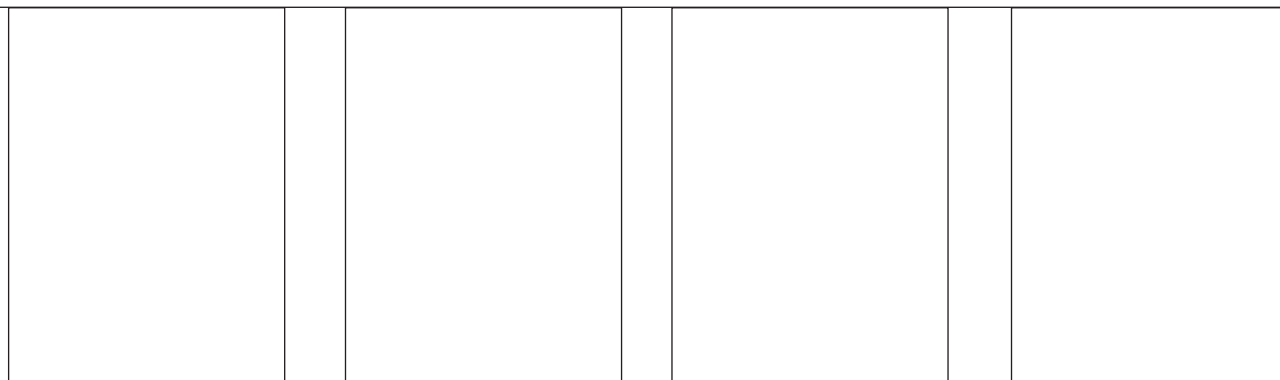# WHAT IS
Personalization?

Perhaps more than ever, today's schools need to produce lifelong learners
who can adapt to a rapidly changing world. Mr. Keefe offers an idea that has been
with us for decades that just might satisfy that need.

BY JAMES W. KEEFE

N THE long history of formal education, schooling has rarely been personalized. It would be easy to compile a long list of famous individuals from the past who have been expelled from schools for their purported inability to learn. It is interesting to speculate whether such notably creative people as Charles Darwin, Patrick Henry, James Russell Lowell, Sir Isaac Newton, Louis Pasteur, Sir Walter Scott, and Daniel Webster were actually advantaged by being pushed out of the schools of their time. In more recent years, Madame Curie, Orville Wright, Albert Einstein, and Marlon Brando shared their fate.

But a truly personalized school would be able to recognize such budding genius. Indeed, it would be able to diagnose and support the whole range of human talents. A personalized school is one in which each individual person, whether student or teacher, matters a great deal and has a program that is good for him or her.

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It was probably excusable for educators of Horace Mann's time to structure their schools on the assumption that all students learn in the same way and need precisely the same content. However, we are now faced with the enormous task of educating for a post-technological age. Today's schools must increasingly produce adaptable individuals who are lifelong learners and able to keep pace with the era of rapid change in which we will continue to live. The task of creating, maintaining, and improving the conditions for learning is thus the most basic challenge facing educators today. The outmoded structures that have encumbered schools for over a century must be replaced with more personalized ways of educating students and categorizing subject matter.

Human knowledge is expanding at an alarming rate. Technology and computerization have drastically altered the ways in which we earn a living. Social, political, and economic problems of unprecedented complexity face everyone on the planet. Schools can no longer be satisfied with organizing themselves primarily for administrative convenience. They must become schools for learning rather than schools for teaching and testing.

The conventional age-graded school system is a product of another century and initially of another culture. It was devised by the Prussians to prepare young peo-

ple for a militaristic society, one in which authoritarianism was the dominant style. The system was imported into the U.S. at the Quincy Grammar School in Boston in 1848 and grew as population increases necessitated accommodating larger numbers of students. It has endured principally because it is easy to administer and neatly categorizes students and curriculum by age and subject.

We are faced with an equally large transition today from arbitrary grouping patterns to personalized learning alternatives. Unfortunately, we are also currently blessed with policy makers who believe they can solve all educational problems by testing. What we require are new models for a new kind of schooling. And we need to avoid the pitfalls of earlier decades when we successively concentrated on new curricula utilizing old teaching techniques or old content using new structures.

THE PERSONALIZATION PREMISE

Contemporary schools must acknowledge the validity of the personalization premise. They must accept the biological truth that no two organisms are alike, and that includes learners. Every learner has a unique experiential background and a unique set of innate talents and personal interests. No two learners exhibit the same behavioral patterns or possess the same goals or levels of aspiration. No two learners solve problems in the same way or are motivated by the same incentives. No two learners are ready to learn at the same time or to the same degree. Learning for each individual is, at least to some extent, unique.

The personalization of teaching and learning refers to any effort on the part of a school to suit its program to its student body. Ideally, each school should tailor the learning process to each student's needs and capacities. In practice, however, personalization can take on many forms, limited only by the human, institutional, and instructional resources of a given school. There is no one best way to personalize.

Admittedly, personalization is one of those concepts that take on many meanings depending on the experience and point of view of the observer. To some, it means individualization; to others, it suggests a personal touch in dealing with students or a supportive school or classroom climate; to still others, it means an effort to empower individual students personally, psychologically, and instructionally. Differences in approaches to personalization over the past several decades have caused some confusion. However, I believe that we can be fairly precise in describing personaliza-

tion. Indeed, if the pedagogy of personalization is to grow and exert a real influence on educational practice, we must be more specific.

Personalized instruction might well trace itself to the days when Mark Hopkins sat on one end of a log and his student James Garfield sat on the other. Surely no one can quarrel with that student/teacher ratio, but even tutoring can fall far short of personalization if the teacher is not aware of the student's previous knowledge and interests, cannot sufficiently relate to the student, or lacks sufficient pedagogical skills to help the student.

Antecedents of personalization have been known in the past under different names: nongraded education, continuous progress education, individualized instruction, individually guided or prescribed education, adaptive instruction, and so forth. Each of these concepts is concerned with personalization but in a limited way. Personalization is more focused on individual student needs and interests and is more authentic in its goals and strategies.

Personalization was cultivated in the Model Schools Project (MSP), sponsored from 1969 through 1974 by the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP). It was adopted as the modus operandi by the special education movement. It was nurtured in the Learning Environments Consortium (LEC) International — a follow-up to MSP — and in the Coalition of Essential Schools.

The earliest formal use of the term "personalized" can be found in the Personalized System of Instruction (PSI) introduced for college students in 1962 by Fred Keller and his colleagues at the University of Brasilia. PSI is distinguished by student self-pacing, a mastery requirement for advancing to new material, the use of lectures and demonstrations as vehicles of motivation rather than information, stress on the written word in teacher/student communication, and the use of proctors to facilitate testing, tutoring, and social interaction.[1] The MSP relied on a variation of PSI as its preferred instructional model.

In the mid-1970s, University of Denver special educator Anne Welch Carroll proposed a new look at the relationship between general and special education. Her solution was personalized education, "an attempt to achieve a balance between the characteristics of the learner and the learning environment." Carroll recommended three basic elements for a personalized approach to education: the learner must be actively involved, the teacher must be a learning facilitator, and a student's program must be success-oriented.[2] Carroll's approach is still very much representative of best

practice in special education today.

Also in the mid-1970s, I formulated a systematic model of personalization for LEC International that fleshed out the diagnosis/prescription/instruction/evaluation model employed by the Model Schools Project. I defined personalized education as "a systematic effort on the part of a school to take into account individual student characteristics and effective instructional practices in organizing the learning environment."[3] This personalized model is still employed by LEC International (with some refinements) and is used in self-directed Canadian schools.

In 1996, in *Breaking Ranks: Changing an American Institution*, NASSP proposed that American high schools commit themselves to substantive renewal, guided by six main themes and 13 interrelated sets of recommendations. First among the report's main themes, with many elements derived from MSP and LEC models, is personalization.[4] NASSP followed this report in 2004 with *Breaking Ranks II: Strategies for Leading High School Reform*, in collaboration with the Education Alliance at Brown University and its Center for Secondary School Design.[5] This second NASSP report included John Clarke's more elaborate definition of personalization, characterizing it as "a learning process in which schools help students assess their own talents and aspirations, plan a pathway toward their own purposes, work cooperatively with others on challenging tasks, maintain a record of their explorations, and demonstrate their learning against clear standards in a wide variety of media, all with the close support of adult mentors and guides."[6]

LEC International also updated its personalized education model in 2000, focusing specifically on the instructional component. In *Personalized Instruction: Changing Classroom Practice*, John Jenkins and I proposed six basic elements of per-

sonalized instruction that we believe constitute the *culture* and *context* of personalized instruction. The cultural components are a dual teacher role as facilitator and adviser, diagnosis of student learning characteristics, and a school culture of collegiality. The con-

textual factors are an interactive learning environment, flexible scheduling and pacing, and authentic assessment.[7]

MAKING SENSE OF PERSONALIZATION

So personalization is not a new idea. It has been around for a long time — at least 40 years. Most educators, of course, have not given it a real try. Many don't know much about it or consider it too much trouble. Some see it as just another in the long line of innovations that have come and just as quickly gone. But personalization is not gone. It has grown in reputation and influence over the past decade.

Operationally, personalization consists in providing a program as nearly appropriate for each learner as is educationally and financially feasible. Personalization can be classroom-based or schoolwide. It can encompass older techniques, such as contract learning, project-based learning, and cooperative learning, or newer strategies, such as cognitive apprenticeships, guided practice, topic study, and differentiated instruction. But whatever the techniques, personalization starts and ends with the student.

It is apparent from even a cursory review of recent highly publicized school reform initiatives that personalization has not been a high priority in many of these designs. In our book on personalization, Jenkins and I judge the *quality* of personalization in terms of the *degree* of interaction and thoughtfulness that the design brings to the school learning environment. But neither interaction nor thoughtfulness is apparent in a number of contemporary school reform projects. Consider how little personalization is evident in the American Diploma Project (ADP), created in 1996 by the nation's governors and business leaders, and sponsored by Achieve, Inc. The ADP would mandate a college-prep curriculum for all students. It argues that recent research suggests that the skills that colleges require of incoming freshmen are very similar to those needed for "good" white-collar and blue-collar jobs. The ADP urges a kind of "default" curriculum for all students, which would "align high school standards and assessments with the knowledge and skills required for success after high school" and "require all high school graduates to take challenging courses that actually prepare them for life after high school."[8]

While this research may well be valid, and the goal is certainly worthwhile, this strategy is unfortunately closer to begging the question than finding the answer to America's school achievement problem. Not all students have the interest or even the academic skills to complete a college-prep curriculum. Nor could some of them even attempt such a program unless it were paired with a highly responsive and personalized instructional delivery system. And that's not a part of *any* of these one-size-fits-all proposals. For many students, this curriculum would mean adding months or years to their schooling — certainly acceptable educationally, but very expensive and hardly motivating to the recipients. If the ADP "core curriculum" were the "essential learnings" of the NASSP Model Schools Project, LEC International, and the Coalition of Essential Schools, then the goal would be more readily achievable. (Essential learnings in these projects are what every student should basically know and be able to do.) And of course, there remains the question of what constitutes a "good" job, which still lies very much in the eye of the beholder.

In 1999, a coalition of educational associations (including administrators' associations and teacher unions) published a review of 24 existing school renewal efforts. Of these, about one-third exhibit strong elements of personalization, while another third utilize some personalized features, and a final third use none at all.[9] The New American Schools project, a national initiative to develop replicable, schoolwide reform programs, and its successor, the Coalition for Comprehensive School Improvement, recommend several school designs that favor personalization. These include the Accelerated Schools Project (building on teacher and student strengths and collaborative inquiry), ATLAS Learning Communities (respect for individual differences, authentic assessment, student exhibitions, and school climate improvement), and Expeditionary Learning Schools Outward Bound (multidisciplinary projects and a school culture of collaboration).[10]

Several other independent school renewal initiatives also encompass elements of personalization. The Foxfire Fund "Core Practices," developed in 1966 by Eliot Wigginton, incorporate student choice and design, teacher as collaborator and facilitator, active learning, small-group work, peer teaching, community as learning laboratory, and reflection as a component of learning. The High/Scope K-3 model was also developed in the 1960s to include active and hands-on learning, students' planning and evaluation of their own learning activities, small-group "experience" workshops, and "activity centers" where students work together. The Coalition of Essential Schools embodies in its "Common Principles" the concepts of essential knowledge and skills, personalized teaching and learning, teacher as coach, a supportive school "ethos," and authentic assessment.[11]

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation approach

also incorporates some elements of personalization. The Gates initiative focuses on increasing U.S. graduation and college-readiness rates. The foundation envisions "High Schools for the New Millennium," in which "all students in the United States can and must graduate from high school, and they must leave with the skills necessary for college, work, and citizenship."

The Gates program advocates a new 3 R's: rigor, relevance, and relationships. Rigor implies a challenging and coherent curriculum that emphasizes depth over coverage, encourages analytic thinking, and focuses on "fewer topics and grappling with the subtleties." Relevance presumes real-world application, where "students are given the time to explore important topics and apply their learning to new problems in a variety of settings." Relationships envision a supportive school environment and small school size (no more than 400 students), with counselors taking an enhanced role in advising no more than 80 students each. Teachers serve as coaches and lead students to take responsibility for their own learning. The Gates view is a compromise between college-prep for all and a personalized vision for the curricular and instructional environment of the school.[12]

SO WHAT IS PERSONALIZATION?

Students of personalization might very well disagree on a precise conceptual definition for the process, but I believe that we can formulate a *descriptive profile* of personalization by bringing together the concepts that most of the pioneers, practitioners, and scholars of personalization might include in such a description. Personalization from this perspective is a systematic process for organizing a school for success. It is an attempt to achieve a balance between the characteristics of the learner and those of the learning environment, between what is challenging and productive and what is beyond the student's present capabilities. It is a systematic effort on the part of a school to take into account individual student characteristics and effective instructional practices in organizing the learning environment. It is a learning process in which schools help students assess their own talents and aspirations, plan a pathway to meet their own purposes, work cooperatively with others on challenging tasks, maintain a record of their explorations, and demonstrate their learning against clear standards in a wide variety of media, all with the close support of adult mentors and guides.[13]

The *philosophy* of personalization is learner-centered — the learner must be actively involved. Personalization builds on the learner's strengths and employs real skill development that reduces cognitive deficiencies so that the learner can experience satisfaction and success. Emphasis is placed on the uniqueness of the individual student, the tenets of self-direction, and the need for student responsibility.

Personalization requires interactive *learning environments* designed to foster collaboration and reflective conversation. The personalized learning environment is child-centered, with a values orientation, a measure of creativity, and constructive learning activities. It builds on the child's natural ways of learning, with a unity of thought, action, activities, and experiences. An essential ingredient of personalization is a school culture of collaboration in which teachers, students, parents, and other community members work together in a cooperative social environment to develop meaningful learning activities for all students.

No single pattern of horizontal or vertical *school organization* is normative in a personalized school. The school is structured as a knowledge-work organization, with students as active workers and learning apprentices; with teachers as designers of high-quality work, learning facilitators, and performance coaches; and with both students and teachers as collaborative decision makers. Educational space is organized into learning centers, laboratories, or seminar areas where students can pursue personal research, work with self-paced learning materials, fulfill educational contracts, and participate in small-group projects.

Advisement is integral to personalization. Advisement is a process that brings the student continuously into contact with persons, places, and actions that facilitate development of the student's talents and interests. The "teacher adviser" or "personal adult advocate" is the key person in this process. Each student has a teacher adviser who acts as an academic adviser and personal advocate. Students select or are assigned a teacher adviser who meets with them on a regular basis, usually daily, to help them establish a personal plan for progress (i.e., an individualized educational plan), to check their attendance, and to make adjustments in their schedules. The foundation of advisement is a diagnostic profile developed for each student, identifying the learner's personal characteristics, attitudes, knowledge, skills, and learning styles.

The *curriculum* of a personalized school connects to real life whenever possible, helping students to connect their education to the future. Each secondary school identifies a set of essential learnings — in literature and language, writing, mathematics, social studies, science, and the arts — in which students must demonstrate achievement in order to graduate. The academic program extends beyond the secondary school

campus to take advantage of learning opportunities outside the four walls of the building.

In personalization, no attempt is made to impose one model of *instruction* or *learning* on all teachers and students. Personalization demands that the teacher assume a dual role — subject-matter coach and teacher adviser — for small groups of students. Teachers as instructors are primarily facilitators, guides, and consultants rather than presenters of information. The teacher focuses on student development, motivation, and success, starting with a diagnostic profile and meaningful learning activities for each student and culminating in an instructional process and a learning environment that support authentic student performance. Instruction is authentic, reflecting construction (rather than reproduction) of knowledge, disciplined inquiry, and value beyond school. Teachers have primary input into the selection of subject matter, the actual instruction, and the day-to-day administration of the school. They also develop self-paced instructional materials and small-group activities to enable students to progress at their own pace and according to their own individual needs. Thus students may work for longer or shorter periods of time on some activities without being tied to the teacher's schedule.

The personalized *school schedule* provides both flexibility and adequate structure for learning activities. Personalized scheduling may use blocks of time or continuous progress arrangements or may be entirely open, but the schedule is always flexible and serves the perceived needs of students. Thus the schedule departs from the traditional arrangement of six to eight separate subjects and a school day divided into related and virtually equal units of time.

Personalized *assessment* begins with the diagnosis of individual students' knowledge and skills (formative assessment). Teachers integrate assessment into instruction so that it not only rates student performance but becomes part of the learning process. Students are judged in terms of performance criteria and personal achievement, rather than according to relative standing within a group. Personalization places the emphasis on performance rather than on time. Personalization typically employs a mastery requirement that allows students to advance to new material only after demonstrating mastery of what preceded it. Students complete end-of-unit tests when they are ready, rather than when an arbitrary class schedule dictates. Personalized assessment includes such activities as demonstrations, oral and written presentations, performances, contests, projects, and problem-solving activities.

Schools rate the *academic progress* of students in a variety of ways so that a clear and valid picture emerges of what students know and are able to do. If grades are given, they are assigned on an absolute basis and certify what a student has or has not learned, not where the student stands in relation to classmates.

CONCLUSION

The recent motion picture *Freedom Writers* graphically illustrates how challenging and yet how variable

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personalized education can be. The film is based on the experiences of a new freshman English teacher, Erin Gruwell, who accepts a position in a Long Beach, California, high school shortly after the 1992 Rodney King riots in Los Angeles. The 23-year-old Gruwell has no idea how to relate to, much less teach, her predominately minority students in this integrated and gang-ridden inner-city school. She tries a number of unsuccessful strategies and then begins to think outside the box. She knows that she must connect with her students first and break down cultural and generational barriers before she can begin to teach them anything.

Gruwell tells the students about the Holocaust, and they read Anne Frank's diary in paperbacks that she personally buys for them. The students can relate to Anne, and they begin to open up. Gruwell has found a strategy to allow her students to begin where they are and to work with their personal identities. She asks them to keep a journal of their thoughts and experiences, like Anne Frank's, to write in it whatever they feel is important to them, and to keep it confidential — even from her, unless they want her to read it.

Of course, the students recognize an opportunity to express their most personal thoughts and aspirations, without even knowing that they are writing, communicating, and demonstrating many of the skills that most English teachers would die for. And of course, they want their teacher to read their journals. (The compilation was eventually published.)

In a keynote address to the 2006 PDK Summit on Public Education, John Goodlad cautioned that our schools are becoming more like "training centers." He commented that "academic test scores do not correlate with any of the virtues to which our democracy aspires. None. . . . Good education provides a sense of community, personal identity, inner strength, purpose, meaning, and belonging."[14] Erin Gruwell found a way to bring that sense of personal identity, purpose, and belonging to her students. That "good education" about which Goodlad speaks is precisely what personalization hopes to bring to all students.

Benjamin Disraeli once said that "the goal of politicians is to get in front of the inevitable." I believe that personalization is the inevitable design and fabric of schooling. Today's politicians, policy makers, and educators should get in front of the inevitable. It is high time that we acknowledge that all human learning is personal. No one can learn for anyone else, nor can anybody teach anyone anything unless the learner wants to know it. Personalizing instruction and learning is education's only valid response to these facts of human nature.

In programs committed to personalization, students are expected to take a greater share of the responsibility for the success of their own education. Initially, many students find this difficult because they have been "trained" to be highly dependent on others for their learning. Indeed, many students come from a background that includes a large measure of teacher spoon-feeding. Hence, the whole learning environment must be restructured to help students become more self-directed. No social promotions, no merciful D's. Everyone has to work. There will certainly need to be a period of reorganization and redesign of our current bureaucratic model of schooling. What happens next depends on the knowledge and skills of school principals, school leadership teams, teaching staffs, and parents and community support groups. All of these stakeholders must work together and keep clearly in mind that personalization simply means humanizing the learning process and placing the learner first.

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6. John H. Clarke, *Changing Systems to Personalize Learning: Introduction to the Personalization Workshop* (Providence: Brown University, Education Alliance, 2003), p. 15.

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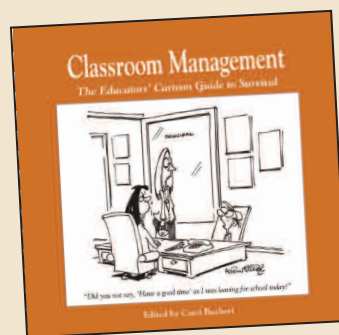
10. The Coalition for Comprehensive School Improvement, available at www.improvingschools.org/accomplishments/index.html.

11. See *An Educator's Guide to School Reform*.

12. Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, "High Schools for the New Millennium: Imagine the New Possibilities," pp. 6-10, available at www.gatesfoundation.org/nr/downloads/ed/edwhitepaper.pdf.

13. This definition is derived from Keller, op. cit.; Carroll, op. cit.; Keefe, op. cit; *Breaking Ranks* and *Breaking Ranks II*; Keefe and Jenkins, op. cit.; and Clarke, op. cit.

14. John Goodlad, "What Schools Are For," keynote address to the 2006 PDK Summit on Public Education, quoted in *PDK Connection*, Winter 2007, p. 1. **K**

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