for Successful Personalization



BY JOSEPH DIMARTINO AND
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A NUMBER OF IMPORTANT STUDIES have pointed to the significance of active participation in learning as a determinant of student performance on tests and of grades (Lee, Smith, & Croninger, 1995; Newmann, Wehlage, & Lamborn, 1992; Stigler & Hiebert, 1999). A study conducted by the Education Alliance at Brown University and referenced in *Breaking Ranks II: Strategies for Leading High School Reform* (NASSP, 2005) sought to discover the particular activities and interactions that engage all students in learning. The researcher concluded that students “cannot succeed in high school by remaining passive recipients of knowledge, waiting for graduation day. Existing structures bring comfort to all parties, but they do not promote engagement. Without engagement, there is no learning” (Clarke & DiMartino, 2004, p. 23).

As these studies showed, student engagement can result from the development of personalized learning. High school personalization, however, does not come from a reliable recipe. Each of the Breakthrough High Schools (BTHS) has taken various paths to personalization that reflect each school’s unique characteristics and existing strengths. Unlike most whole-school change strategies, personalization doesn’t depend on a single organizing tactic, such as comparing test scores over time across programs or beginning small-schools restructuring (Clarke & DiMartino, 2004).

BTHS employ strategies for personalization that are appropriate for the schools because each school has a principal who strongly believes that personalization efforts will improve learning for his or her students. Some of the principals focus on providing adviser programs, with each student having an adult advocate who knows him or her well; others find innovative ways to recognize students and reward success; others strive for a manageable scale through smaller learning communities; and still others monitor changing student needs. Regardless of which particular strategy is chosen, the primary focus at each of these schools is on students and their achievement, rather than on adults.

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Sometimes It Takes Just One Person

Strong evidence suggests that if students perceive they are known by an adult in the school and if the school has a supportive environment, then the students will tend to have better attendance and be less likely to drop out than those who do not feel an attachment to school personnel (Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandez, 1989). Also, a positive psychosocial climate between teachers and students leads to improved academic achievement (Galassi, Gullledge, & Cox, 1997). An advisory program that focuses on creating such a climate is a strategy used by several BTHS.

“The main reason we developed an advisory program was to have every kid have an adult advocate and to build positive relationships with other kids,” said Keith Morris, the principal of Mabton (WA) Junior/Senior High School. To foster a family environment, advisory programs include students from grades 7–12, with each adviser guiding 15 to 16 students. They work on team-building activities, graduation portfolios, college awareness, and student-led conferences during the advisory period. “We didn’t want it to be a study hall, and if it was going to be 30 minutes each day, it had to be productive, useful time,” said Morris.

The idea for the advisory program came from a group of teachers who saw from survey results that students really needed a healthy, safe environment at school. “Thank goodness, it came from a core group of the teachers, saying that they were really going to commit to make advisories work,” said Morris. “Even so, the first thing that came up was the question, ‘Are you going to help us with this?’” He agreed to help and worked with the staff to create the Supportive Learning Environment committee, which developed a resource notebook to help new and struggling advisers.

Principal Kathleen Ponze closely monitors the advisory program at the Young Women’s Leadership School in New York City. “We have written curriculum,” she said. “We have bought curriculum. We really believe that the students need a very personalized space that’s going to deal with their entire well-being: social, emotional, psychological, as well as academic. And it’s the perfect bridge for family outreach. When you break your student body down into manageable [groups] of 14 to 16 students and each teacher is responsible for family outreach for those families, it becomes manageable.”

Sometimes it just takes that one person to follow up with and look after a student to make a difference in that student’s success. At Edcouch-Elsa High School in Edcouch,

TX, a mentoring program builds 30 minutes into the schedule during fourth period for students to meet with their teacher mentors. The teacher mentors can look up grades and attendance records, keep up with the students, and “might be that one person who will benefit that child and will make them go on and succeed,” said Principal Carmen Garcia. “We also have built in character education lessons that focus on team building, respect, responsibility, and study skills. We decided to have lessons and provide a curriculum so teachers could do things with the kids to really get to know them. We have a lot of economically disadvantaged students, so a lot of them feel that they can’t do anything because they don’t have money. But with this particular program, it teaches children that there are scholarships out there, there are other things they can do, and they can excel as well.”

Making Regular Kids Feel Special

Students in personalized high schools often see their daily work as a way to confirm their sense of progress toward personal goals. Seeing small successes helps students understand how they are moving toward their long-term goals. Recognizing their mastery of skills or knowledge increases their confidence and often opens new avenues of learning and connecting with their schooling (Clarke & DiMartino, 2004).

Mel Riddile, principal of J. E. B. Stuart High School, spends time with students and teachers in his role as instructional leader.

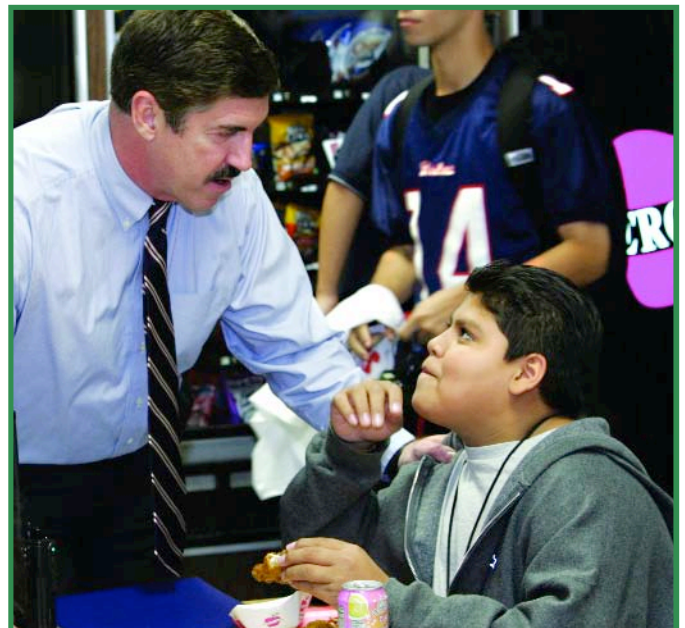


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Principal Asenath Andrews of Catherine Ferguson Academy in Detroit, MI, understands the importance of having a recognition program, particularly for those students most likely to be overlooked. Andrews sees the same 50 girls every year: they have different names, and they're from different households, but they're demographically similar students. "They've been out of school for one or more years; they have really difficult family situations. We lose them in the first 30 days of school," said Andrews. "Then we have another group of kids who, for some reason, can't keep it together enough to stay throughout the whole school year."

Andrews had an idea for how to support these students. She called it the "Power Sisters" and publicized its members as "people we have identified with leadership potential, but they fit within the categories that we are worried about losing." The Power Sisters meet once a week for breakfast or lunch with one of the nurses and the social worker. "We feed them for anything. I don't know why, but it works," Andrews said, noting that everybody likes to be in the group. "If you make kids special, they become special. This year we got the Power Sisters some blazers, and you just change their whole outlook on themselves and school. [These students] are no longer [representing] whatever wasn't succeeding before. They've been identified as special, and they live up to that specialness. So if you change the legend, you change the kid."

Debra Pace, the principal of Poinciana High School in Kissimmee, FL, wants to change not only the legend of the kids' lives at her school but also the legend of the school itself. For years, Poinciana had a negative reputation among the parents, among the students, even among some of the teachers themselves. For a long time it was so bad that "we'd have kids come to [our] pep rallies in other schools' shirts," said Pace. "And so we initiated Poinciana Pride, our positive-behavior support program—a different way of approaching discipline as opposed to a reactive approach."

In an effort to improve behavior, the teachers and the administrators had been punishing students more and more; Pace wanted to reinforce and reward doing the right thing instead. "If they have a coupon on Fridays, they can either get a cookie, or popcorn, or a CD cover, or a sticker that says 'Poinciana Pride.'" On the first day of school, every stu-

dent and staff member received a T-shirt that listed the "Pillars of Excellence" on the back—respect yourself and others; have the courage to do what's right; show loyalty to your school, yourself, and your community; have tolerance for all; and accept responsibility for your words and actions—and "Poinciana Pride" on the front. Every Friday has become Pride Day and students wear their T-shirts to school. At the beginning of each year, a new T-shirt is designed by one of



Teachers at Poinciana shifted their focus from punishment to positive behavior—and it worked.

the students. "The T-shirt is their ticket into pep rallies, and it's wonderful to see the sea of shirts," said Pace.

T-shirts are also part of the Very Improved Performance program at Forest Hill High School in Jackson, MS. "The VIP program is an opportunity to recognize the students that are not necessarily your scholars," said Norm Chappell, the school principal. "They are not your star athletes, they are not your cheerleaders, but they are giving you the best that they have." Each student who receives an award is given a T-shirt with the VIP logo on it at an assembly, affording them the opportunity to receive recognition for their good efforts. "We have had students wear those T-shirts until they [were] threadbare," Chappell said.

Teachers can nominate as many students as they want for the Effort Awards at J. E. B. Stuart High School in Falls Church, VA, as long as they write a statement of why they're nominating the students and as long as they aren't honor

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roll students. “It’s for your average, what I call ‘RKs,’ a regular kid who is a good citizen of the school, who does what is expected every day, and never really does well enough to get recognized but really is always appreciated in many ways by their teachers,” said Principal Mel Riddile. “And those are the kids that are the backbone, the heart and soul of any school or any organization, and we found a way to recognize them. We started with just a couple kids, 20, now we’re up to 130, and the families come. These are kids that never received awards, sometimes never in their whole life. So a whole family will show up. And the administrator will read the statement from the teacher about why they’re receiving the award.... It’s extremely positive, and I’ve seen kids even put down on their college application that they won an Effort Award. So they really think it’s a big thing. I think it’s more positive than graduation. It touches kids that don’t get touched in any other way.”

Creating a Manageable Environment

In 1996, Theodore Sizer wrote, “The heart of schooling is found in relationships between students, teacher, and ideas. Kids differ, and serious ideas affect each one in often interestingly different ways, especially as that child matures” (p. xiii). Converting comprehensive high schools to smaller, personalized settings in which students and teachers work together to plan and carry out personalized learning is a long-term challenge.

Gail Awakuni followed the principles in *Breaking Ranks* to create smaller learning communities at James Campbell High School, a large school of 2,300 students in Ewa Beach, HI. She started by working with staff members to divide the school into five academies. “There are 380–400 students in each academy, and it has allowed us to look at how do we form a school, change the structure, build in support, and monitor,” she said. “By dividing ourselves into smaller learning communities, we felt that we could then put in place what those principles called for and that we could manage it in smaller chunks; and this is what we have had to do in all these years that we have been toying with school reform.”

A lot of kids can get lost in the cracks in a large school. Principal Geraldine Ambrosio has 4,500 students in DeWitt Clinton High School in New York City. “We’re very good at the high end and very good in the middle, but I still have a

group of kids who failed in ninth grade,” she said. To reach as many of these students as possible, Ambrosio created five small learning communities that students enter in the ninth grade and stay in for four years. The faculty self-selected the community they wanted to be in for the first year and started developing a core curriculum that would be the same for all the small learning communities.

“What’s different about this is that before they had houses, so they had the same guidance counselor; now [they’ll have] the instruction piece. It’s very nice when an English teacher and a social studies teacher who never knew each other before can talk to each other about the same kid,” said Ambrosio. With teachers actually knowing the ninth-grade students and discussing them from class to class, students have a better chance of not getting left behind academically in a school as large as DeWitt Clinton.

Responding to Individual Needs

Personalized learning allows each student to earn recognition from peers and from adults as well—teachers, parents, and school leaders. Earning recognition can happen only when

Ninth-grade academies focus on achievement in grade 9 as the key to graduation at grade 12.



“Everybody that complained became part of my advisory group. Because it’s okay to complain, but you’ve got to be about solving it.”

students have the opportunity to voice a personal perspective and assert a unique identity. Schools that personalize learning by expanding opportunities to meet individual needs must develop equitable processes that let many voices be heard (Clarke & DiMartino, 2004).

Two principals of BTHS rely on student advisory councils to identify student needs and offer suggestions on strategies to meet those needs. In those schools, the principals took student opinions very seriously and honored them by ensuring that students had a voice in how decisions affecting their lives were made. At Madison High School in San Diego, CA, Principal Virginia Eves noted, “When I first came to this school, every time I went outside, [a student] was complaining to me about something: I can’t stand this teacher, I hate this, I hate that. So, everybody that complained became part of my advisory group. Because it’s okay to complain, but you’ve got to be about solving it.” And Charlesetta Deason, the principal of Michael E. DeBakey High School for Health Professions in Houston, TX, “wanted to hear what the kids were thinking,” so she started an advisory committee that meets with her once a month to discuss what is going well and what needs improvement.

Chappell (Forest Hill High School) has developed an innovative way to support students by creating a before- and after-school tutorial program: “We have a number of students that are at the school in the morning at 7 a.m. when I get there; they’re there in the afternoon at 5 p.m. when I leave,” he said. “Mama drops them off on her way to work; she picks them up on her way home. So we thought that we could take advantage of this and institute a tutorial program where these students could come to our computer lab and receive some individual, one-on-one instruction with a certified teacher.” Students can get extra assistance in four core areas: math, science, English, and social studies.

To support the needs of English-learning students at Arroyo High School in El Monte, CA, Principal Keith Richardson started the New Horizons program: “We realized that they were the let-down students. A lot of them are recent immigrants; their parents don’t understand the system.” Teachers provided names of English language learners in

their classes, and the counselors and the administrators made contact with the students and their families and explained that they were monitoring progress, checking up with the students on a weekly basis through progress reports, and providing certain incentives. For example, if a student had no tardies or absences for a month, he or she received a gift card from Tower Records.

Conclusion

The popular perception is that personalized learning for high school students is a soft skill that should not be the focus of high schools. Nothing could be further from the truth. Personalized high schools focus on students to improve performance and increase both college attendance and test scores. The demands of society, in addition to the current measures of accountability, require that principals ensure that all students are educated to high levels of performance and measured against common standards and the personal aspirations of each student.

Personalizing learning is essential if a school is going to meet the requirements of No Child Left Behind. After all, the measure of success for a school is now based on demonstrating that each student meets standards. The only way to measure up against that yardstick is to pay close attention to each student in a school that personalizes learning. BTHS have clearly demonstrated that. **PL**

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