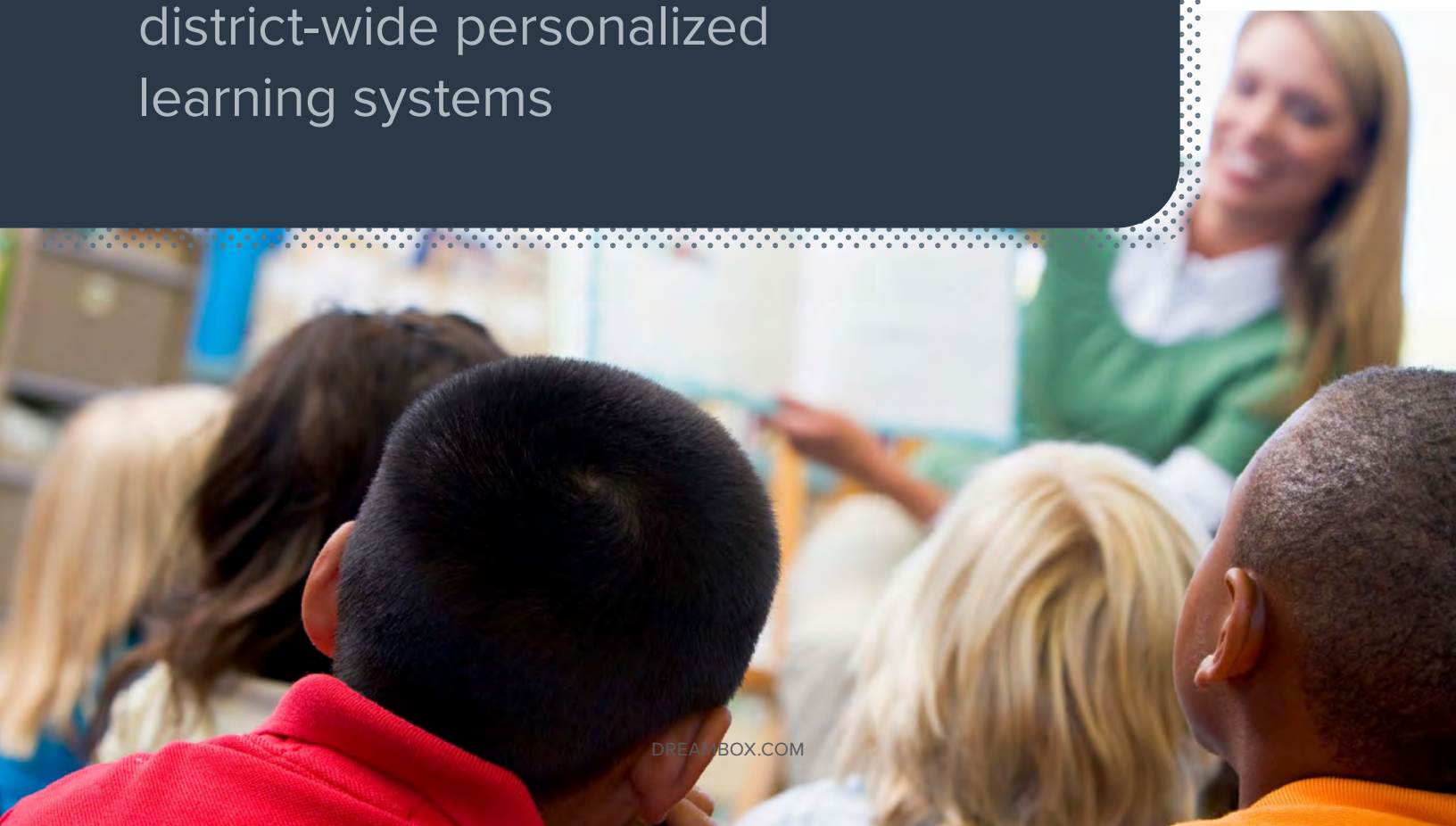# Implementing Personalized Learning Systems at Scale

8 key takeaways

for successfully creating district-wide personalized learning systems

Contents

Introduction

Educators nationwide have started this school year with a commitment to nurture success for every student. Coupled with this optimism is the reality that many districts still struggle with lagging achievement levels and accumulated learning loss. Each and every student within a school or district has a unique profile of strengths, gaps, and motivations. Finding ways to effectively meet the specific needs of each student is vitally important to catalyze growth and help them reach their potential. Doing so for all students in a school or district, however, is overwhelmingly challenging for even the most experienced and qualified educators.

During a recent webinar, Expanding Teacher Impact: Scaling Personalized Learning Across Districts, a panel of educational leaders spoke about their experiences implementing personalized learning systems at scale. The panelists shared strategies and best practices to inspire other educators to work to transform outcomes and create a culture of ongoing growth and success.

About the Panel

Dr. Brenda Hafner

Superintendent,
Lexington County School
District Two, South Carolina

Dr. Jennifer Wise

Coordinator of Mathematics,
Lexington County School
District Two, South Carolina

Anasya Turner

MTSS Specialist,
Charlotte-Mecklenburg
Schools, North Carolina

The following includes key takeaways from this meaningful conversation on successfully creating district-wide personalized learning systems:

1 Prioritize ease of use

When selecting a personalized learning platform, ensuring ease of use is critical.

The speakers all agreed that for a resource to be effective, it must be easy for educators to learn and use, regardless of background knowledge, skill set, or classroom structure. When assessing a resource, Turner explained that it's essential that it's not time-intensive, complicated to understand, or will add to a teacher's already overwhelming workload. She explained that when evaluating tools, she always asks, "What is going to be most user-friendly for our teaching staff, and what is going to be most accessible?" Considering this as a core tenet acknowledges the diversity of backgrounds among teaching staff, honors the hard work required of their profession, and ensures that the selected resources will not create additional burdens — ultimately increasing the likelihood that teachers will use the tool and realize the benefits.

Considering ease of use as a core tenet acknowledges the diversity of backgrounds among teaching staff, honors the hard work required of their profession.

2 Encourage educator buy in

During rollout for new resources or initiatives, tie program benefits to district goals and share success stories to encourage broad adoption and educator buy in.

All panelists noted the importance of getting teacher buy-in as a prerequisite for a personalized learning system to be effective. Turner commented that tying the benefits of a program to student outcomes and district goals can be a productive approach, "When we're scaling and getting teacher buy-in, [we] show how this supports goals as a district and how it closes achievement gaps." Dr. Hafner agreed, sharing that, in her district, when they roll out a new initiative, they focus on ensuring that teachers know "the why of this program" to see the purpose. She added that, as part of this process, they make sure teachers "understand theconnection to the growth, learning, and success" of students.

The speakers also explained that, from their experience, teachers hearing about success from other teachers is the most effective way to breed confidence in and engagement with a resource or approach. Turner explained, "If teachers hear from other educators about a personal experience with the platform and how it impacted student growth [...] they are more likely to buy into the program." Dr. Hafner concurred, explaining that for teachers to feel invested in the initiative, they "have to see results" and successes from peers before they can view it as "a viable option for their students."

Focus on ensuring that teachers know the why of a new program and understand the connection to the growth, learning, and success of students.

3 Meet multiple needs

Truly adaptive personalized learning platforms with embedded continuous assessment can meet a broad spectrum of student needs.

A recurring theme during the webinar was the wide diversity of needs in classrooms today and the tremendous challenge to effectively meet those needs. All the panelists noted the value personalized learning systems can offer by leveraging technology to help support the unique needs of each student – from addressing learning gaps to providing opportunities for enrichment and acceleration, all within a single classroom. Turner described how a truly adaptive, personalized learning platform "can benefit every student in your building – from accelerated content to re-engagement of skills students may lack." Put differently, Turner later said that this kind of resource has the "flexibility to truly meet students wherever they are." Dr. Wise explained that when designing their program, they asked "Is that personalization able to support us at Tier I, Tier II, and Tier III, and what does that look like?" These questions drive the selection and deployment of resources that support every learner.

Another benefit all the panelists described is using personalized learning platforms to reinforce concepts or to front-load content to help build confidence when students are later introduced to the material. Having a platform that can do this without requiring teacher time provides a seamless way to familiarize students with new ideas and information, making it accessible, and laying the groundwork for future success.

> **A truly adaptive, personalized learning platform can benefit every student in your building – from accelerated content to re-engagement of skills.**

4 Amplify impact with data

Leverage data and insights to inform instruction, build teacher capacity, and amplify educator impact.

The speakers remarked on the benefits of both the time students spend on a personalized learning platform and how the impacts and data collected from those experiences can inform and bolster other instructional time and practice. Dr. Wise noted that, in education, "time is one of our nonrenewable resources." Turner described that having students work on a personalized learning platform – which is meaningful and productive for them – also "frees up the time teachers spend planning for targeted instruction." Another advantage is that the platform has the ability to provide instruction and practice that's outside a particular teacher's range of expertise or experience. Turner explained that this can be a comfort to teachers' who "use these tools that extend beyond their personal skillset to benefit students."

Wise described how data and insights gathered from an adaptive personalized learning platform can support other forms of classroom instruction, including small groups. "Being able to tease out to the skill – to the specific standard – that students need support with, is a labor-intensive process [...] Being able to use the data that we can gather from programs and platforms is really powerful and actually helps us meet our goals without feeling like it's one more piece." She explained that this data allows educators to see student needs and gaps, as well as areas of strengths, so that support and enrichment are simultaneously possible.

Data and insights gathered from an adaptive personalized learning platform can support other forms of classroom instruction, including small groups.

5 Get to know your students and celebrate them

Don't lose sight of the importance of relationships and seeing a student holistically when implementing personalized learning systems. Find ways to recognize, celebrate, and build on personal successes to foster further growth and confidence.

Dr. Wise pointed out that "looking at students holistically and really identifying who our students are"– beyond achievement test scores – is at the core of personalized learning. Turner reiterated this point, saying that, in her district, they have intentionally shifted how they frame thinking about students –from asking What can a student do? To Who is the student? All the speakers agreed that personalized learning platforms can be a great resource for identifying strengths and progress, even for students who struggle, allowing educators a more nuanced view of a student. Dr. Wise noted that "When you have a plat-form that is able to help you tease through some of that data, it makes those celebrations all the more possible and strengthens the conversation."

Dr. Hafner connected this effort to understand who a student is with an educator's ability to meet a student's needs. "Building a relationship – both academically and a value-add relationship – where that student knows you are interested in them as an individual and what they bring, not only to the academic classroom, but the social learning environment, is very important. That helps you to better develop that personalized approach, which will breed that early success, which gives them the confidence to move forward into some of those uncharted territories."

Shift your thinking From: What can this student do? To: Who is this student?

6 Measure growth in multiple ways

Regularly gauge learning to ensure that all students are making progress – within the platform and on external measurements of growth and achievement.

The panelists all spoke about the importance of monitoring student learning in a variety of ways. Turner explained that, in her district, they "look for indicators of growth not only within the digital learning platform, but [...] growth being replicated in other areas of assessment – on universal screening data, on end-of-year assessments, and on classroom assessments." They then extend the analysis to ask, "Are we seeing the same level of growth on those assessments as we are in the platform itself?" Confirming this alignment reinforces that the time spent on the platform is working to meet student needs, which builds confidence among educators across the district and encourages continued use and engagement.

Dr. Wise added that it's also important to regularly establish the district's desired goals for personalized learning over time. She explained that their district's goals have evolved since initial deployment – from encouraging students to engage in productive struggle to targeting the number of completed lessons to deepening the fidelity of implementation to target specific results. Understanding the connections among usage, fidelity, and results – and intervening when a student is off track – ensures that learning and growth can happen at a scale.

Monitor student learning in a variety of ways. Look for indicators of growth not only within the digital learning platform, but in other areas of assessment as well.

7 Cultivate open communication channels

Be strategic about deployment and build in mechanisms for questions, feedback, and continual support.

Rolling out any new program or initiative across a school or district requires thoughtful goal setting, open communication, and strategic short- and long-term planning. Turner explained that the "best thing to do when getting started is to have a plan." She outlined three questions to consider:

- How are you going to use the tool or platform?
- What is the expected outcome?
- Who is the audience?

The panelists also spoke to the importance of fidelity of implementation in order to achieve desired results for any program or intervention. They suggested that an initial pilot rollout can bolster confidence and build internal champions for a wide-scale deployment.

Dr. Wise noted that it's incumbent upon districts to support educators and offer opportunities for feedback as part of the implementation plan. She called on districts to consider, "What is that support going to look like so that we are able to provide in an ongoing way — both from an infrastructure standpoint but also in terms of PD?" She also highlighted the importance of listening to educators at the onset of any new initiative or program as a way to understand and address their concerns and questions. Taking care to do this early ensures that all stakeholders are aligned on the goals of the implementation and understand the metrics for success.

Listen to educators at the onset of any new initiative or program to understand and address their concerns and questions from the start and throughout.

8 Foster a culture of continuous improvement

The overarching goal of personalized learning should be to foster a culture of continuous improvement.

All three panelists reminded the audience not to lose sight of the ultimate goal of a personalized learning system – to foster growth for all students, regardless of their starting point. Dr. Hafner put it succinctly, explaining that "the heart of personalized learning is about continuous improvement and innovation."

The speakers agreed that to successfully implement personalized learning, the intention to meet the needs of all students must transcend the entire district. Turner noted that, for personalized learning to truly be scaled, "it must be operationalized at the district level and embedded into district practices." Dr. Hafner described that, to cultivate this collective approach in her district, they encourage their teachers to constantly question:

- What is it we want our students to know?
- How will we know they are learning it?
- What are we going to do if they've had difficulty?

If educators grapple with these questions, they naturally create a personalized roadmap for each student. A high-quality, adaptive personalized learning platform can provide actionable data, address gaps, and accelerate learning so all students across a district can reach their destination and achieve success.

To truly scale personalized learning, educators must operationalize it at the district level and embed it into district practices throughout all levels of the organization.

Watch the full conversation here.

About DreamBox

Districts partner with DreamBox Learning® to provide educators and students with effective supplemental education technology solutions that have been independently shown to accelerate student learning achievement. Joining the DreamBox community links districts to a team of experts committed to ensuring successful implementation by equipping educators, from the classroom to district leadership, with robust data analytics and engaging professional development that enhances their capacity. With DreamBox, students experience a personalized learning experience tailored to their individual needs which develops a lifelong love of learning.