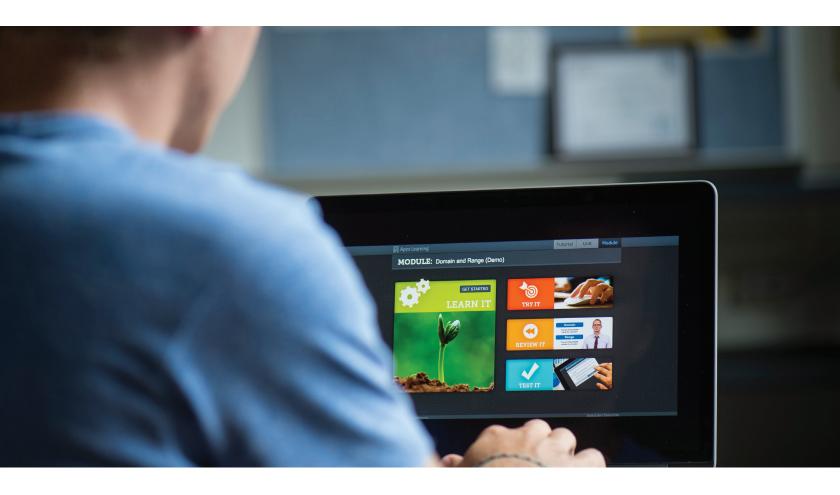# Increasing Student Access to Personalized Learning

Speak Up National Survey Results Show Students Want More Use of Technology to Support and Improve Learning

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November 2016

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Introduction

New learning opportunities, powered by technology, are transforming the way students learn, resulting in improved student outcomes. Use of technology and digital content with real-time assessment of student performance and adaptive instruction drives learning growth. Students can now have a learning experience that is responsive, allows for voice and agency, and provides appropriate and timely feedback. However, schools are struggling to bring this reality to the classroom at scale.

Today's students are digital natives who have never known a world without Google. They grew up with ubiquitous access to information and interactive tools designed to respond to their unique needs and interests. They regularly engage with digital resources for recreation, communication, research, and decision-making. They create digital montages to commemorate and share interactions with friends. Students seamlessly integrate digital and physical personas outside of school in order to generate customized experiences; however, this integration is largely absent in school.

This report, developed in collaboration between Project Tomorrow and Apex Learning, analyzes research and data from the national Speak Up survey about the use of or desired use of technology to improve the learning experience. Survey responses clearly indicate student demand for learning opportunities that include personalized experiences reflective of life outside of school. Further, the data indicates students are already using their own personal devices and applications to enhance and adapt the pace and path of their learning where they are able. Despite this, schools and districts face challenges in making this a reality in the classroom. Even in cases where access to high-speed Internet and devices are no longer major obstacles, challenges remain. These include choosing a digital curriculum to meet student needs from the growing number of options, implementation planning, change management, professional development to build teacher capacity, and evaluating and responding to programmatic outcomes.

This paper will outline the student vision for personalized learning based on the Speak Up survey results, the state of adoption in today's classroom, the challenges to implementing personalized learning, and a checklist for comparing where your district stacks up against students' criteria for personalized learning.

Students want a personalized learning experience

Technology is an essential part of student life, including the school experience Students use personal devices to research and customize learning

Teacher access and comfort with technology has increased, however, personalized learning practices remain in emergent stages of adoption

Teachers feel that digital tools have the potential to adapt education to students' needs and allow students to learn more deeply and develop 21st century skills

There are challenges in implementing personalized learning

Students are frustrated by one-size-fits-all instruction

Teachers would like more effective professional development

Speak Up National Survey: Profile of Secondary Students and Teachers

The Speak Up survey is a national online survey of K-12 students, teachers, parents, and school administrators that looks at educational trends and technology usage in K-12 education. Nearly 416,000 K-12 students participated in the 2015 Speak Up survey, representing 7,825 schools in 2,676 districts. Of those, 240,000 identified as middle and high school students. These students hail from a broad range of urban, suburban, and rural districts. More than 35,900 K-12 teachers contributed to the 2015 survey, with 17,326 identifying as secondary school teachers.

> "I think learning is easier with technology. Courses can move at a quicker or slower pace depending on the student."
>
> **Student**
> Speak Up 2015

Key Finding 1

Students want a personalized learning experience

Students want their education to adapt to fit their needs and interests, rather than trying to fit into a one-size fits- all mold. Secondary student respondents in the Speak Up data say that they want to be agents in their own education, providing input into how their particular path reflects their own needs and interests. More than half of high school students (52%) and middle school students (53%) surveyed said they like learning "when [they] can be in control of when and how [they] learn."

In recognizing the value of a personalized education, students surveyed are using their own resources to adapt their education and meet their needs. They are engaging in activities where they determine the pace and path of their learning, such as using online materials to supplement traditional coursework, and seeking out resources on their own to support their interests. A large majority of secondary students in the survey use websites to more deeply research an interesting topic and regularly read online news stories or reports to augment their education. They want to experience real-world applications of what they are learning in order to establish relevance, and as the responses show, a majority play online games or use virtual reality simulations as an exercise to learn a skill or to more deeply understand concepts. These students want to apply concepts they are learning in ways that interest them.

How Students are Personalizing their Own Learning		
Activity	**Middle School Students**	**High Schools Students**
Take self-paced online courses or tutorials	25%	30%
Engage in web-based research of topics	73%	77%
Play online games or virtual reality simulations to learn a skill or concept	61%	50%
Supplement learning with online news	52%	63%

The students surveyed do not view education as simply an exercise in digesting facts and concepts; rather, they value learning with a self-directed orientation in which they create their own content. This is a fundamentally different shift from many teaching philosophies and the traditional instructional model of "sit and listen." Today's digital tools, content, and resources provide efficient ways for students to self-explore academic interests and to exercise their creative "doing" muscles, for example, working through problems or scenarios instead of just watching or listening to someone else. Already, 20% of high school students and 17% of middle school students surveyed say they create videos to demonstrate mastery of a skill or lesson for their schoolwork-related activities. This is a harbinger of what is to come.

Beyond producing their own application of lessons, these students see value in sharing products with peers and teachers, often using digital resources to do so. A quarter of secondary students surveyed regularly post content, artwork, and writings online. A significant number of high school students (25%) and middle school students (19%) participate in class blogs or discussion boards. Nearly half of secondary students polled utilize social media to explore real-time conversations about educational topics that interest them. For students who feel isolated in a traditional classroom environment, technology facilitates collaboration and connection with other students.

Students are personalizing components of their education so that it is interactive, adapted to their interests, self-paced, and creative. And these experiences continue beyond the school day, as students responded that technology allows them to extend their learning beyond school walls. Digital resources allow for both enrichment and reinforcement for these students, providing them the opportunity to more deeply explore topics of interest that may have been covered only briefly in class, or spend additional time mastering a difficult concept.

Student Attitudes about Technology Enabling Personalized Learning		
Statement	Middle School Students	High Schools Students
Technology allows students to learn at their own pace	60%	53%
Technology allows students to learn in a way that fits their learning style	55%	48%
Technology allows students to extend learning beyond school	40%	40%
Technology allows students to spend additional time mastering content	44%	38%

Students use technology to guide the trajectory of their educational path. Half of all middle and high school students surveyed believe that technology allows them to be in control of their own education. Beyond associating digital resources with a successful education, these students see the use of technology and education personalization as important to developing key 21st century skills for successful future participation in a global economy. Students have always collaborated with each other to complete individual assignments and group projects. Digital natives are using tools no older than they are to meet these needs as nearly a quarter of students report using social networking sites to work with classmates on group projects. These students are connecting the concepts of a technology-enabled, personalized education with college and career readiness. Use of these tools is viewed by students as preparation for their post-secondary life: respondents believe that learning to utilize and work with technology is preparing them to be successful in future jobs.

How Technology Enables Personalized Learning		
Students Say	Middle School Students	High Schools Students
Technology allows them to apply what they learn in school	53%	54%
Technology allows for collaboration with peers	50%	53%
Technology use is preparing them to be college and career ready	47%	38%
Social media is used to collaborate on school projects	23%	27%

Key Finding 2

Teacher access and comfort with technology has increased, however, personalized learning practices remain in emergent stages of adoption

Teachers report an increasing level of comfort with using technology in their professional and personal lives. Almost all teacher respondents from the Speak Up survey (96%) consider themselves to have average to advanced technology skills. These teachers also report having wide-scale access to digital devices: most have a smartphone (91%), a laptop (85%), and/or a tablet (66%). And when they describe their ideal school, they overwhelmingly include key digital resources as fundamental to increasing student achievement and success.

Tools that Hold the Most Potential for Student Success in an Ideal School	
Tools	**Teachers**
Ubiquitous Internet access at school	64%
Interactive whiteboards	57%
Laptop for every student	57%
Online tests and assessments	48%

Echoing student responses, teachers feel that digital tools have the potential to adapt education to students' needs and allow students to learn more deeply, develop 21st century skills, become more engaged with course material, and overall, be more college and work ready. The teachers surveyed feel that utilizing multimedia in presenting course material allowed students to better understand abstract, difficult concepts (40%), especially in class groups that can include an array of learning styles. Teachers also believe that students are more motivated to engage with class materials when they use digital resources (54%).

Teachers feel that digital resources facilitate more effective collaboration and communication among students, as well as between students and teachers; 43% reported that technology allowed their students to collaborate with one another on group projects. They also said that in utilizing email and class portals, students were more connected with the teacher and communicated much more frequently about issues (34%). Overall, the teachers from the survey said that, from their own experience, integrating technology in their teaching has allowed students to gain a better understanding of course content (51%).

Clearly there is consensus on the desire for using more technology to personalize learning in the classroom, but there is somewhat of gap between how students want to utilize digital resources to personalize their learning and how most teachers are currently doing so in the classroom. For example, students surveyed see value in utilizing social media to express their understanding of material and to connect with others interested in a topic, but few teachers see it as a key tool for student success. In fact, when describing their dream school, a vast majority of teachers (78%) did not list social media access as an important tool. Students also expressed a distinct wish to personalize their learning by showing mastery with the creation of unique content rather than through summative assessment. Yet only a third of teacher respondents reported utilizing digital resources to support student creation of content.

Key Finding 3

There are challenges in implementing personalized learning

Many students surveyed in the report feel frustrated by a one-size-fits-all learning experience. The vast majority (58% of high school students and 55% of middle school students) report that most of their learning takes place in a traditional classroom setting where direct instruction is provided in a physical classroom on a fixed schedule. As well, the lecture style of sit-and-watch or sit-and-listen is still prevalent. This teacher-centric model is one of the most static experiences across generations of Americans — most classrooms have not evolved to a student centered focus with an adaptive curriculum to address the needs of individual learners. Personalized learning is happening in a piecemeal, ad hoc fashion in many districts. The challenge is to deliver a comprehensive, systemic effort to implement solutions that support every student at their level of learning.

District, school, and classroom policies present challenges for fully deploying technology-enabled, personalized education in schools. A majority of high school (86%) and middle school students (72%) in the survey have their own smartphones with Internet, and around half of secondary students own a personal laptop. Despite having access to these resources, students express disappointment in policies that restrict the use of digital tools in school. Nearly half of the secondary students in the survey say there are too many rules limiting technology use in their school. District and school firewalls are also seen as a major barrier to the Internet access required to support a fully personalized education. Additionally, a majority of high school students (57%) report that their schools block websites needed for schoolwork.

Teachers report a lack of effective professional development as a barrier to impactful integration of digital learning resources that deliver personalized learning in the classroom. More than half of teachers (52%) call for more effective professional development around utilizing digital tools for these purposes. A majority of teachers (57%) also say they need more planning and collaboration time with grade-level or subject-area peers in order to fully make the jump to a student-centered approach.

Checklist for Evaluating Your District on Students' Criteria for Personalized Learning

This table aims to provide a way to evaluate your current state of personalized learning based on the student view. Check, Yes, No or In Progress to see where your district stands.

Statement	Yes	No	In Progress
Our students have access to curriculum anywhere, anytime.			
We have implemented digital resources across all subjects.			
Our students use technology to support learning.			
All students receive personalized learning opportunities aligned with needs, strengths, and interests.			
Multiple pathways for meeting standards are provided, including remediation when necessary.			
Lessons are interactive and engaging, and include a variety of digital and non-digital formats.			
Digital resources provide scaffolding for struggling learners and support for ELLs and other special learners.			
Our teachers have easy access to robust reporting that lets them see how each student is progressing.			
Our digital resources address the different learning needs or preferences of individual students.			
Students are able to learn all subjects at their own pace.			
Students are able to benchmark their progress and performance in real time.			
We rank well against the latest research on implementing personalized learning in our district.			
We provide training on the technologies used in the classroom.			

Note: Responses to these questions may vary. "In Progress" could include districts just starting to introduce personalized learning or those that are looking to improve their current approach to personalized learning. In reality, the work of personalization will always be in progress. Districts can revisit this checklist during annual planning.

Conclusion

Creating personalized learning experiences and considering the student viewpoint

For as long as children have been grouped into learning communities, individual students have come to school with their own unique set of needs, strengths, challenges, and interests. With this unique profile, each student experiences education in a personal way. On the other hand, teachers, because of constraints of time, space, and resources, have had to design lessons to meet the needs of the overall group. Teachers have not, on a large scale, had the tools or time to assess each student's unique set of characteristics and adapt instruction to meet those needs. Thus, districts and teachers have been in a reactive mode, teaching to the mean and responding to outliers, rather than meeting the full growth potential of each child. In this vein, students have been molded by limitations rather than possibilities. We now have the ability to change this dynamic. We now have the capabilities to truly personalize learning.

Moving toward this kind of education is in line with student, teacher, and parent visions of the future of education. The data from the Speak Up survey clearly reflects that both students and teachers want classrooms that are able to meet each student where they are at in their achievement, that the educational plan is customized to their learning preferences, and that the pace of delivery is determined by the student.

In short, both students and teachers want personalized education. With the right combination of technology and digital content, districts can create a reality in which students are engaged and motivated, teachers have the tools and training to effectively personalize learning, and each district can meet evolving expectations for student growth and achievement. Districts will know they have accomplished this task when students believe they are in an environment to personalize their learning and maximize their unique potential.

About the Speak Up Research Project

For the past 13 years, Project Tomorrow's annual Speak Up Research Project www.tomorrow.org/speakup has provided schools and districts nationwide and throughout the globe with new insights into how today's students want to leverage digital tools for learning based upon the authentic, unfiltered ideas of students themselves. Each year, education, policy, research, and business leaders leverage the Speak Up findings to understand the trends around students' use of technology, and how schools and communities can better serve the learning needs of today's digital learners. Speak Up reports over the past few years have focused on connecting the digital dots for learning, mapping a personalized learning journey, and moving from chalkboards to tablets as part of a digital conversion effort.

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An industry leader with deep expertise in digital curriculum, Apex Learning works closely with school districts across the country to implement proven solutions that increase on-time graduation rates and create opportunities for student success in school and beyond. The company is driven by the understanding that supporting the needs of all students – from struggling to accelerated – strengthens schools and creates stronger communities, brighter futures and a more equitable world. Apex Learning is accredited by AdvancEd and its courses are approved for National Collegiate Athletic Association eligibility. Apex Learning, where opportunity thrives. For more information, visit http://www.apexlearning.com.

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