Opportunity Thrives with High-Quality Digital Curriculum

Evaluation Criteria for Selecting Digital Curriculum

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In today's knowledge-based society, educators are embracing personalized learning as a way to increase opportunities to ensure every student is prepared for college, work, and life.

Personalized learning shifts the learning approach from a teacher-driven model, which delivers the same lesson to every student, to a student-centered model, where the content, method, and pace of learning are different for each student based on his or her individual level of readiness. In personalized learning models, teachers identify areas where students need support, determine instructional strategies that work best for each student, and track progress.
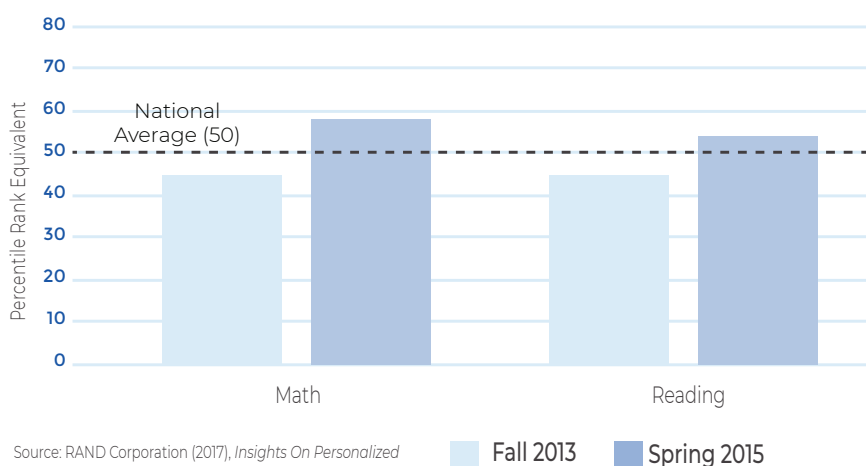
The concept of personalized learning is by no means new, but its recent rapid adoption by districts is due in part to new rigorous state standards and to advances in technology platforms. Personalizing the learning experience is made easier through technology, but it's not just the technology that makes personalized learning effective. Impactful personalized learning requires: establishing a common vision; providing educators with professional learning opportunities to successfully implement personalized learning techniques and technologies; a qualified teacher to guide and support students; and access to high-quality digital curriculum that supports student learning.

Start with a vision, not the technology

At its heart, personalized learning is about student learning, not technology. The vision for student achievement in your district is what drives changes in instructional strategies, which in turn drives changes to curriculum. Start with the desired outcomes for personalized learning and then determine the policies, instructional strategies, and resources needed to achieve those goals.

To illustrate this, let's look at an ongoing study of schools using personalized learning approaches commissioned by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and conducted by the RAND Corporation. The 62 schools included in the study all received funding from three Gates Foundation initiatives focused on improving student outcomes, particularly college and career readiness. Schools were selected to participate in these initiatives through a competitive process, which included a rigorous evaluation of its leadership team and its instructional vision.

After two years of personalized learning, student achievement on MAP math and reading assessments jumped above the national median.

Source: RAND Corporation (2017), *Insights On Personalized Learning Implementation and Effects.* Retrieved from https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2042.html

At a high level, the vision of each of the school leaders was to increase the number of students graduating prepared for college and career. A look at student achievement data found that students who initially performed below national medians in math and reading performed significantly above national medians after two years in personalized learning environments. This progress toward the vision of college and career readiness was achieved through personalized learning, which was facilitated by a variety of instructional approaches and curriculum materials to meet the learning needs of all students.[1]

Support your vision for personalized learning with quality digital curriculum

Personalized learning comes in many different forms but the foundation for success is the same: selecting a high-quality, rigorous curriculum that accelerates and deepens student understanding. Not all digital curriculum are the same and not all will enable teachers to design a variety of rich learning experiences that meet the individual learning needs of all students. Which is why evaluating digital curricula options is critical when ensuring that the personalized learning goals of the district are being supported.

In a survey of educators conducted by MDR, an education-industry research firm, the most important factors when evaluating digital curriculum were clarified:

- Consistently high quality

- Highly engaging and motivating content

- Accessibility to all students

- Measurable results[2]

Based on that, what specific criteria should you look for in a digital curriculum?
The Center for Digital Education (CDE) recommends the following.

Learning paths

Students embark upon individual pathways with the goal of reaching mastery level.

Interactive elements

Students interact with and progress through lessons; by engaging with content, organizing, sorting, categorizing, responding, etc., students build critical-thinking skills rather than simply memorizing facts.

Assessment items

The digital content includes multiple formative and summative assessments, prescriptive pretests, and authentic assessments that elicit higher-order thinking; opportunities to reflect on learning and interactive skill assessments should be incorporated.

Adaptive

Data collected through student interaction with instruction and assessment adjusts the lessons to create a personalized learning path that adapts to the individual student's needs.

Data collection and reporting

Data is collected and reports on that data are accessible for a view of learner usage, progress, and achievement.

Self-paced

Students work through instruction as they master content knowledge and skills at their own pace.[3]

Because the use of digital curriculum is in the early stages of adoption, the State Educational Technology Directors Association (SETDA) recommends that states, districts, and educator-preparation programs provide educators with professional learning opportunities surrounding the selection and use of digital curriculum materials, and ways to integrate them into instruction.[4]

Develop an implementation strategy based on established goals

The key to a successful implementation of personalized learning is to identify measurable goals that are tracked and responded to throughout the implementation. Quantitative and qualitative data should be regularly collected and evaluated to gauge progress toward established goals. The most effective implementations are developed in collaboration with the digital curriculum provider, who offers expertise and works closely with administrators and educators to design programs and instructional models that meet student needs and support and build capacity of the staff.

Professional development for everyone from district and school leaders to classroom teachers is essential for the effective implementation of personalized learning programs. Professional learning should be designed around the goals of the program as well as the experience of educators. The key is to develop a program that enables educators to choose their own paths to knowledge and provides coaching and mentoring to support educators as they develop their skills.

Find the right match

If your district already has an evaluation process in place for instructional materials you will likely start by reviewing that process and modifying it as needed to incorporate criteria unique to digital curriculum resources that support personalized learning. Once you've developed your general evaluation framework, consider the following checklist based on iNACOL next-generation learning models for personalized learning needed to ensure your digital curriculum solutions match those elements.

Digital Curriculum Evaluation Checklist	
STUDENT ENGAGEMENT	**YES (✔)**
Is your current digital curriculum specifically designed to be responsive to the needs of students who struggle in traditional classroom environments?	
Does your current digital curriculum provider have deep experience with teaching and curriculum development for online learning?	
Are there embedded scaffolds and supports immediately available at time of need so that students struggling to learn a skill or concept can access grade-level coursework?	
Is your current digital curriculum built to state and national standards?	
Does the digital curriculum support varied learning styles and ensure that students are actively engaged with and motivated by the instructional content?	
Do teachers have the ability to customize courses and scored activities?	
PROFESSIONAL SERVICES & SUPPORT	
Did your current digital curriculum provider work with you every step of the way throughout the implementation process?	
Are implementation and support tied to your district's unique goals and objectives?	
Was implementation easy for technical staff and educators? Does the implementation have minimal impact on existing network infrastructure?	
Is there extensive professional development tailored to the needs of teachers and administrators?	
Are ongoing support, help, and resources available 24X7?	
OUTCOMES & RESULTS	
Can your current digital curriculum demonstrate proven results, including third-party efficacy studies that indicate student learning and increased achievement?	
Has your district successfully met its goals for implementing digital curriculum with the current provider?	
Has the current digital curriculum provider helped your district successfully meet its goals for student achievement, such as increased graduation rate and test scores?	
Can educators easily access reports showing student usage, progress, and achievement against national and state standards?	
Does your current digital curriculum provider demonstrate a clear understanding of your district's goals and requirements for student achievement?	

Empower students, improve outcomes

Personalized learning has the potential to accelerate and deepen learning for all students. This instructional approach guides students toward knowledge and mastery on their own learning paths. For the promise of personalized learning to be realized, the following combination is needed: a rigorous digital curriculum, technology that enables access for all students, an implementation plan that provides professional learning and support for educators, and ongoing evaluation against program goals. With all of these components in place, every student will have the opportunity to thrive.

References

[1] Pane, J. F., Steiner, E. D., Baird, M. D., & Hamilton, L. S. (November, 2015). Continued Progress: Promising Evidence on Personalized Learning. RAND Corporation.

[2] MDR. (2014). Purchase Criteria, Product Requirements and Emerging Trends.

[3] Bjerede, M., Laufenberg, D., & Ray, K. (June 2016). Guide to Choosing Digital Content and Curriculum. Center for Digital Education.

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About the Author

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Jean has over 25 years of leadership and management experience in the education and software publishing industries. Her expertise includes software design, project management, technology implementation, curriculum strategy and development, and instructional design. As Chief Academic Officer at Apex Learning, Jean oversees the teams responsible for creating original curriculum solutions.

Prior to joining Apex Learning, Jean served as Vice President of Curriculum and Instruction for AdvancePath Academics, where she was responsible for overseeing curriculum design, implementation, and efficacy. Previously, Jean was Vice President of Curriculum Development at PLATO Learning Inc. Among her credits are numerous award-winning educational software products published for both school and consumer markets.

Jean holds a master's degree in Educational Technology and Instructional Design from the University of Oklahoma.

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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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