District Spotlight: Pelham School District
Pelham, New Hampshire

CHALLENGE: How can districts use personalized learning to maximize the implementation of education and assistive technology to support all students, including students with disabilities?

Personalized Learning: Blurring the Line Between Assistive and Educational Technology

Pelham School District (PSD) is a small, suburban district of three schools—an elementary school, a middle school, and a high school—in New Hampshire. When our spotlight begins, the district was struggling to leverage technology to support the needs of students with disabilities. Without a systematic approach to the selection and procurement of technology and the necessary professional development to support teachers with the use of these tools, district leaders sought to identify strategies to meet the needs of all students, particularly students with disabilities. After exploring different options and talking to experts, district leaders concluded that the path to enhancing teaching and learning could be found in the principles of universal design for learning (UDL)[1] and personalized instruction.[2] These two strategies emphasize the need to identify and build upon the student's individual strengths and align the appropriate technology tools (assistive technology (AT),[3] edtech, and accessible educational materials[4] to support student learning.

Learn how PSD leadership built on the principles of UDL and use of accessible technology to personalize learning for all students. The PSD team shares strategies and offers recommendations to districts focused on building their capacity to use AT and accessible technology to support personalized instruction.

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[1] CAST (2018). *UDL at a glance*. Retrieved from http://www.cast.org/our-work/about-udl.html

[2] Personalized learning—instruction in which the pace of learning and the instructional approach are optimized for the needs of each learner. Retrieved from https://tech.ed.gov/netp/learning/

[3] Assistive technology device—any item, piece of equipment, software program, or product system that is used to increase, maintain, or improve the functional capabilities of persons with disabilities. Assistive technology service—any service that directly assists a child with a disability in the selection, acquisition, or use of an assertive technology device. Retrieved from http://idea.ed.gov/download/statute.html

[4] Accessible educational materials—materials and technologies usable for learning across the widest range of individual variability, regardless of format or features. Whether a material or technology is designed from the start to be accessible for all learners or is made accessible for learners with disabilities, it is considered an accessible educational material. Retrieved from http://aem.cast.org/about/what-are-aem-accessible-technologies.html

Pelham School District: Setting the Stage

Limited funding and insufficient resources are two common challenges school districts face when providing AT and edtech to meet the needs of all students. However, PSD's challenges were compounded by the lack of a systemic approach to technology implementation across schools. It became apparent that there were insufficient policies and processes with the selection, procurement, and assignment of AT and edtech and professional learning. As a result, each school offered a combination of devices and supports that were used for teaching and learning. District leadership recognized the need to implement an approach that provides streamlined systems and aligned technology implementation across grades, classrooms, and buildings and also considers the issues related to accessibility and the needs of students with disabilities.

As a catalyst for change, PSD's superintendent signed the Future Ready District Pledge, an initiative launched in November 2014 by the White House. By signing the pledge, the district superintendent made a commitment to "implement meaningful changes toward a digital learning transition that supports teachers, and addresses the district's vision for student learning."[5] PSD prioritized this effort by allocating valuable resources and sending a diverse group of district staff to an intensive 2-day professional learning summit to draft their district's technology plan with support from peers and national experts. Upon return, the team collaborated with stakeholders (e.g., teachers, staff, parents, students) to develop a new district vision for digital learning (see sidebar), understand needs, refine objectives, implement activities, and collect and analyze data to inform continuous improvement. Through focused implementation efforts, PSD met its targets; within 18 months of beginning the journey, the district received national recognition on Digital Learning Day[6] for completing the comprehensive planning process.

> ## District Facts
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> - Number of Schools: 3
> - Number of Students: 1,966
> - Percentage of Students With Individualized Education Programs: 16

The new technology plan emphasized personalized professional learning, personalized and flexible learning environments, a cohesive technology infrastructure, and continuous stakeholder engagement. PSD recognized the importance of integrating accessible and assistive technologies into the general education classroom, given that the majority of students with individualized education programs spend 80% of their day in a general education setting. [7] To better meet the needs of all students, it was critical to ensure that all teachers were familiar with their students' AT and the accessible features in mainstream technology in order to personalize instruction. PSD built teacher capacity by fostering an ongoing, collaborative, professional learning community that included job-embedded professional development opportunities. For instance, elementary school teachers shared ideas and innovative practices in a weekly newsletter and then scheduled visits to their colleagues' classrooms to see the instruction in action. This approach gave teachers new ideas and professional development within the school day. Another example of a professional development opportunity is the Digital Cohort, which brought teachers together from each school to share best practices, discuss technology tools, and develop technology-infused units that incorporate personalized learning strategies. In addition, students were encouraged to take ownership of their learning and to steer their own paths with the support of peers, teachers, and technology resources. For a final project, eighth-grade students participated in a Celebration of

[5] Future Ready District Pledge http://futureready.org/take-the-pledge/
[6] Digital Learning Day, hosted by Alliance for Excellent Education http://www.digitallearningday.org/
[7] U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2016). *Digest of Education Statistics, 2015* (NCES 2016-014), Chapter 2. Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=59

Learning capstone powered by personalized learning. Students researched and presented information in different ways, which gave them opportunities to experiment with various research tools and presentation formats and platforms. Aligned to the new plan, PSD procured and integrated technology systematically, and, after a successful pilot, PSD rolled out a 1:1[8] Chromebook initiative to Grades 3–12 students.

As a result of this effort, PSD can point to three key improvements to teaching and learning: (1) clear policies and processes when AT is being considered, (2) better understanding and awareness of the available AT tools and existing and new edtech, and (3) stronger partnerships and systems of support within each building. In addition, PSD's decision to enhance student learning with the use of technology, personalized learning, and UDL principles implemented in conjunction with a new approach to professional learning has the capacity to improve teaching and learning throughout the district.

Strategies for Success

Ensure a wide range of perspectives are considered.

- Bring key stakeholders to the table. The commitment for change came from the top, but staff throughout the district were involved each step of the way, working together to develop the district's technology plan, objectives, and implementation milestones.

- Facilitate authentic stakeholder engagement. PSD built a strong coalition of stakeholders to understand needs and concerns; share ideas; collect, analyze, and use data to drive decision making; and inform continuous improvement revisions to the implementation plan.

> ### PSD Vision for Digital Learning
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> *The Pelham School District is committed to inspiring success by providing personalized, flexible, student-centered learning that utilizes a wide spectrum of instructional practices and tools that support high-order thinking and college and career ready skills. A flexible approach and environments, supportive resources and professional learning are essential to this success.[9]*

Provide personalized professional learning and encourage collaboration.

- Provide ongoing professional learning to all teachers in UDL. PSD general education teachers participated in small-group learning communities to design personalized units using mainstream technology devices and apps with accessibility features to ensure that content provided used multiple means of representation, expression, and engagement.

- Encourage informal collaboration. Connecting with colleagues to share challenges and successes in an informal setting (e.g., weekly newsletter) is invaluable. These interactions take the pressure off and provide a more relaxed way for teachers to build capacity from within.

Invest in technology staff.

- Hire dedicated technology staff. Each of the three schools staffs a technology integrator (or coach) who is responsible for supporting students and staff with the use of AT and edtech in the classroom. An expert in each building who has knowledge of the latest devices, software, and functionality improves opportunities and efficiency for students and teachers.

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[8] 1:1 = one device for each student

[9] Pelham School District Future Ready Technology Plan: http://www.pelhamsd.org/departments/technology/future-ready-technology-plan

Empower students and parents.

- Elevate student voice. In rethinking technology use in the district, district leadership wanted to ensure students had the room to grow and take ownership over their learning.

- Give students ownership. High school, middle school, and elementary school students have opportunities to assist teachers with the use of technology (e.g., troubleshooting issues) and service technology tools in need of repair at the student-run help desk.

- Communicate with parents. PSD hosts monthly meetings with parents of students with disabilities on a range of topics (e.g., successful implementation of individualized education programs, how to strengthen the relationship between school and families to meet the needs of students).

Recommendations for Districts Facing Similar Challenges

- *Make it your own!* As a team, PSD staff worked together to create their own definition of what personalized learning would like in their schools (see sidebar).

- *Lead by example.* Create an expectation for technology use and personalization by modeling this expectation from the top down.

- *Take your time! It's a process.* Successful change will not happen overnight. Thoughtful, detailed, deliberate implementation is key. Set small goals and celebrate wins to keep the momentum moving forward, and take time to reflect on what strategies are working and where challenges remain.

- *Be vision driven.* District leadership across departments worked together to achieve the same goal. Returning to the district's vision was a critical element to collaboration and ongoing success.

- *Encourage teachers to innovate.* Assure staff they have support to practice new instructional approaches (e.g., delivery method, flexible classroom setting). If staff do not believe that they have a safe space to experiment, they may feel deterred.

- *Integrate technology with an eye on equity and accessibility.* When implementing technology initiatives, such as BYOD, be mindful of inequities in student devices and student needs (e.g., accessibility). Use technology tools and apps that have extensions and add-ons with built-in accessibility features (e.g., read aloud, captions) that benefit everyone and open avenues for greater personalization.

> ## PSD Definition of Personalized Learning
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> - Learners understand how they best engage with academic and social-emotional competencies, and performance outcomes.
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> - Learners cultivate a network of peers, teachers, and resources that fosters individuals to take responsibility for their learning.
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> - In partnership with a teacher or mentor, learners are active participants in designing, implementing, and evaluating a personalized learning plan.[10]

Additional Resources

- Assistive Technology 101
- Digital Accessibility Toolkit: What Education Leaders Need to Know
- Pelham School District: Future Ready Technology Plan, July 2016–July 2019
- Technology Implementation Practice Guide
- For support, contact an AT specialist at the Center on Technology and Disability at ctd@fhi360.org.

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[10] Pelham School District's Path to Personalization: https://futureready.org/pelham-school-districts-path-personalization/

About This Resource

"Assistive and Instructional Technology Supporting Learners with Disabilities"