

PERSONALIZED LEARNING POLICY PLAY #9: CREATE GREATER FLEXIBILITY IN CLASS CONFIGURATIONS AND IN HOW SCHOOLS ALLOCATE AND USE STAFF RESOURCES

CONTEXT

Many innovative learning models allocate human capital in new ways to personalize instruction and better meet students' needs. A variety of existing policies, however, may constrain the ability of schools and districts to use human capital in different ways. Class size policies, for example, may limit schools' and districts' abilities to implement personalized learning models that place students in larger groupings for part of the school day in order to allow for small group or individualized instruction at other times. Some states also have policies that require students to be under the constant supervision of a certified teacher, making it difficult for schools to experiment with staffing patterns whereby paraprofessionals supervise students working with technology. Schools and providers also cite inflexible funding tied to specific staffing positions as a barrier to implementing personalized learning models.

Beyond creating outright barriers to organizing schooling in new ways, these policies also limit schools' and districts' ability to shift resources to support personalized learning. Some alternative staffing configurations might reallocate human capital costs, freeing up funds that could be put toward one-on-one or small group time, new technology investments, or higher teacher salaries. Locking schools into specific staffing configurations prevents them from reallocating funds in this way.

Some providers and charter school networks have created innovative models that redesign classrooms and staffing patterns. For instance, New Classrooms changes classroom layouts by creating multiple learning stations within one physical space. Over a single class period, as many as 200 students may rotate among the stations, which employ different instructional approaches such as small group collaborative work, individual online tutoring, and teacher-led instruction. At Rocketship Education charter schools, students spend part or all of their day in large open spaces where they rotate through traditional large group instruction, online learning activities, small group instruction, team learning, and targeted intervention. Up to 115 students may be in the same classroom with both certified teachers and paraprofessionals. Reconfiguring staffing in this way allows Rocketship to pay its teachers significantly more than it could if it used a traditional model.

PLAY IN ACTION

Because the nature of these barriers varies from state to state and district to district, policymakers should carefully review existing policies to identify rules or assumptions about staffing that may limit schools' ability to implement personalized learning models. Depending on the nature of these barriers, states may either change their policies or offer waivers to districts implementing personalized learning (see Play No. 11).

Some states, such as Texas, California, and Georgia, have already relaxed class size requirements by allowing school districts to apply for waivers. Although these waivers were originally created in response to budgetary pressures, some schools and districts have taken advantage of them to implement personalized learning models. Milpitas School District, in California, used a waiver to shift from single-grade classrooms to fluid, multi-age groupings based on the needs of the students as indicated by regular formal and informal assessments. This allows teachers and principals to customize students' learning experiences using a combination of small group, one-on-one, and project-based learning with computer-based instruction.

The requirement a certified teacher supervise students for the entire school day also poses a barrier to personalized learning models. Paraprofessionals or other noncertified personnel may be able to adequately supervise students during the part of the day when they are receiving technology-enabled education, as many models call for. Allowing schools that use personalized learning models to apply for waivers of this requirement may encourage them to use staff resources creatively to achieve cost savings or optimize use of available resources.

Some states and districts also employ formulas that base school funding on specific assumptions about staffing levels or require schools to use funds for specific goods and services. These funding formulas may act

as a barrier to implementing personalized learning models, because they rely on the assumption that schools need specific staffing positions or resources—and schools must use funds in the prescribed way or risk losing them. To implement personalized learning models, schools may need to use resources in different ways.

Rather than allocating funding based on specific assumptions about school expenditures, states and districts should move toward models that distribute funds to schools on a per-pupil basis, adjusted to take into account student characteristics that may affect learning (for instance, special-education needs or low-income status). Several states and school districts have adopted Weighted Student Funding models, which provide schools with a set amount per pupil they serve—with additional increments for low-income, English-language-learning, special-education, and other high-need students—and allow them to choose how to use these funds to achieve student learning outcomes. California’s Local Control Funding Formula, enacted in 2013, enables districts to use funds in more flexible ways to meet student needs. Previously, California allocated funds to schools using a complicated formula that required much of the funding to be spent on specific items or activities. Under the new model, local districts have control over how to spend funds, but they must engage educators, families, and the wider community to create a Local Control and Accountability Plan that addresses eight state priorities,

including improving student achievement and ensuring college and career readiness.

In some schools and districts, however, class size limits are maintained as a matter of habit rather than requirement. In these places, school and district leaders must recognize the flexibility that they have regarding class sizes and staffing configurations, and be open to thinking creatively about how to deploy existing resources.

IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS

Changes to class size policies may meet political resistance; small classes are popular with teachers and families. Research does support a correlation between small class size and student achievement from pre-K through third grade. Disadvantaged students, in particular, may benefit from much smaller class sizes than are standard in many schools today. But many state and district class size limits extend beyond the grades for which evidence supports limiting class sizes, or cap class sizes at numbers far above the levels (typically 13–17 students) that research indicates benefit disadvantaged students. States and districts may wish to maintain smaller class sizes for pre-K through third grade while lifting limits in other grades. Another option states and districts may consider is setting limits on average class size across a school. A school that is allowed to have an average class size of 25 would not need to limit all classes to 25 students. Instead, it could establish some

larger classes—perhaps a blended learning classroom, similar to Rocketship’s Learning Lab—as long as other classes are small enough to maintain the average.

States and districts that choose to allow greater flexibility in staffing or class configurations in order to promote personalized learning should clearly explain the rationale and benefits of the change to parents and other stakeholders. Smaller class sizes are popular, in part, because parents believe that their children get more personalized attention when there are fewer children in the room. Policymakers will need to explain to parents and the public how relaxing class size limits can open the door for new approaches that actually enable students to receive even more personalized attention.

More broadly, states that provide waivers to allow for more local control over staffing configurations and funding will need to have robust accountability mechanisms in place. Districts and schools that take advantage of this flexibility must show that they are using personalized learning models and must be held accountable for student performance. States may wish to limit eligibility for waivers to schools and districts that meet at least a minimum threshold for student performance; waiver agreements should set clear expectations for the level of performance a school must demonstrate to maintain its waiver.

LEGISLATION

Texas, TEC Statute 25.112 (maximum class size exceptions)

Georgia, O.C.G.A. Statute 20-2-182 (maximum class size exceptions)

California, A.B. 97 and S.B. 91 (Local Control Funding Formula)

CONTACT FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

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RESEARCH AND RESOURCES

New Classrooms works with schools to **redesign classrooms** and implement personalized learning models. See: <http://www.newclassrooms.org/reimagine.html>

For a discussion of **Rocketship's blended learning model**, see: <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2014/01/21/19el-rotation.h33.html>

For information on **class size flexibility policies in Georgia**, see: <http://www.gadoe.org/External-Affairs-and-Policy/Policy/Documents/Class%20Size%20Information.pdf>

Milpitas School District applied for a waiver in California to increase **class sizes** in personalized learning classrooms. See: <https://www.edsurge.com/n/2014-01-07-what-makes-milpitas-a-model-for-innovation>

A copy of the **waiver request** that **Milpitas School District** submitted can be viewed at: <http://www.cde.ca.gov/be/ag/ag/yr13/agenda201301.asp>

Prince George's County, in Maryland, and **Charlotte-Mecklenburg**, in North Carolina, have made strategic decisions around **class size reductions** based on research findings. See more at: http://bellwethereducation.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/Bellwether_Conflicting-Missions-Unclear-Results.pdf

Governor Haslam's proposal to revise average class size restrictions in **Tennessee** met opposition. See more at: <http://www.newschannel5.com/story/16941337/governor-haslam-abandons-tennessee-class-size-proposal>

An advisory council created by the **Minnesota legislature** noted that **increased flexibility in class size** would expand student access to online and blended learning. See more at: <http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/Welcome/AdvBCT/OnlineLearnAdvCoun/>

Currently, **seven states** employ **formulas** that fund schools based on the number of **staff positions** within the school. For more information, see: <http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/01/02/86/10286.pdf>

To learn more about districts employing **weighted student funding formulas**, see: <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2012/06/13/35weighted.h31.html>

For an overview of **California's Local Control Funding Formula**, see: <http://www.cde.ca.gov/fg/aa/lc/lc/ffoverview.asp>

For overviews of **studies on class size reduction**, see: http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2011/5/11%20class%20size%20whitehurst%20chingos/0511_class_size_whitehurst_chingos.pdf

<http://www.aera.net/Portals/38/docs/Publications/Class%20Size.pdf>