

# LISTEN: How a “drop-out factory” turned into model for success

*Educators embraced personalized learning, an idea with little research but a lot of enthusiasm*

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*This is the latest installment in a series about efforts to reform the high school experience at one of New Hampshire’s lowest-performing campuses.*

Not that long ago, the high school in Pittsfield New Hampshire had some of the lowest standardized tests scores in the state.



“Students seem disengaged in Pittsfield,” says Superintendent John Freeman. “We were the only New Hampshire high school identified as a drop-out factory.”

But over the last seven years, the school district has overhauled its approach to education and now in most classes grades are not used to measure progress.

Jennifer Wellington teaches English at Pittsfield Middle High School. She says the focus is on learning.

“The old grading system allowed students to pass with a 65,” says Wellington. “What does that 65 mean? You did bare the minimum? You showed up? You did some tests right and you failed some? But I don’t know if you’ve learned anything.”



*This story also appeared in National Public Radio*

Pittsfield is one of dozens of school districts across the country that has invested in student-centered learning. At the high school, students map their own progress and won't get a grade until the very end of the year, after they've had a chance to accomplish their academic goals. In Wellington's class those include mastering writing, research and literary analysis.

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“They have multiple opportunities to demonstrate mastery, and once they realize they can make mistakes in class then they’re going to take risks and that’s what engages them in their learning,” she says.

**“I dealt with a child that everyday going to school or coming home he was in tears. He was saying he was stupid and getting so frustrated that he was melting down.”**

Tessie Simpson, a parent in  
Pittsfield, New Hampshire

In Wellington’s classroom, the students come up with their own questions for the reading and even decide the format of class. There is one student whose job it is to make sure that everyone participates in the discussion. Wellington sometimes sits in the circle with the students and other times observes from the floor, asking an occasional question.

“Part of student-centered learning is asking the class what do you need to make this class work?” she says. “The students are the ones telling me what works and it’s going to be different for every class.”

Students at Pittsfield Middle High School have a lot of say over how they learn and even how the school is run. Their student government presents directly to the school board and

students lead their own parent-teacher conferences. As a result, parent participation has increased from 30 to over 90 percent.

“Everybody is heard and that is important to me,” says Elisa Sullivan, who graduated last year.

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Before coming to Pittsfield, Sullivan attended a high school in Manchester, the state’s largest city.

“It was a totally different experience,” she says. “I didn’t get much one-on-one experience before, and here I just feel more included.”

So far Pittsfield Middle-High School has gone from ranking almost at the bottom of the state for standardized tests scores to rising up to the middle among New Hampshire school districts. Graduation rates have also vastly improved.

Jenny Wellington says that's because with this personalized approach, students become more invested in their education.

"We are building a community of learners and we are saying we are all in this together," she says.

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**"His confidence has changed, His confidence is different."**

Tessie Simpson, a parent in Pittsfield, New Hampshire

The move to student-centered learning isn't cheap. This small district received more than \$4 million dollars in federal and foundation grants to train teachers and add staff. (The Nellie Mae Education Foundation supports the school and is also among the many funders of The Hechinger Report.)

Recently the district expanded personalized learning to its elementary school. Pittsfield parent Tessie Simpson says before that change her 8-year-old son, Zach, was struggling in school.

"I dealt with a child that everyday going to school or coming home he was in tears," she says. "He was saying he was stupid and getting so frustrated that he was melting down."

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But since Zach enrolled in the student-centered learning class, he has become much more engaged in his lessons and is doing a lot better.

"His confidence has changed, His confidence is different," says Simpson. "There's just something different about the dynamic of that classroom

and the way they're teaching."

Zach's teacher Bernadette Rowley says she can tailor her lessons to each child with the help of parent volunteers and para-professionals in class.

"I'm reaching all of my students at the level they need to be met to keep moving forward," says Rowley. "We've had a lot of success with students who are not succeeding in a regular classroom."

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Across the country, public and private funders have invested hundreds of millions of dollars into student-centered learning. But it's not clear whether this approach actually works better.

One major study found big improvements in math and reading among kids who participated in personalized learning. But there are few comprehensive studies. That's because there is not standard yet. Each school is adapting its own version and that makes it hard to measure.

In Pittsfield, despite major improvements, the teacher turnover rate is high. Much of that has to do with the fact that salaries here are among the lowest in New Hampshire. But Jennifer Wellington says not all educators are suited to this new approach.

"It has to be about going into the classroom and letting go of your ego and teachers are not comfortable giving up power," she says. "But I don't see it as giving up power, I see it has shared power and that makes the job a lot easier."

*This story was produced by The Hechinger Report, a nonprofit, independent news organization focused on inequality and innovation in education.*