



CASE STUDY IN PERSONALIZED LEARNING



Wilder School District 133, Wilder, Idaho



Jeff Dillon, Superintendent of
Schools

Raised on a small farm outside of Wilder, Idaho, Jeff Dillon received his early education in the district in which he now serves as superintendent. After completing his university training and teaching middle school science and reading, he responding to the opportunity to return to his hometown. Subsequently, he was

appointed an elementary principal and district Title I director. His school was the recipient of the National Title I Association Distinguished School award in 2012 and the International Reading Associations' Exemplary Reading Program in 2011. As a result of his successful leadership as the elementary principal, Jeff was hired to lead the Wilder School District as the district's Superintendent of Schools in December of 2012 in addition to retaining his K-5 principal role. He is the recipient of numerous awards for leading the achievement increase of this high poverty rural school district. In addition, he is an active member of the AASA Personalized Learning Cohort.

More about Jeff Dillion:

<https://wilderschools.org/>

DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF WILDER SCHOOL DISTRICT 133

Designation: Rural	Ethnic Distribution of Students: 75% Hispanic
Enrollment: 525	Median Annual Household Income: \$23,000.
Free & Reduced Meal: 98.7 (CEP/85%)	Poverty Rate: Extremely High
Student-Teacher Ratio: 15:1	Percent Adults of Population Service with Bachelor's: 4%
Expenses/Student: \$9,083	Student Enrollment Annual Turnover: 25% on average
Distribution of Expenses: Instruction: 56%	Percent of Kindergarteners Entering with Basic Literacy Skills: Almost None
Support Services: 36%	
Other: 8%	
Average Graduation Rate: 92%	

PERSONALIZED LEARNING IN WILDER SCHOOLS

Superintendent Jeff Dillon describes Personalized Learning as essentially *student voice and choice*, where schools provide personalized plans for every single student in the district, K-12, that allows a student to work at a pace as well as a place that is meaningful and is centered on mastery. Mastery is clearly linked to state standards. Jeff Dillon prefers to refer to what they have done as **Personalized Mastery-based Learning Ecosystem**.

I believe that every student wants to learn and learn at high levels, but it only happens when you have great mentors to unveil that opportunity for them.

After two years of full implementation, he recognizes some imperatives for success:

- Focus on the student – student's work and success must be the focus of every conversation. Teachers and principals must constantly ask themselves how we do we contribute to each student's success? The mindset is refocused from group success to individual success.
- Understand and identify the context in which you are working and identify the hurdles that are going to negatively impact the movement in this direction.

- It is the choice of teacher and parent to work in or send their child to an environment based upon a personalized mastery based system. In doing so, they need to understand the challenges and how they was going to address those challenges.
- You need to gain consensus, build the leadership team, and address those issues in advance. Confronting those issues must be done prior to the launch.

Unique to the work of Jeff Dillon in Wilder was his approach to gaining board support and supportive policy enactment. He began working with each board member by reflecting on the impact personalized mastery learning would have on their own child. He explored how it would impact their child and how it would provide their children with new opportunities for demonstrating mastery. All of this took place during the initial implementation stage and board members could see firsthand the successes enjoyed and challenges overcome. It was after that initial implementation that the board and superintendent undertook the task of developing the policies underpinning the implementation. Admittedly this requires significant trust on the part of the board but resulted in what many observe as more focused and sound enabling policy development.

No major reshaping of how one reimagines how schools should work is without lessons learned. The Personalized Mastery Learning as launched in Wilder was no exception. Jeff Dillon reflected that the challenges included:

- The reality of different levels of competencies of his teachers as they transitioned and adapted to an entirely new way of doing business placed a premium on enlightened professional development.
- Meaningful weekly professional development was essential. The method employed was an early release Wednesdays that focused on successes experienced and NOT on challenges. Teachers were asked to speak about their successes. Absent from the professional development was the discussion of the negative - emphasis was placed on what is working.
- Time became a major focus of learning. By the removal of traditional passing periods and bell schedules, Jeff Dillon estimates that over four years an entire year of instruction is recovered thus allowing students and their mentors to better allocate the instructional time needed fulfill the district commitment to empowering student voice and choice and student mastery.
- Jeff Dillon acknowledges that creating the environment conducive to Mastery Personalized Learning is on the surface probably easier in small student population schools while what we have learned from the work in small learning communities can contribute implementation in larger schools.

In Wilder, the conceptual framework around which the Personalized Mastery Learning is fashioned after the well-known work of Costa and Kallick in their *16 Habits of the*

Mind. Jeff Dillon's vision is that his schools will develop the "soft skills" that are inherent in the Costa and Kallick framework.

- Persisting
- Thinking and communicating with clarity and precision
- Managing impulsivity
- Gathering data through all senses
- Listening with understanding and empathy
- Creating, imagining, innovating
- Thinking flexibly
- Responding with wonderment and awe
- Thinking about thinking (metacognition)
- Taking responsible risks
- Striving for accuracy
- Finding humor
- Questioning and posing problems
- Thinking interdependently
- Applying past knowledge to new situations
- Remaining open to continuous learning

The work in Wilder is predicated on the development of those soft skills for students on managing and understanding what it is to learn, creating the desire to learn, and overcoming the challenges to learning.

That has been the backbone of our successes – actually watching students take ownership of learning. Ownership of learning is centered on developing the soft skills for learning.

Jeff Dillon in his work with mentor teachers and principals constantly employs the mantra that they must use with their students.

I am right here with you, we are going to walk through this together, but when you get there and master it you are going to feel amazing.

Some of the indicators of success included:

- K-5 students develop the passion for learning, they love to learning, they are telling the teacher that they need more time to write – more of this more of that so they can master this standard.
- Last year, the first year of implementation, Math alone based on standards students grew 1.5 years (K-5). They looked at the data and found that kids were doing 50-60 problems per day. This provided evidence of increased persistence.
- K-5 data reading or listening 300 books/per student each year.

- Once a week secondary students worked with their mentor teacher (Grades 6-12) on their individualized plan – in the second year of implementation 50% of high school students chose to take college classes – doubled previous levels.
- Wilder school staff is finding that though that voice and choice students have enjoyed an accelerated completion of graduation requirements including customized senior projects linked to post-secondary plans.
- Personalized Mastery Learning for special education students freed them from the labeled of underachiever while providing examples of how they are engaged in managing their learning and make significant progress on mastering the content and in some cases exceeding expectations.

Finally, Superintendent Dillon characterizes the impact of Personalized Mastery Learning on the schools he supervises as “liberating.” He reports hearing this refrain each time he visits schools where student voice and choice flourish. In addition, he credits the AASA Personalized Learning Cohort for providing him with the risk-free support group needed to sustain the significant changes he had led in Wilder.

Getting together with like-minded superintendents that really wanted to look outside traditional approaches to education and not hearing the constant we can't, we can't, we can't. Being in a cohort of people who really want to take a look at revolutionizing teaching and learning and go look at some places and have some conversations. That was the hook for me, I want to be a part of this group because of that approach. We talked about success and challenges and support each other.

REFLECTIONS OF A WILDER CLASSROOM TEACHER

Lynnette Rivera is a lead first grade teacher in Wilder who is deeply engaged in Personalized Mastery Learning. Her reflections are extraordinarily valuable as they help define the day-to-day rewards and challenges facing a teacher committed to Mastery Personalized Learning. Her thoughts reflect unedited responses to a series of questions she was asked.

How do you define personalized learning from your perspective as a teacher?

Teachers have the ability to meet the needs of each individual student and prepare them for lifelong learning and success. Advanced students are able to move further and faster on their learning path while the teacher can offer additional strategies and /or support for the struggling learner.

While the implementation is never totally completed, could you identify several important lessons learned during implementation that contributed to the success you have achieved?

“Mulligans” aka do overs! When things didn’t work as we thought it should, we were able to try it over. Having PD with the other teachers and being able to discuss issues as they arose helped tremendously.

Just any new idea, implementation always presents challenges and obstacles. Could you identify a couple of the most important of those challenges/obstacles and how you work to overcome them?

Challenge: Redefining the roles of the student and the teacher. In a traditional class the teacher makes the decisions where now in PL the student makes those decisions. We are now mentors and support our students in their goals and learning path. For many teachers it was quite a challenge to give up the control of what the student is learning and how and when they learn it.

Challenge: Allowing students to be flexible in their seating arrangement. Students are now allowed to sit in various places in the room and in the hall. Each room has various types of seating from wobble chairs to beanbags.

Challenge: Being able to balance technology with our curriculum, how much is too much technology in one day?

Challenge: Apps and Internet working properly.

Your district is known for its data-driven commitment to student achievement. Have you seen positive signs of the impact of PL? If so, can you briefly describe them?

Students have taken more control of their learning and make goals to achieve mastery in the standards. Having more mentor/student conferencing gives the student immediate data/feedback instead of at the end of the quarter when it is too late.

Please share your suggestions for the successful implementation of PL by those considering joining the movement.

Successful implementation needs but not limited to:

- *Effective leadership.*
- *Involvement of all participants (administration, school board, parents, teachers, students).*

- *Positive attitudes; have a common vision.*
- *Willingness to fail and learn from our failures.*
- *Willingness to take risks.*
- *Continue to learn; open to new ideas.*
- *Willingness to learn from your students.*
- *Willingness to give up control; making the shift from teachers delivering knowledge to their classrooms of students to teachers as facilitators/mentors of learning.*
- *Professional development for staff.*
- *Proper and sufficient amount of technology for students and staff.*

For more information related the American Association of School Administrator's Personalized Learning Cohort - <http://www.aasa.org/personalized-learning.aspx>.

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