

Education, personalized

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dallas — In 1997, a sixth-grader at Dan D. Rogers Elementary School set a three-alarm fire in the library. Erin and Sean Jett, whose house is so near they hear the school bell ring, did not have school-aged children at the time. But it left an impression. “My child will not go there,” Erin said.



When it comes to their children’s education, parents are like drug-sniffing dogs. Test scores matter. But so do other things. Which is why now, more than 10 years later, Emma Jett will be a fifth-grader at the Dallas school this fall. And her parents are happy about it. Their changed view — and that of others who shunned Rogers and now want in — is driven by personalized learning.

Amid all the bellowing about charters, school choice and vouchers, a potentially more revolutionary reform movement is bubbling up. Philanthropists, state education officials, reform advocates — even charter school leaders — are examining personalized learning. So what is personalized learning? It’s a customized path so that students learn at their own pace, in the manner that resonates best with them, with content tailored to their interests, aided by their computers. It feels natural to a generation groomed to presume that everything is calibrated to their needs and wants — whether it’s online shopping, news or math homework — and raised with smartphones in their hands.

It sounds benign, and wonderful, to many parents. Schools, districts and even entire states are embracing it. Teachers unions cautiously endorse it, while flagging the concern that educators could be replaced by technology.

But personalized learning raises big questions about educational equity. Is it important for all children to be taught common skills and content? Could personalized learning spur an even more splintered society? Is the purpose of education to forge a thoughtful citizenry or to equip students for jobs? What does personalized learning mean to the perennial tug-of-war over the content of what is taught? Is sameness the key to equal opportunity?

Concerns about the content, or even the variable pace, of personalized learning derives from a middle-class educational ideal that is outdated and misses the point, said Trace Pickering, a proponent of personalized learning and the leader of Education Reimagined and co-founder of Iowa BIG, an experience-based high school in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. More important, he said, is for educators to ask, “How can we effectively self-actualize human beings?”

What can that look like? When Rogers Elementary became one of five schools in the Dallas Independent School District to pilot personalized learning in the 2015–2016 school year, Principal Lisa Lovato said she and her team grappled with decisions on granular issues, such as “How long should it take a kindergartner to log into a computer?” and big philosophical questions, such as “What matters most?”

But perhaps the most dramatic decision made by the school involved explicitly teaching students to lead their own learning. Students would not be recipients of lessons, but drivers of them.

This basic idea matters because even given current excitement about personalized learning, much of it has been done for years. Differentiated instruction was conceived in the 1950s. Before and since, teachers have given different students different work sheets and assignments.

What’s new at Rogers is that children are taking the lead — and some responsibility — not just for what they do in class, but for their growth as students, said Marissa Limon, the school’s assistant principal. They work with teachers to create learning plans, and they reflect on their progress.

Even in kindergarten, teacher Pauline Hayden schedules brief conferences every few weeks with each of her 20 students.

“We discuss their goals and what they are working on, and if they had an assessment, we might talk about that,” she said. They set new goals, including nonacademic ones. “They are in charge of their learning,” Hayden said. “We are teaching that in kindergarten.”

Each classroom operates differently — independence has one look in kindergarten and another in fifth grade — but students display a striking sense of academic selfawareness. “I am pretty low in multiplying and dividing by decimals,” Carlie Lovato, a fifth-grader, offered. She admitted, “I like to talk a lot,” and her conversation can slip from school to TV shows. She’s working on it.

Arnav Jain, in kindergarten, aspires “to do addition really fast.”

Such insight matters. It means that even though Genesis Velazquez is 11 math lessons behind David Nava in teacher Sudhir Vasal’s fourth-grade class (“My pace is super fast,” David said), Genesis has not lost an ounce of pride in her work. “I don’t like to go that fast, because then I can get some problems wrong,” she said confidently as she worked through a lesson on geometric symmetry. Her corresponding quiz scores: 100, 92, 92.

Technology is a big part of the personalized learning story. Silicon Valley’s push into education has made tech spending an increasingly large line in school budgets. Smart tools that adjust to students’ responses (and automatically provide more practice when they stumble) can enable increasingly specific levels of independence. Software can also integrate student data into teacher programs to help them track progress in ways unthinkable

several years ago. In Vasal's class, students take a test; he instantly sees their errors and can explain their mistakes.

Overall, the rise of online learning makes "blended" learning that combines computer and live instruction feel normal to students. And it will follow them into the workplace and throughout their careers. So it's no surprise that the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative — started by Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg and his wife, Priscilla Chan — just gave \$14 million to Chicago Public Schools to develop personalized learning.

But does personalized learning work? That is harder to answer. A Rand Corp. study conducted for the Gates Foundation (both the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative and the Gates Foundation are funders of the Hechinger Report) and published last year noted that, "while [personalized learning] is promising in theory, there are very few evaluations of students' learning outcomes." The study tracked math and reading test scores and compared students who got personalized learning instruction with those who got traditional instruction. It found a small but statistically significant bump in math (3 percentage points) and a "similar trend" (but "not significant") in reading. Hardly earthshattering results.

Test scores have become the public face of school quality. But talk to parents and you hear less about numbers and more about a child's happiness. It's why a fire in the library tarnishes a school's reputation in the minds of parents, sometimes for years.

At Rogers, test scores have ticked up slightly. But surveys put parent satisfaction in the 88th to 96th percentiles. Parents connect the dots between their child's academic engagement and sense of well-being. Rogers, once shunned, now has about 200 transfers among its 520 students, Lovato says.

Kristen Watkins, director of personalized learning for the Dallas Independent School District, said the concept is catching on and will be in 10 schools in the fall. But the district does not dictate a top-down recipe. "We gave autonomy to the schools," she said.

At Rogers, the Jetts said they appreciate the tone that personalized learning has brought.

"In the classroom, if you want, you can sit at a table. If you want to sit at a desk, you sit at a desk. You can sit on the floor. If you want, you can sit on a ball," Sean said.

Everyone learns, said Erin, "in the way they want to learn. It is not merely tolerated. It is embraced."