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Making it personal: Pilot program looks to create better learning environment

Shannon Keith Nov 24, 2018 Updated Nov 24, 2018



Students dance during lunch time at Boonsboro Elementary School on November 19, 2018. Per personalized learning, students are encouraged to participate in activities like dancing, legos, or games after they've had lunch instead of keeping them in the cafeteria. (Photo by Taylor Irby/The News & Advance)

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BEDFORD — Officials with Bedford County Public Schools said schools involved in the division’s personalized learning pilot program are “definitely on the right track” in creating a better learning experience for students.

“We are constantly going back and reevaluating what we are doing with our students,” Boonsboro Elementary School Principal Elizabeth Williams said. “We don’t always get everything right but we are constantly improving and are definitely on the right track here.”

Bedford County Public Schools’ Superintendent Doug Schuch said this is the fourth year the school division is incorporating personalized learning into the curriculum. The program currently is being tested at Boonsboro Elementary School, Staunton River Middle School and Jefferson Forest High School.

“This is our fourth year in the pilot program but this came about as a concept about five years ago,” Schuch said.

Karen Woodford, Bedford County Public Schools’ chief learning officer, has presented information about the division’s pilot program to schools across Virginia and to officials with the Virginia Department of Education.

“We are really excited to be sharing our ideas,” Woodford said. “A lot of people think that personalized learning is about letting the kids run wild. We are trying to show them that it simply is a different way for students to learn, which takes advantage of technology to help students learn more independently.”

Schuch said some school divisions across the state have been coming to Bedford County to observe the pilot program in action.

“Just last week we had a group from Augusta County come to Jefferson Forest to observe,” Schuch said. “And we are going to other schools that do personalized learning and observing what they do. Personalized learning is becoming more common across the United States and I think it is an exciting time to be in education.”

Schuch said division officials discussed creating a personalized learning program after observing several teachers in Bedford County that had integrated personalized learning into their classrooms.

“Personalized learning is nothing new,” Schuch said. “Teachers had been doing it for years. We saw what some of our teachers were doing and we kind of expanded the concept from there.”

Schuch said the division-wide definition of personalized learning is providing students with “CHOICE and VOICE” in their learning while reducing the barriers of “PACE and PLACE.”

“The world outside of the classroom has changed dramatically,” he said. “However, the environment inside the classroom had not changed that much. We felt that we needed to change the way students learned in order to better prepare them for life after graduation.”

Schuch said the learning model in which many schools operate is designed to prepare students for either college or trade employment after they graduate.

“There is something unsettling about a system that sorts and selects certain students,” he said. “We wanted to create a model that gives every student a chance to succeed.”

In the personalized learning program, the teacher prepares a variety of activities at various skill levels — many using a variety of interactive computer programs and web resources — and students can work at their own pace as they move through different exercises.

Students who work more quickly may progress ahead of standards, remaining challenged rather than bored, while other students have the chance to spend longer on an exercise rather than having to move forward because the class did, Schuch said.

“In the traditional system of learning, the constant is time and the variable is achievement,” he said. “What we have done is flip that upside down and make learning the constant and the variable is time.”

Boonsboro Elementary teacher Anne Barrow agreed.

“Students learn at different paces,” she said. “With personalized learning, the students that have the material can move ahead and I can work with the students that might not yet have a grasp on the lesson. If the students that know the material have to wait, that is when they get bored and start to lose interest. We want to keep all of our students engaged and challenged so they are constantly learning.”

Schuch said personalized learning also gives students a voice in their education by offering them options.

“There is more to learn about any subject than any teacher can stand in front of a classroom and tell them,” Schuch, a former physics teacher, said. “Our teachers still lecture and this doesn’t change what they have to learn. However, learning doesn’t begin or end in the classroom and we are giving students a choice about how they learn a subject, at what pace they learn and how they demonstrate mastery of a subject.”

Schuch said the schools that are involved in the program also are taking different approaches to personalized learning.

“We can’t go in with a single vision or definition of what personalized learning is and expect every school to do it one way,” he said. “These teachers know these students better than anyone in the division office does and they know what they need to be successful.

“That’s what personalized learning is about.”

Williams said part of the approach to personalized learning at Boonsboro Elementary is the use of “personalized seating” in the classrooms. Students are given choices of how to best be comfortable during class. On Monday, students at the school could be found sitting in beach chairs or on yoga balls, stools, mats on the floor or even standing on “wobble boards” while doing their work.

“Most of us were brought up in classrooms where you sat in rows of desks all day,” Williams said. “By giving them options, we allow the students to find what makes them more comfortable so they can focus more on their work. I watched a student the other day bounce up and down on a yoga ball while taking a math test and she was just as happy as she could be while she was doing it.

“She also scored a 97 and finished the test in about 28 minutes,” Williams said.

Williams said Boonsboro Elementary also began giving students more choices about how they would spend their time during lunch each day.

“Most of our discipline problems were coming during lunch,” Williams said. “It was a hot mess at times because some students would finish their lunch in 10 minutes and then would be expected to sit quietly for the other 20 minutes. Our staff looked at the problem and we decided to use some of what we were doing in the classroom in the cafeteria.”

The school now has centers set up where students can spend the remainder of their lunch period after they finish eating.

“They can sign up to play games on the stage in the cafeteria,” Williams said. “We have ‘Lego’s in the Lobby,’ a ‘Walk and Talk’ in the gym and we have a room set up where students can sit quietly and read. By giving them choices, we are giving them a say in how they spend their time and the students go back to class recharged and ready to learn.”

Mac Duis, Bedford County Public Schools’ chief operations officer, said the reduction in disciplinary problems has been one of the biggest benefits of the program.

“There have been decreases in referral and suspension rates in school-wide programs from previous years,” Duis said. “And there are much lower referral and suspension rates in pilot programs compared to same school as a whole. Discipline referral and suspension trends have been positive in all the pilots.”

Duis said students in the personalized learning programs are showing improved Standards of Learning scores in both English and math.

“We are seeing a slight increase in those numbers,” Duis said. “But it’s hard to measure that because our scores in the county were good before and have remained pretty good. I think the biggest thing you can measure is the drop in discipline problems and overall satisfaction with the program.”

Duis said surveys of pilot participants at the end of the last school year showed high satisfaction scores from both parents and students at all three schools saying the program created a “welcoming and respectful environment.”

Surveys at Boonsboro Elementary School found:

98 percent of parents reported adequate or better fit for learning style of child;

90 percent of parents rated the school good, very good, excellent on whether child's needs were met; and

98 percent of parents rated adequate or better overall quality of education for their child.

Surveys at Staunton River Middle School reported:

76 percent of students rated personalized learning a good fit in math;

89 percent of parents rated math education as good, very good, or excellent and 79 percent in academy pilot; and

78 percent of academy pilot students and 84 percent of math students reported that needs were supported well in pilot.

Surveys at Jefferson Forest High School reported:

95 percent of parents reported adequate or better fit for learning style of child;

78 percent of parents rated the pilot as good, very good, or excellent on whether child's needs were met; and

95 percent of parents rated adequate better overall quality of education for their child.

“I think these are pretty good numbers,” Duis said. “We will continue to look at the data for these pilots and we hope the numbers will continue to be positive.”

Jefferson Forest Principal LeeAnn Calvert said students that started the personalized learning pilot three years ago now are “natural leaders” at the school.

“They are amazing,” Calvert said. “It is wonderful to see how they have grown. If one of them wants to start a new club or pitch a project to me they will email me and schedule an appointment. When they show up they have PowerPoint presentations or proposals ready to present. They really approach things in a very adult-like manner and think out of the box in the way employers of today want their workers.

“These students do not need to be spoon-fed material. By giving them a chance to take charge of their own education, these kids have learned to think on their own and are able to learn independently.”

However, Schuch said personalized learning does not change what a student is required to learn.

“A common misconception about personalized learning is that we are letting students do whatever they want,” he said. “That’s not what we are doing. The only thing we are doing is giving a student options about how they learn the material and how they can best demonstrate to us that they have mastered the material.”

Schuch said even though personalized learning is becoming part of education in schools across the country there is plenty of skepticism or criticism about the program.

“There are people that don’t want things to change and I get that,” Schuch said. “If our test scores are good, why change the way we teach? I don’t think personalized learning is about test scores but rather changing education to meet the requirements of today’s workforce.”

Woodford said incorporating technology into the classroom is a big part of the pilot program.

“Schools used to be set up like assembly lines because those were the types of jobs that were available,” she said. “That is not the world these students live in and we have to change our approach to be able to prepare these students for the future.”

Schuch said the personalized learning programs will continue to change as “we keep learning from our mistakes.”

“It’s a work in progress,” he said. “We look at some of the things we did in year one that we wouldn’t do again if we were starting over. But we continually look back at what we have done and look for ways to improve as we move forward. This is a long process but we are off to a good start.”

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