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“Personalized Learning” Can Help Rural Schools Address Their Unique Needs and Challenges, Says New Report

Publication Offers Step-by-Step Implementation Guide for Rural Schools

WASHINGTON, DC—To prepare all students for college and a career, many schools and districts nationwide have turned to “personalized learning,” a student-centered approach that tailors instruction to students’ unique strengths and needs while engaging them in challenging, standards-based academic content. Largely an urban phenomenon, personalized learning can also address the unique challenges facing rural schools, and a new publication released today by Future Ready Schools® (FRS) offers them a step-by-step guide for how to do so.

Due to their remote nature, rural schools face difficulties attracting effective teachers and administrators, transporting students to and from school, and keeping up with fast-evolving technology, including high-speed internet connections, says *A Guidebook for Success: Strategies for Implementing Personalized Learning in Rural Schools*. At the same time, however, rural schools typically serve as the centers of their communities, drawing in young and old citizens and creating strong personal relationships that stretch across generations.

“I’ve seen firsthand the many challenges facing rural schools, from teacher recruitment and tight budgets to a school principal who also drives the school bus,” said Bob Wise, former governor of West Virginia and current president of the Alliance for Excellent Education, which leads FRS. “But rural schools also have tremendous assets, most notably their tight-knit communities that create trusting relationships among teachers, students, and families. Personalized learning allows rural schools to capitalize on these assets to increase student engagement and improve outcomes.”

Released in partnership with AASA, the School Superintendents Association, and the National Rural Education Association, the guidebook uses the FRS research-based framework and five-step planning process to help rural schools move to a personalized learning model. The framework includes seven essential planning components, or gears, of a personalized learning model while the planning process guides districts as they assess their readiness for personalized learning and develop a plan to implement personalized approaches to learning.

Because state and local leaders may need to apply the FRS framework differently within unique rural contexts, the guidebook includes a gear-by-gear analysis of the FRS personalized learning framework through a rural lens. For each gear, the report outlines unique assets, barriers to implementation, and strategies for implementation specific to rural schools. It also offers two

overall strategies that are critically important to supporting personalized learning implementation:

1. District leaders must develop and communicate a clear vision and plan of action for transitioning to a personalized learning model.
2. District leaders in rural schools should pursue partnerships with other FRS districts to share knowledge and expertise to capitalize on economies of scale that will command better prices for large purchases of materials, technology, and other resources.

“Personalized learning is not just a distant hope waiting to happen in our country,” said Daniel A. Domenech, executive director of AASA, the School Superintendents Association. “I am encouraged by the dozens of school districts making significant attempts to change the system of education as we know it through personalized learning. We need to move away from educating one group at a time to educating one child at a time. AASA is very pleased to partner with the Alliance for Excellent Education and the National Rural Education Association on this project in our collective efforts to grow the personalized learning movement in rural communities.”

The power of personalized learning is evident in Deer Isle, a remote fishing village in Maine where fewer than 60 percent of students graduated from Deer Isle–Stonington High School (DISHS) in 2009. The following year, DISHS implemented a personalized learning approach that included a marine studies academic pathway to connect the classroom to real-world experiences through the community’s main industry—lobstering. Today, algebra and geometry are taught through the lens of boat building and maritime navigation and 91 percent of students graduated from DISHS in 2014.

“With its focus on individualized learning and the use of emerging technologies, personalized learning helps to transcend many of the limitations confronting rural students such as geography and limited course opportunity and access,” the report notes. “Districts that have embraced personalized learning have seen success by focusing on opportunity and the needs of students, instead of barriers that in the past have limited access to quality academic programs. Personalized learning is helping to reduce the opportunity gap that often restricts student learning in rural school districts.”

The guidebook also includes a case study of Fordland R-III District in Missouri, where Superintendent Chris Ford used the FRS framework in his rural district of 600 students to transition to a personalized learning model that has resulted in greater engagement among teachers and students, as well as students who can demonstrate a deeper understanding of their course work.

“The National Rural Education Association is a proud partner with Future Ready Schools as a national coalition partner,” said Allen Pratt, executive director of the National Rural Education Association. “We feel this guidebook will help rural school district leaders address the persistent challenges they face in their communities, as well as leverage opportunities specific in rural schools to ensure students get the personalized learning experiences they need to succeed.”

Download *A Guidebook for Success: Strategies for Implementing Personalized Learning in Rural Schools* at www.futureready.org/rural.

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*The **Alliance for Excellent Education** is a Washington, DC–based national policy, practice, and advocacy organization dedicated to ensuring that all students, particularly those traditionally underserved, graduate from high school ready for success in college, a career, and citizenship.*

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***Future Ready Schools**® is a project of the Alliance for Excellent Education that helps school districts develop the human and technological capacity needed to personalize student learning and prepare students for college, a career, and citizenship.*

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