Two Schools: Two Approaches To Personalized Learning

The authors believe that the kind of vital personalization exemplified at Haney and Parker - not state testing or rigid standardization - must become the cornerstone of school renewal if educators and the communities they serve hope to change, in any significant way, the basic grammar of schooling.

THE NEW century promises changes beyond imagination. If the present is any kind of prologue, the possibilities for the future seem staggering. A journey into uncharted waters awaits the emerging school population. How do we prepare students for such an unknown? Linda Darling-Hammond stresses the need for all students to learn at high levels and sees the job of instruction as that of enabling diverse learners to construct their own knowledge and to develop their talents in effective and powerful ways.\(^1\) The future will demand flexible and thoughtful people unafraid to meet the unknown head-on. As Albert Einstein is often quoted as saying, "No problem can be solved by the same consciousness that created it. We must learn to see the world anew."

Personalized learning has been developing as an instructional model since the mid-1970s.\(^2\) Personalization is the effort on the part of a school to take into account individual student
characteristics and needs and to rely on flexible instructional practices in organizing the learning environment. In "Personalized Instruction," page 440, this Kappan, we discussed six basic elements of personalized instruction, first defined in our recent book:

1. a dual teacher role of coach and advisor;
2. the diagnosis of relevant student learning characteristics;
3. a collegial school culture;
4. an interactive learning environment;
5. flexible scheduling and pacing; and
6. authentic assessment.(3)

These features distinguish the culture and context of personalized instruction. Only a few schools currently use all these elements in a comprehensive and systemic school design. Many others are working toward their implementation.

We would like to describe two schools, one in Canada and one in the United States, that perhaps best exemplify current initiatives to personalize schooling and instruction. They are personalizing instruction in different ways; they are challenging students to accept responsibility for their own learning and to experience formal education differently. Each school is a laboratory for personalization.

**Thomas Haney Secondary Centre**

Background. Thomas Haney, located in Maple Ridge, British Columbia, opened in the fall of 1992, spurred by the leadership of the district superintendent, Denis Theirren, and his staff. Formal planning involved members of the district staff, potential administrators and faculty members for the school, and consultants from the Learning Environments Consortium International (LEC), a self-help cooperative of schools and districts in the western U.S. and Canada. Plans for the facilities were drawn from specifications that called for independent activities, collaboration, and large-group meetings as needed. The facilities at Bishop Carroll High School in Calgary, Alberta, served as a point of departure for this school for a new century. The building plans included open spaces, seminar rooms, regular classrooms, and specialized spaces for the arts, physical education, technical education, and the sciences.

The goals for Thomas Haney were taken partially from the Year 2000 Report of the British Columbia Ministry of Education and partially from goals presented by a local design team. The first three goals were adopted from the ministry report:

1. Learning requires the active participation of the learners.
2. Students learn in a variety of ways and at different rates.
3. Learning is an individual and a social process.

The final four goals were the work of the local design team:

4. That students learn is more important than when they learn.
5. All students can be successful learners.
6. Students learn best in a safe and orderly environment.
7. Learning is a lifelong process.

The original plan was to develop a facility and an educational program for students assigned to a new attendance area, not a magnet school for students throughout the district. As the school developed, however, students from other areas of the district were permitted to attend, pending
available space.

The Haney Centre incorporates under one roof secondary education (grades 8-12), junior college (grades 13 and 14), and continuing education programs. A fundamental premise of the school is that, if students are going to learn to be independent, they should experience independent learning in spaces designed to support that kind of learning. Similarly, if students are to learn to work together in teams, they should experience learning in spaces designed to support collaboration. Thus traditional classrooms have been replaced, for the most part, by spaces designed for personalization.

The building features a "Great Hall," a large open area where students obtain study guides and work at their own pace, either on their own, with another student, or with a small group of students. In the Great Hall, students work on mathematics, English, and social studies. They work on second languages in the school media center, near other spaces where "classes" meet periodically. Still other spaces are more specialized for individualized science, technology, art, music, drama, physical education, and business education.

Implementing personalized instruction. Thomas Haney puts into practice all six elements of personalized instruction mentioned above.

Dual teacher role as coach and advisor. Multi-age groups of 18 students meet with their advisors (teachers and administrators) 10 times each week. On Monday and Thursday, meetings are scheduled for one hour; on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Friday, for 15 minutes. The Monday meeting allows teacher-advisors to work with advisees to set goals for the week and to arrange their schedules accordingly. Thursdays are used to check weekly academic progress. As students advance at their own rates through a continuous-progress program of curriculum and instruction, advisors help keep them on track and intervene when appropriate. They also keep parents informed, in many cases on a monthly basis, even though district reports are issued only three times per year. All full-time professional staff members serve as advisors. The advisor is the one adult in the school who has close, personal knowledge of all facets of a student's academic life and some facets of his or her personal life. The principal, Ian Strachan, states, "Any school in the 21st century that does not include an advisement system in its growth plans is doing a disservice to students."

Teachers at Haney Centre also serve as learning coaches and facilitators to students engaged in their subject-area specialties. The school is organized so that eighth-graders follow a relatively traditional timetable (schedule) in structured classes while they are being introduced to self-paced learning guides and to learning at their own best rates for success. From grade 9 onward, students create their own timetables in conjunction with their teacher-advisors and with recommendations from their subject-area "markers" - one teacher in each of the four subject areas assigned to meet with a student to give academic advice and feedback. Generally, students work on four learning sequences/ courses at a time. Teacher-coaches monitor student work, provide coaching as needed, offer seminars for more complex content or for follow-up, initiate large-group presentations as appropriate, and assess student achievement.

Diagnosis of student characteristics. Each student develops a personalized educational plan with the help of his or her advisor. Students are administered the Learning Style Profile (LSP), and the results of this instrument are used to help them choose activities from learning guides and to select appropriate learning environments. The teacher-advisor uses information about past student
achievement, data from the LSP, and developmental information to create a personalized plan for each advisee. The plans are subject to modification based on the student's progress, interests, and needs. Periodically, teacher-advisors provide direct instruction in study skills and time management. A student plan book is given to each advisee so that daily plans can be constructed. Advisees keep the plan books with them at all times and use them in conferences with their advisors to compare the amount of time spent in various areas of the curriculum with academic progress in each of these areas.

A culture of collegiality. Teachers work in departmental teams. Common planning areas allow teachers to meet both in and across departments. Each teacher's workstation is equipped with a computer that links the teacher to databases detailing student progress and advisee background information. Students often work in pairs or learning teams as they complete activities from the many learning guides developed by teachers. It is not unusual to see students working together toward the solution of their common problems or students helping other students understand difficult material. When asked about the difference between Thomas Haney and her previous school, one student remarked, "It is more difficult here. I must do the work and do it well before I receive credit. I can also get help from my fellow students. We aren't competing with each other."

An interactive and thoughtful learning environment. The curriculum at Haney is delivered using a series of learning guides for each course. The learning guides are written by teachers and address major course objectives. Varying activities are offered so that students can meet the objectives in accordance with their learning styles, knowledge and skills, and developmental needs.

Each student is assigned a teacher marker in each of the four subjects he or she takes per semester. The teacher markers meet with students on a one-to-one basis as needed and review test results to give feedback. As students work to complete learning activities, they interact with their teacher markers and other teachers of the same subject. The open facilities of the Great Room, the media center, and other spaces enable teachers to move about the areas, observing students at work and intervening when appropriate.

Course content is rigorous and focused on the standards mandated by the British Columbia Ministry of Education. In English and literature, students undertake many critical analyses. In the 12th-grade literature course, for example, students study 56 different works - plays, novels, and poems - from writers such as Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Swift, Austen, and Dickens.

Creative independent or group projects are built into the learning guides. Students are also encouraged to negotiate with subject teachers for projects based on individual interests. A typical project contracted by a student in 11th-grade English involved the construction of a portfolio of original poetry that later served as the focus of a one-person show for an audience of 200 students. Another project occupied a student in reading a series of historical novels and then writing an op-ed piece for the school newspaper.

Learning guides are viewed as road maps that direct students to textbooks, outside readings, interactive software, hands-on materials, experiments, and community-based resources. Students are expected to accept a healthy degree of responsibility for their own learning, with teachers accessible to give help when needed.

Flexible scheduling and pacing. Thomas Haney offers a student-driven schedule focused on
continuous academic progress. With the help of their advisors, students build their schedules on a weekly basis. Changes can also be made throughout the week as needed. The advisor and the student are empowered to make decisions as to location and the amount of time a student may spend working on a particular course, unit, or learning activity. Computer networking allows subject teachers to report student progress back to the advisors. Subsequent placement and scheduling decisions are made in light of student progress.

Teachers and teaching teams schedule group activities as needed. Some courses are scheduled two or three times a week because the nature of the program requires that students meet in groups. Other groups grow out of the learning guides and are scheduled on an ad hoc basis. Seminars in social studies and literature are offered, for example, when sufficient numbers of students are ready to engage in discourse. Essentially, students are able to spend as much or as little time working in specific areas as they need. If a student wishes to devote extended time to working on a project, he or she has only to check with the advisor and the subject teacher or teachers. It is not unusual for some students to work three or four days on one project exclusively.

Authentic assessment. Students take tests when they are ready and not in accordance with a teacher-developed schedule. In this kind of setting, student comprehension takes precedence over simply accumulating grades for the report card. Teachers review test results and meet with students on a one-to-one basis to give feedback. Students redo any unsatisfactory work until all errors are corrected. Thus students are only in competition with themselves, and the normal curve is replaced by the school standards. Other forms of assessment include presentations to faculty members and other students, project exhibitions, musical recitals, art shows, and demonstrations of various types.

Evidence of Accomplishments
Students report that they are working harder and learning more at Thomas Haney than they did at their previous schools. One student remarked, "I am a little behind where I think I should be at this point in the year. If I stayed at my other school, I would have graduated without a problem. I am not so certain here. But the system is better because I learn more, and I am learning to take responsibility for my own learning." Vancouver's leading newspaper, The Province, ran a feature article on British Columbia's top high schools. Using the results of the provincial final examinations administered to all 12th-grade students in the province, the newspaper ranked all the high schools. Topping the list was Thomas Haney. (4)

Self-directed learning may not touch all students equally at first, but in time it makes them work harder and prepares them for life. As one Thomas Haney teacher observed, "These kids work through breaks, they work through lunch, they even follow me to the washroom. These kids do it all themselves. I'm just here for assistance."( 5)

Francis W. Parker Charter Essential School
Background. Francis W. Parker, named for the man whom John Dewey called "the father of progressive education," opened in Devens, Massachusetts, in 1995 as a charter school. The idea for the school came from four parents of high school students who decided to "create a public school of very high quality where kids enjoy school."(6) They were dismayed at the lack of intellectual challenge for their own children in the existing high school and wanted to do better. The task was made easier when the core group persuaded Theodore Sizer to help mold the school. He and his wife, Nancy Faust Sizer, served as acting co-principals in 1998-99 and remain active members of
Parker's board of trustees.

The 10 Common Principles of the Coalition of Essential Schools guide the educational practices at the Parker School. Foremost among these are that teaching and learning should be personalized, that the governing metaphor should be the student-as-worker rather than the teacher-as-deliverer, and that credit is earned not for time spent in class but only for mastery of skills and knowledge. (7)

**Implementing personalized instruction.** As with Thomas Haney, the six elements of personalized instruction are all in evidence at the Parker School.

Dual teacher role as coach and advisor. All Parker teachers serve as advisors to students, nurturing their intellectual, emotional, social, and ethical development. Students meet twice each day in advisory groups for 15 minutes and for one hour every Friday. During these times students and teacher-advisors "lie back and talk about whatever." The teacher-advisors are there to help students work through both academic and personal problems, as well as to monitor their academic progress. (8)

Teacher/student ratios are generous (2:25), enabling teachers to get to know their students well and to coach them through the challenging academics. Teachers lecture less and coach more at Parker. And they provide direct assistance to students as they work through problems. For example, a 12-week project in history, philosophy, and social science consisted of studying the "Melian Dialogue" in Thucydides, Thomas Paine's Common Sense, the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, Orwell's Animal Farm, and speeches by Martin Luther King and Patrick Henry.

Teachers at Parker see themselves as friends of the 300 students in the 7-12 school and operate on a first-name basis with them. The use of first names seems in line with William Glasser's notion that successful teaching is based on good relationships. Glasser advocates "connecting" as a replacement for discipline in a school setting. (9)

Diagnosis of student characteristics. Diagnosis of student knowledge and skills is conducted in terms of standards and rubrics. Much is asked of Parker students academically as they advance through a six-year program of studies at the rate appropriate to their individual development. Students are expected to demonstrate mastery of school standards for Divisions 1 (7-8), 2 (9-10), and 3 (11-12). Students demonstrate mastery of curricular standards in each division through exhibitions in which they present and defend their academic portfolios. Each student's year-end assessment includes a brief summary of the Parker curriculum and a narrative description, written by the student's teacher, of his or her progress in each of the school's three integrated domains (arts and humanities, including Spanish; math, science, and technology; health and adventure). Teachers assess student work as "just beginning to meet curricular standards," "approaches curricular standards," or "meets curricular standards" for Division 1, 2, or 3, and these diagnostics become the launching points for student effort and progress in the coming year. Students who are not making satisfactory progress are identified and given additional assistance. Students are also encouraged to develop personal learning plans.

A culture of collegiality. In this area of personalization, the Parker School truly outperforms its conventional cohorts. Teachers participate in a true learning community. They collaborate with colleagues to create and evaluate the curriculum; they work with colleagues, parents, and students...
to define school standards and norms; they work with other professionals to provide special services to students who need them; they act with colleagues, parents, and students in making decisions about the school and solving its problems; they involve parents, students, and community members in assessing student progress; and they engage colleagues in collaborative observation, critique, and reflection. The daily schedule of two classes of two hours each provides teachers with a minimum of two hours per day to collaborate with one another.

Students take an active role in school governance. They serve on important school operations committees, a schoolwide community congress, and a school justice committee. The Parker School Constitution, written and ratified by students, frames student life. Service is a key ingredient in the school philosophy. Peer tutoring is widely practiced, as is hosting visitors to the school. Students also volunteer in the Devens community - in hospitals, nursing homes, and community centers. One of the gateways to advanced status, Division 3, is the presentation of evidence of personal and social responsibility.

An interactive and thoughtful learning environment. The low student/teacher ratio enables teachers to work individually with students, using interviews and timely interventions to determine student progress and understanding. As one student explained, "A lot of whys are asked and how-comes. Why is this important, so what, and who cares questions. We have our opinions and facts, but so what? Tell me why it is important."(10) All coursework is focused on an essential question that cuts across traditional disciplinary lines. The essential question is addressed schoolwide at all levels and generates sub-questions that invite active learning of both thinking skills and content-area knowledge.

Students are challenged to see the connections among disciplines as they address these essential questions. For the school's initial year, the focus question was "What is community?" which made a great deal of sense in a developing organization. The essential question for the second year was "What is change?" which seemed to epitomize the Parker experience for students and faculty who were making a transition from a more traditional school setting. For the third year, the question was "What is balance?" Questions for the succeeding years included "What are patterns?" and "What's the limit?" The use of an essential question each year tends to ensure that the Parker curriculum and learning tasks will be inquiry-based.

A recent issue of "Friday Announcements," a written communication to parents, described the Parker approach:

The first uncertain months of getting to know one another, getting used to working together, becoming acclimated to the rigors, routines, and expectations of academic life and the challenges of growing as a cohort are intended to lead to classes that are unified by common goals and understandings and distinguished by excellent work. It is not surprising to see Senior Projects that look like college work, or Division 2 students listening carefully and respectfully to each other, coaching, critiquing, collaborating on assignments or projects, or to see a group of Division 1 students dig deep in a text-based seminar so extraordinary in its depth and intensity that visitors to the school are awestruck.

The depth with which Parker students engage knowledge was captured in one student's retelling of the story of Artemis, goddess of the hunt, and the two giants who sought to rule the world and make fools of the gods.
Without a script, outline, or note cards, the student captivated an audience of students and teachers for five minutes at the annual all-school gathering. She wove such a fascinating tale that the audience could see the graceful and exquisite vision of Artemis in her two forms and hear the voices of the giants as they calculated their takeover.

Flexible scheduling and pacing. Parker classes are a heterogeneous mix of from 15 to 50 students whose ages span several years and who work with one or two teachers toward mastery of common standards. Students and faculty members have sufficient space in their daily schedules to pursue work independently and collaboratively. A visitor to Parker recounted his experience while visiting a Division 1 class. He remarked, "The class was not quite a class in the ordinary sense in which the word is used. Two teachers served 25 students for a block of two hours' time. Students moved in and out of the room easily on their way to other, seemingly more appropriate centers in the school, to do their work. Some went to a computer center, others to the library, and some to unusual places like the hallway." The visitor actually became a subject in an experiment on skin sensitivity conducted by a female student. She instructed the adult to sit down, take off his shoe and sock, and roll up his pant leg. She then proceeded to gather data. (11)

Authentic assessment. Criteria for excellence, school standards, and scoring rubrics have been formulated for the school's three divisions in reading, writing, oral presentation, listening, artistic expression, research, Spanish language, mathematical problem solving and communication, scientific investigation, systems thinking, and technology. The criteria for excellence are the same across the three divisions, but as students advance through the levels, the tasks become more complex, and students are also expected to display more autonomy and initiative and to grow in their awareness of their own and others' work. For example, in the technology area, one of the criteria for excellence is "You can use and create computer simulations to model the behavior of systems over time." For Division 1, the corresponding standard is "You can use a computer simulation to model the behavior of systems over time." For Division 2, the standard advances to "You can create a single computer simulation to model the behavior of systems over time." The holistic rubrics for each division describe how student work looks when it approaches, meets, or exceeds Parker's expectations for that level.

Student work is assessed using portfolios, schoolwide standards, and scoring rubrics. Students advance through the six-year program of studies at the rate appropriate for their individual development, achieving promotion via Gateway Exhibitions. Teachers provide narrative evaluations in their year-end assessments. Parker has no ranking of students, nor are there letter grades, honors, or prizes. Division 3 students have a Capstone Senior Project, a topic they choose to investigate independently with the help of a mentor. The project can take many forms, from community internships to apprenticeships to science projects to academic inquiries, all resulting in a formal paper. In every case, the student is required to make a public presentation of his or her findings and conclusions. The Senior Project provides a bridge between high school and the adult world.

Evidence of Accomplishments
Parker students take the mandated Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) exams at grades 8 and 10 and the Stanford Achievement Tests (SAT 9). In 1998 Parker's average MCAS scores were higher than the averages in 22 of the 25 school districts from which Parker draws its students. Few, if any, formal evaluations of Parker exist. It has been the school's practice,
however, to invite selected educators to spend time at the school and to record their observations, impressions, and suggestions for improvement. Among the visitors have been Joseph McDonald, senior research associate, Annenberg Institute for School Reform; Marilyn Stewart, professor of art education, Getty Center for Education in the Arts; Vito Perrone, director, teacher education programs, Harvard Graduate School of Education; and Marilyn Wentworth, coordinator, Partnership Teachers Network: Foxfire, in Maine. The reports have been decidedly positive, noting the following:

1. Students take responsibility for their learning and membership in a community.
2. Positive relationships exist between teachers and students, teachers and teachers, and among all students.
3. Adults give students the time to learn, to make mistakes, without interruption – "the longest 'wait time' patience I have witnessed in some time."(12)
4. Opportunities abound for students.
5. Constant reflection takes place on content and process.

When interviewed by a reporter from a local newspaper, Parker students made several observations about the school's strengths. "Teachers explain why you got the grade you got. They give you feedback." "There's a lot of revision here. You don't just do an assignment and turn it in." "The school lets you operate at your own pace . . . you get a 'gateway' halfway through the year if you show you know the material."(13)

Student work is constantly open to public review. Senior projects are reported to a public audience as part of a student's graduation exhibition. Students in all Parker divisions offer their services to the community by working in nursing homes, shelters, hospitals, and other service organizations.

The depth of inquiry in the Parker program requires that students demonstrate their understanding of ideas, skills, and concepts. In The Disciplined Mind, Howard Gardner describes the need to combat naive misconceptions through discourse with teachers, mentors, and other students.(14) He sees schooling as an orderly process engaging students at increasing levels of difficulty. The divisions at Parker appear strikingly supportive of Gardner's thesis. Having students gradually excise misconceptions and replace them with more robust and accurate representations seems a central function of formal education. The Parker Essential Charter School may well provide us with a high-quality exemplar for achieving this end.

**Two Schools, One View**

Both of the secondary schools described here are dynamic; they are schools in motion. And undoubtedly change will continue for them as they integrate new discoveries in learning, instructional strategy, and organization.

The schools are somewhat different in philosophy and structure, but they share several characteristics. Both are committed to a personalized form of instruction that includes self-pacing, project learning, coaching and mentoring, advisement, experiential learning, community-based learning, and many of these strategies in combination. They care for students as individuals. Congeniality and cooperation between teachers and administrators, teachers and teachers, teachers and students, and teachers and parents permeate the school culture. Both schools operate under the same rules and the same constraints as more conventional schools, but they are blazing new
frontiers in education for other schools to emulate and to adapt to their local circumstances. It is our view that the kind of vital personalization exemplified at Haney and Parker - not state testing or rigid standardization - must become the cornerstone of school renewal if educators and the communities they serve hope to change, in any significant way, the basic grammar of schooling.

PHOTO (COLOR)


5. Ibid.


12. Ibid., p. 60.


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