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'Personalized Learning' Varies for Race to Top Districts

By **Michele McNeil**

The 16 **Race to the Top district winners**, pushed by \$400 million in federal grants that put a premium on personalized learning, are embarking on vastly different makeovers of the classroom experience—from districtwide approaches to a narrower blueprint focused on middle school math.

Despite the divergent approaches, a review of the winning applications shows those districts are tapping similar tactics: mobile devices and individualized learning plans for students, personalized learning coaches for teachers, and data dashboards that collect all student learning information in one place.

What's more, many of the districts are embracing the philosophy that learning isn't defined by time spent in class, but by mastery of a particular subject or lesson.

For example, the Middletown city school district in New York is piloting a policy in which elementary students advance to the next grade when they show mastery of grade-level standards. In Carson City, Nev., high school students who master their high school subjects in the middle of the year can move right into earning college credit.

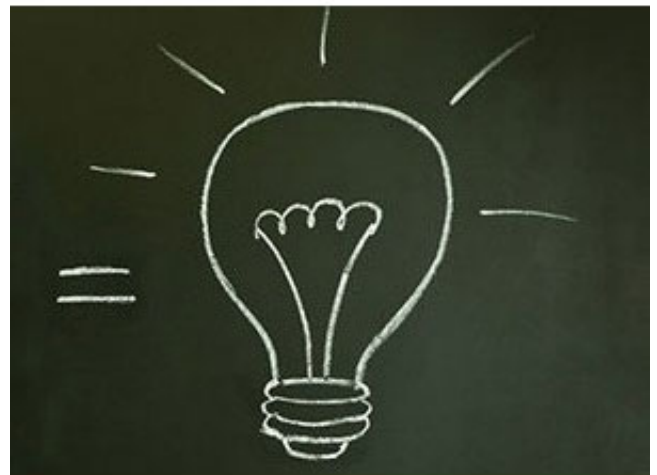
Last year's grant contest was the first time the U.S. Department of Education used its signature Race to the Top brand to try to push for education redesign at the local level, specifically around personalized learning.

In putting the grant money up for grabs by districts, federal officials sketched out a broad definition of what they wanted in a personalized learning environment: one in which educators used data and 21st-century tools—such as mobile devices and "learning algorithms"—to customize instruction to the needs of individual students.

The original Race to the Top competition, launched with money from the 2009 federal economic-stimulus measure, was considered successful in getting states to adopt certain policies favored by the Obama administration, such as charter school expansion and teacher evaluations tied to student academic growth. But it remains unclear

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Making It Personal

As part of last year's Race to the Top contest for districts, applicants had to design a four-year plan that would personalize learning for students. Through programs and technology, the 16 winners

how successful the district iteration, funded through fiscal 2012 congressional appropriations, will be, experts in personalized learning say.

"What Race to Top does best is change the fundamental condition under which school happens—whether that's policy or market conditions," said Michael B. Horn, the education executive director of the Innosight Institute, a San Mateo, Calif.-based think tank that promotes personalized learning. "But when Race to the Top delves into operations of school districts," he said, "that's a whole other matter."

But if nothing else, Mr. Horn said, the latest Race to the Top has "elevated student-centric learning onto the radar."

Local Leaders

In December, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan announced the 16 district winners, which include three charter school districts, two educational cooperatives, one large urban district (Miami-Dade County in Florida), and 10 midsize districts. Grants ranged from \$10 million to \$40 million. Mr. Duncan and his staff have hailed the portfolio of winning districts as leaders in upending the traditional school experience.

Most of the winning districts plan to buy new technology with their grants. In fact, a review of the project budgets for those districts shows that at least \$77 million of the \$400 million total will be spent on technology—from iPads to additional bandwidth for schools. For example:

- The 12,000-student Metropolitan School District of Warren Township in Indianapolis will buy 6,750 new iPads so elementary and middle school students can, among other activities, keep up to date on their progress toward academic goals.
- In Guilford County, N.C., each of the district's 17,000 students use hand-held devices to access digital content, a new online learning platform, instructional software, and subscriptions to various services.
- The 345,000-student Miami-Dade system will offer 30 new laptops for students in its highly individualized middle school math program to take home.
- And elementary students in New York's 7,000-student Middletown district, which has budgeted for half its \$10 million grant on new devices, will share 40 new Google Chrome netbooks.

And even in districts that don't plan to buy iPads or other tablets for students, the goal is the same: expand Internet access so students have more opportunity to learn outside the physical boundaries of a school.

Green River's Approach

The Green River Educational Cooperative in Kentucky, which encompasses 112 schools and 59,311 students in rural parts of the state, will use its grant to put Wi-Fi on buses so students can learn during long rides to and from school. Eventually, the cooperative wants to expand access to churches and businesses—an acknowledgment that in sparsely populated areas, Internet access in each student's home is no guarantee.

approach personalized learning in different ways.



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education; Individual District Applications

But Green River's plan clearly states that it is "not a technology initiative."

One of its primary components aims to spark a culture shift in students by making them more responsible for their own learning.

Students will start to align their learning and goals with career aspirations even in the early grades.

"I'm not talking about making Einsteins out of 3-year-olds," said George Wilson, the executive director of the Green River cooperative. "It's about having them say: 'What I do now matters about my future.' "

In Charleston County, S.C., a new digital learning platform will serve as one-stop shopping for all student data so parents, teachers, and students can track academic progress.

"One of the most important things we're pushing is students owning their learning," said Lisa Herring, the associate superintendent for academic and instructional support for the 45,000-student district. "But that also does not minimize the very important role of the teacher."

Getting students engaged in their own learning—and allowing them to pursue their own interests—is a common strategy of the winning districts.

The 24,400-student Harmony public schools, a charter school network in Texas, has designed a "custom day" with two hours of flextime for students to receive remediation in math or English/language arts, take advanced classes in those subjects, or pursue electives.

The Iredell-Statesville district in North Carolina gives students 30 minutes of "SWAG time" (shorthand for one high school's Supporting Warriors to Achieve Greatness program) to pursue personal interests—learning to play the guitar or practicing French, for example.

That is just a small part of a much more comprehensive approach to customized learning, district officials say.

"I think the biggest change is the way instruction is delivered. This is a major culture shift," said Melanie Taylor, an associate superintendent of the 20,000-student Iredell-Statesville schools.

Making the change means incorporating digital learning into the classroom, but it also means using "blended learning coaches" in each building who can help Iredell-Statesville teachers use new technology and smaller-group instruction in their daily lessons.

"There's less lecture, less students sitting in desk. There will be more of a rotation around project-based learning and small-group instruction, and more work happening on a device," said Kelly Marcy, the executive director of student services. "More subtle will be that the teacher is the leader."

Coverage of "deeper learning" that will prepare students with the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in a rapidly changing world is supported in part by a grant from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, at www.hewlett.org.

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