

PERSONALIZED LEARNING POLICY PLAY #7: SUPPORT THE DEVELOPMENT OF DISTRICT CONSORTIA TO FOSTER PERSONALIZED LEARNING IN SMALL OR RURAL COMMUNITIES

CONTEXT

Personalized learning models can offer real benefits to students in small or rural districts, but these districts may lack the resources to develop and implement personalized learning on their own. Districts in rural areas may also have fewer opportunities to learn about new innovations or access external expertise than districts in urban and suburban areas. Without policy action to address these barriers, students in small and rural districts may have less access to personalized learning than their peers in larger or more urban districts.

Over the past decade, many education reforms have focused on improving outcomes for students in high-poverty urban communities. Rural communities have received less attention, even though many rural schools and districts also have high concentrations of low-income or otherwise at-risk students. As more schools move to implement personalized learning, district and state policymakers should take action to ensure that rural students are not left behind.

PLAY IN ACTION

Regional consortia have the potential to help small or rural districts and schools take advantage of personalized learning by creating a mechanism through which they can pool resources and work together to develop, implement, support, and learn from personalized learning models.

The New England Secondary Schools Consortium offers one example of the potential of such consortia. Through NESSC's League of Innovative Schools, high schools in five partner states—Connecticut, Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, and Rhode Island—exchange best practices for school improvement and innovation. Educators from participating schools visit other schools to observe new models, participate in professional development, and receive coaching. This type of exchange allows educators to discuss new developments in online courses, customized learning plans, and community-based learning; glean insights from other schools' and districts' experiences; and leverage resources across multiple districts or schools.

The League of Innovative Schools connects educators from multiple states, but regional consortia can also operate within a single state. The Wisconsin eSchool Network began in 2002 as a partnership between the Appleton Area School District and the Kiel Area School District, two rural districts in northeastern Wisconsin. Since then, the

network has grown to become an independent nonprofit organization that works with 20 Wisconsin school districts using the same online learning platform. By pooling resources, districts have increased purchasing power to create online learning experiences for students. In 2012, the network also became a partner in the Wisconsin Digital Learning Collaborative, which was established to increase student access to for-credit online and blended learning opportunities.

IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS

While district- and school-level leaders must make the choice to create or join such consortia, states can support these efforts in a variety of ways. States that choose to establish innovation fund competitions (see Play No. 1) could encourage small and rural districts to enter these competitions as regional partnerships. Ohio, for example, encouraged districts that applied for Straight A Fund grants to apply as consortia or partnerships. The Ohio Appalachian Collaborative Personalized Learning Network, a consortia of 27 rural school districts, received \$15 million—the largest Straight A grant—to increase access to blended learning and dual-enrollment programs among students in member districts.¹ Allowing schools or districts to enter competitions as consortia can help level the competitive playing field for smaller districts that might otherwise lack the resources to prepare a successful application,

¹ The Ohio Appalachian Collaborative was formed in 2010 by 21 school districts seeking Race to the Top funding. Twenty of those districts joined the Ohio Appalachian Collaborative Personalized Learning Network to apply for Straight A funding. See: http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/rural_education/2013/12/ohio_collaborative_wins_15m_to_advance_personalized_learning.html

and increase the impact of state funds by spreading innovations—and costs—across multiple districts. To ensure the effectiveness of such partnerships, states should require each consortium applicant to explain how participating schools and districts will collaborate with one another to increase student access to personalized learning.

District consortia that are created for other purposes—such as achieving cost efficiencies or providing vocational education services across a network of districts—may also serve as a vehicle for collaboration around personalized learning. As New Jersey works toward increasing its readiness for statewide online Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) assessments, the state Department of Education has started encouraging districts to form regional consortia. By working together, districts can purchase Internet access and other technology services at a price potentially lower than what would be offered to an individual district. These same collaborative partnerships could also enable districts to collaborate to design personalized learning models or contract with external providers.

Intermediate or regional school districts, such as the Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) districts in New York, could also play a role in supporting district collaboration. BOCES districts share educational services and programs, particularly in areas such as career and technical education and special education. States could amend the

legislation that authorizes BOCES and other intermediate districts to include support for personalized learning.

Finally, states should review existing policies to ensure they do not create any barriers to this type of collaboration across districts.

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RESEARCH AND RESOURCES

For more information on the **Wisconsin eSchool Network**, see: <http://www.wisconsineschool.com/>

An *Education Week* article describing **collaboration** among school districts in the **Wisconsin eSchool Network** is available at: <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2012/03/15/25collab.h31.html>

An overview of **Ohio's Straight A Fund competition** can be found at: <http://education.ohio.gov/Topics/Straight-A-Fund>

The **New Jersey** Department of Education released a memo describing the state's progress toward achieving PARCC readiness and the value of **regional consortia in purchasing technology services**. View the memo at: <http://education.state.nj.us/broadcasts/2014/JAN/28/10823/PARCC%20UPDATE%20MEMO.pdf>