

Personalized Learning: A Human Resource Perspective on Hiring 21st Century Educators

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Introduction

Educators and policymakers worldwide are engaged in a discussion about the need for system-wide education reform, often referred to as 21st century learning or personalized learning. In British Columbia, the Ministry of Education recently published an interactive discussion paper, *Personalized Learning in BC*, which outlines what this might look like in the province's education system.

The discussion paper refers to a system of learning that is both flexible and rigorous. It envisions a shift in the way we have traditionally defined learning away from broad-based outcomes to more individualized learning environments that offer greater choice and flexibility, tailored to each student. It outlines an approach to education that will be “increasingly student-initiated, self-directed, and interdisciplinary and that is facilitated by the teacher and co-planned with students, parents and teachers.”¹

The paper proposes a number of ways we can enable personalized learning province-wide. It presents a framework to ensure high standards for student success, actively involve learners in designing their own meaningful learning experiences, respond to the uniqueness of every learner and provide parents with more choice. These practices are enabled, in part, through equitable access to technologies that support learning and teaching.

These ideas are not new. Indeed, the discussion paper draws from the work of numerous researchers, policymakers and others who write on neuroscience, student engagement, system reform, student achievement, assessment practices, technology and other issues in education. Many voices and perspectives are contributing to the discussion on personalized learning. Not surprisingly, there is also considerable debate about the value, motives and agenda of 21st century learning and many different ideas about how it might be implemented.

However, while there may be disagreement about elements of this new approach, there is consensus that the current focus on the need to reform aspects of the education system is both healthy and timely.

¹ BC Ministry of Education, *Personalized Learning in BC: Interactive Discussion Guide*, p. 11.



The many papers and research studies share one other characteristic: they pay scant attention to the role of the employer in supporting system reform. While the needs of students, teachers, parents, community members, post-secondary institutions and others are addressed, the employer is almost entirely absent from the conversation. Yet employers in the education sector play a crucial role: they control who is hired and they oversee the daily decisions that shape the environments in which our teachers work and our students learn.

In this paper, I look at the topic of personalized learning from a perspective that has been overlooked until now. Specifically, I am interested in examining the responsibilities of the school district or employer in terms of their hiring practices, and what these responsibilities mean in terms of supporting the shift to personalized learning.

Shaping personalized learning through hiring practices

While many of us have a broad understanding of the skills and competencies that personalized learning aims to develop in our students, there has been less discussion of the skills and competencies that personalized learning will require of our educators. Although this paper does not venture into that very fulsome and detailed (and sometimes political) discussion, I want to focus attention on the role of the employer/school district in hiring the teachers who will be at the forefront of the personalized learning initiative.

Much has been written on how teacher pre-service training and teacher professional development relate to personalized learning. What's missing is any discussion of how the employer contributes to shaping this new landscape – even though employers are often closest to the action and in a strong position to support system reform. For example, it seems that no one has yet considered what competencies employers might want to seek out when hiring the new teachers who will be carrying these practices forward into the next decades.

Let's look at the current approach to hiring educators. An analysis of the hiring processes used in many of BC's school districts reveals that a significant number still rely on traditional recruitment strategies



and selection methods that were commonplace 30 years ago. Although some districts are adapting, the change is not happening expeditiously, and the change is not widespread through all districts. This reluctance to shift to more effective recruiting and selection methods is problematic for a number of reasons.

First, first impressions count. A district may lower its reputation as a desirable place to work when it uses outdated and traditional recruitment and selection practices – appearing unwelcoming or conservative in its approach. This could jeopardize the district’s ability to bring in strong teachers. Districts that are serious about attracting the best and the brightest – the technically adept and creative graduates of teacher education programs – must use current and creative recruitment practices. All employers need to consider the Employment Value Proposition, which requires asking “why would anyone want to work for us?” when designing recruitment and selection processes. If districts want to attract new hires who embrace the instructional practices of 21st century learning, shouldn’t they model these same practices and attributes in their recruitment and selection methods?

Second, and even more important, people matter. Districts need to ensure they are actually hiring people with the skills and attributes required to implement personalized learning. With changing educational methods and a new set of required skills and attributes on the part of our educators, it’s more important than ever to re-examine recruitment and selection processes. If employers do not pay attention to the skills they will need, how are they assured that the future generation of their workforce will be able to support the personalized learning approach?

The lack of attention to the topic of hiring in the literature reinforces the importance of raising this issue and promoting its discussion within school districts and educational leadership circles provincially and nationally.

The absence of discussion and the apparent lack of rigor around hiring teachers also leads to the conclusion that many school districts simply assume that graduates of teacher education programs are all equally capable and/or that they can be trained into the district’s learning culture and pedagogical approach once they are hired. Indeed, most literature on teacher effectiveness focuses on either



teacher education programs or professional development. The basic assumption is that the skills and competencies developed in a teacher education program align with the skills and competencies valued by school districts. It also assumes that professional development initiatives help teachers improve their practice in alignment with broader system goals. However, this may or may not be the case. The curricula covered in faculties of education may be more closely aligned with faculty research interests than labour market need, and professional development activities are often chosen entirely by the individual educator.

School districts have limited influence over the curricula taught in teacher education programs and in guiding the professional development of their staff. Where they do have power is in making hiring decisions – in ensuring that the new teachers they hire have the expertise to support students in a collaborative, flexible, project-based and interdisciplinary learning environment.

The hiring process is the transition point between teacher education and professional development. It's a critical moment, and it's important that employers get it right. After all, the educators hired by school districts will be the ones actually creating new learning environments in the schools of British Columbia. Moving from the *idea* of personalized learning to its successful *implementation* requires educators with the skills and vision to make it happen.

If districts care about the quality of their programs and are committed to moving in the direction of personalized learning, they must ensure that those being hired into the districts possess the skills, knowledge and attributes necessary to do the job.

Re-examining our hiring practices

The cost of making a bad hiring decision is high. This includes both the time and money invested by district and school staff in the selection and hiring process, as well as the time required to mentor, evaluate and support a struggling teacher.



Research suggests that the cost of a bad hire is substantial and far-reaching. In addition to the administrative costs of advertising, screening and interviewing candidates, and checking references, longer term negative impacts may affect the organization as a whole². These include increased costs associated with the need for more managing and mentoring, negative effects on coworkers in terms of morale and lost leadership opportunities. The public's confidence in the organization may erode, and hiring an underperforming employee may also impact an organization's ability to hire stronger performing candidates in the future.

Within the education sector, the cost of a bad hire extends far beyond what is described in human resources research. An underperforming teacher can significantly hinder student learning and confidence – costs that are not easily measured.

In British Columbia, and across Canada, demographic data from the education sector provides additional evidence of why the sector needs to continue to discuss hiring practices. The upcoming retirement of the baby boomer generation will have implications for hiring practices in all sectors and industries. In the public education sector within BC, 38% of educators (which includes both teachers and educational leaders) are currently over the age of 50³. Districts will need to increase their hiring numbers to offset the retirement of this large segment of their workforce over the next decade. As school districts approach the task of bringing in more new teachers, it is crucial that they do it right.

Employers in the education sector simply cannot rely on traditional approaches to hiring. If school district employers do not shift their hiring practices to reflect the transformation in our classrooms, they will have lost a crucial opportunity to support their district's capabilities to implement personalized learning.

Unfortunately, many employers rush through the hiring process or are not sure of the criteria they should be using in the screening process. Traditionally, districts have focused on assessing a new hire's

² John Sullivan, "The cost of a bad hire: Butts in chairs and how to convince hiring managers to avoid them," accessed online at <http://www.drjohnsullivan.com/articles-mainmenu-27/articles/hr-metrics-mainmenu-31/527-cost-of-a-bad-hire>.

³ Data accessed from the BC Employment Data and Analysis System.



planning strategies and instructional strategies. Is this enough? Or is it time to modify a century-old assessment strategy to better match our current needs?

What are we hiring for?

How can education employers ensure that teachers have the skills and competencies needed to lead the transformational change envisioned for our school system?

It's a crucial question. Many studies have concluded that "of all the controllable factors in an education system, the most important by far is the effectiveness of the classroom teacher."⁴ Reform cannot happen unless effective educators are leading our classrooms.

Educators' roles are expected to shift and evolve. As outlined in *Personalized Learning in BC*:

"In an increasingly student-centred education system, we will see a wider variety of instructional approaches that focus on the exploratory nature of learning. These approaches could include:

- teachers becoming co-learners with their students, using inter-disciplinary approaches and working in teams of teachers to support students,
- students being provided with more time to reflect on what they are learning and why they are learning it,
- teachers facilitating learning experiences for students beyond the classroom that contribute to the community at large,
- using the community and local environment as the classroom,
- teachers providing students with real life problems requiring a team-approach to develop a variety of solutions, and
- recognizing and providing for a variety of ways for students to express their learning."⁵

⁴ Byron Auguste, Paul Kihn and Matt Miller, *Closing the talent gap: Attracting and retaining the top-third graduates to careers in teaching*, McKinsey & Company, September 2010, p. 5.

⁵ Ministry of Education, p. 20.



Are our teacher education programs equipping graduates with the skills and competencies to use these instructional practices? Are professional development programs doing so?

Districts must shift their hiring practices to reflect the values and priorities of personalized learning. This includes examining the entire hiring process, from defining selection criteria and recruiting candidates to screening applications, conducting effective behavioural interviews and checking references.

To look at just the first steps in the hiring process, it's time for school district employers to screen candidates to ensure their skills and competencies align with the desired outcomes of personalized learning. This requires an understanding of the skills teaching staff will need to lead the transition, and ensuring that those skills are included in the selection criteria. They must also seek candidates with the most appropriate "fit" with a district's culture and broader goals.

The first step in the process is to identify and define the criteria to be used for assessing and evaluating potential employees. This prevents common selection problems, such as inconsistent evaluation of candidates, and maximizes the likelihood that districts will select the right candidates to take on the personalized learning approach.

The second step is to gather evidence of these defined selection criteria and use effective methods to measure and assess the candidates' competencies. These include the use of thorough and well-designed screening, interview and reference checking processes.

Districts might want to include the following selection criteria to measure a candidate's ability to embrace BC's vision of personalized learning:

- proficiency with a variety of current computer systems and an understanding of how information technology can be used to facilitate student success,
- an ability to be collaborative, flexible and creative in a range of working and learning contexts,
- an ability to approach problems with a willingness to adapt to changing conditions,
- facilitation skills that allow students to feel empowered, confident and self-directed,
- a strong understanding of the importance of diverse learning programs for all students, including aboriginal learners,



- ability to present ideas in variety of ways,
- active and patient listening skills, and
- valuing community and the influence of others in students' learning.

Districts that use these selection criteria increase the likelihood that the teachers they are hiring will be able to support the transition to personalized learning. Districts are making significant investments, both in program design and new technologies such as SMART Boards, iPads and wireless connectivity. It is a huge risk to make these investments of time and money without a parallel investment in ensuring that new hires are able to implement and support new approaches to learning and teaching.

In the end, it's up to employers to carefully consider their recruitment and selection practices to ensure that they are hiring educators with the vision, values and skills that will support the shift to new ways of learning and teaching.

Challenges and considerations

There are still many unknowns in terms of what personalized learning will look like in practice. It's clear, however, that this shift will not happen in isolation, and that it will require changes to aspects of the K-12 education system beyond introducing new instructional practices or curricula. Provincial ministries of education, as well as individual school districts, may want to consider a number of human resource issues when planning and implementing personalized learning in their schools. The following questions may assist us in mapping out our plan:

- Can we learn from the hiring practices in other jurisdictions – both nationally and internationally – to discover best practices in hiring educators for 21st century learning?
- Do districts that use innovative hiring practices increase the likelihood of attracting the best candidates?
- Have we defined the district-specific selection criteria that are most relevant in terms of hiring teachers for personalized learning?



- Have we considered developing a human resources toolkit that could be implemented province-wide to ensure that districts are using up-to-date, relevant and contemporary approaches to hiring; and are we considering new methods of assessing potential candidates to ensure consistency with personalized learning strategies?

Investing the time and resources into understanding how school districts can best support system reform is an investment worth making. We need to provide employers with the tools and knowledge to hire the educators best able to meet the challenges of personalized learning – the first step in ensuring our students are immersed in the learning environments that will help them thrive and succeed well into the century ahead.

If you'd like more information on how to align your selection processes with the skills and competencies required of educators in a personalized learning environment, please contact Janet Stewart, Director of Make a Future, at janets@makeafuture.ca.