A background network diagram consisting of various sized circles (nodes) connected by lines (edges). The nodes are arranged in a non-uniform, interconnected pattern. The top half of the diagram is rendered in a light blue color, while the bottom half is in a darker blue. The overall background is a solid light blue color.

ACTION BRIEF

THE ROLE OF NETWORKS IN ADVANCING PERSONALIZED LEARNING

January 2018

About FSG

FSG is a mission-driven consulting firm supporting leaders in creating large-scale, lasting social change. Through strategy, evaluation, and research we help many types of actors—individually and collectively—make progress against the world’s toughest problems.

Our teams work across all sectors by partnering with leading foundations, businesses, nonprofits, and governments in every region of the globe. We seek to reimagine social change by identifying ways to maximize the impact of existing resources, amplifying the work of others to help advance knowledge and practice, and inspiring change agents around the world to achieve greater impact. As part of our nonprofit mission, FSG also directly supports learning communities, such as the Collective Impact Forum, the Shared Value Initiative, and the Impact Hiring Initiative, to provide the tools and relationships that change agents need to be successful.

FSG has worked extensively on issues related to personalized learning, including work with schools, nonprofits, foundations, and government entities. We are particularly focused on accelerating the pace of learning and improvement within the personalized learning sector, on connecting the experiences of practitioners with those who hold power, and on understanding the conditions and supports needed for personalized learning to succeed and spread.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Networks, long a part of public education, have recently gained prominence in the personalized learning field. Over the past several years, a number of new networks have sprung up to focus on personalized learning while existing organizations have started to work on personalized learning in more networked ways. These networks take a number of forms—some are place based, while others work nationally; some focus on new innovations, while others refine set approaches. Taken together, this increase in network activity marks a maturing personalized learning sector, where networks present a valuable approach to spreading promising practice and bringing good work to scale.

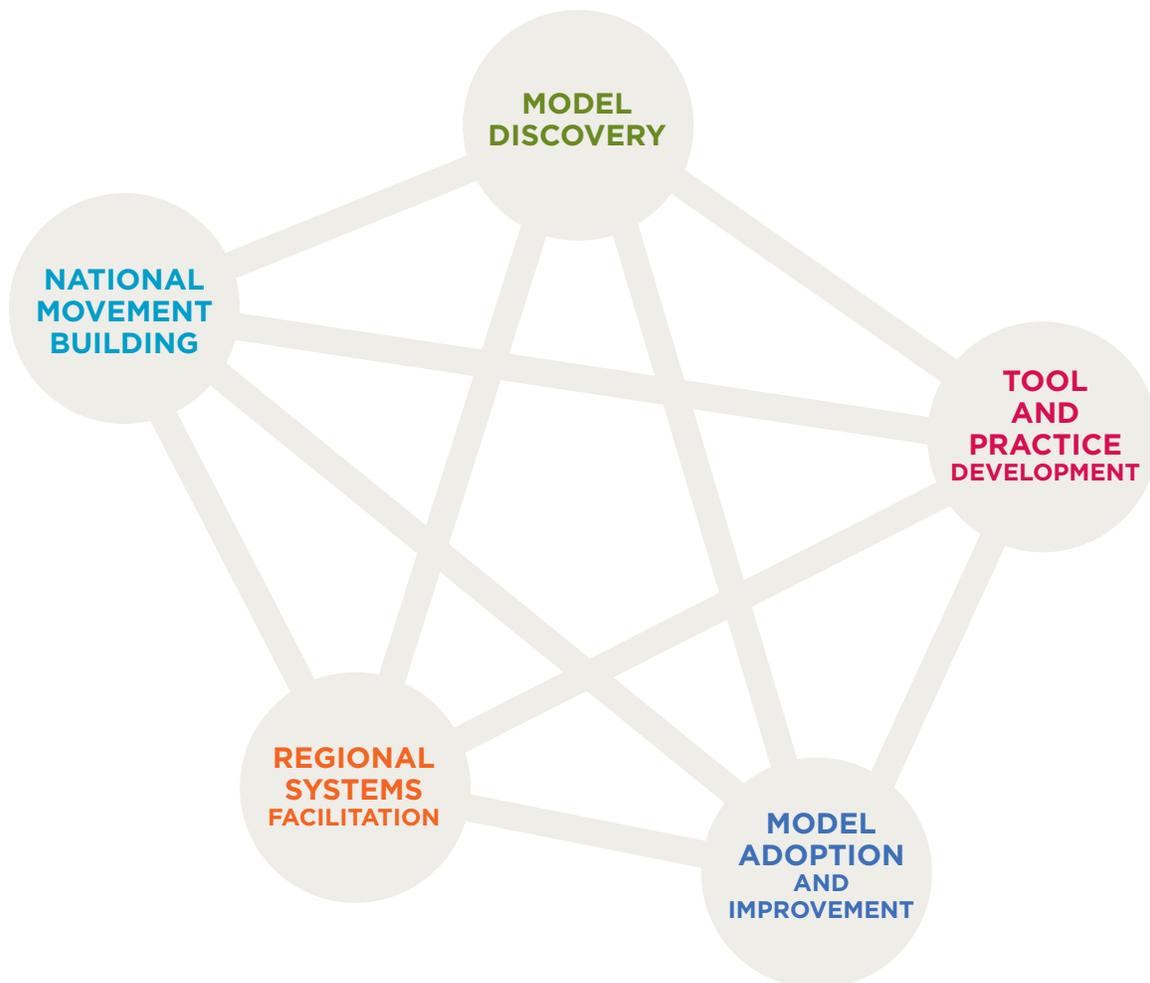
This report explores the state of networks in personalized learning today, drawing on nearly a year of research conducted by FSG and supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. It covers three main themes: the value of networks for the personalized learning sector, the roles that networks already play today, and *how to strengthen networks* going forward.

When most people think of networks, they focus first on the practical benefits networks bring their members. Networks can help to spread knowledge, provide a sense of community, and adapt work to different contexts. Networks also offer an approach to fostering social change that differs from common paradigms today. We know from experience that top-down, replication-focused transformations rarely succeed. Yet asking each school or district to master personalized learning on their own is equally impractical. Networks can be part of a third path: a method for scale that allows for individual initiative and context-based work while providing the support and knowledge of a collective whole.

Our research shows that networks, even in early stages, already play valuable roles in the personalized learning sector. We identified five clear roles that networks play to further the development and spread of personalized learning. Some organizations may play more than one role, and each role is explored further in this report.

- 1. Model discovery networks** provide funding, support, and learning experiences to develop cutting-edge personalized learning models and approaches.
- 2. Tool and practice development networks** increase the knowledge base, aggregate evidence, and improve market conditions to support personalized learning implementation.
- 3. Model adoption and improvement networks** spread particular platforms or approaches to personalized learning while allowing for continuous improvement.
- 4. Regional systems facilitation networks** systematically increase the adoption and development of personalized learning within a particular city, state, or region.
- 5. National movement building networks** create the conditions for the broad-scale adoption of personalized learning through research, convening, coaching, and advocacy.

NETWORK ROLES IN ADVANCING PERSONALIZED LEARNING



Going forward, the challenge for the field lies in strengthening the work of existing networks while expanding the use of networks to scale and share good practice. This does not mean devaluing the efforts of individual organizations or schools. Rather, networks can complement and amplify the work that individual organizations and schools are doing to support the adoption of high-quality personalized learning at scale.

For funders and policymakers interested in supporting networks, this will mean taking a long view and nurturing field infrastructure while adopting creative methods to evaluate the impact of networks. For organizational and network leaders, this will mean learning from one another's strengths, adapting lessons from networks in other sectors, and collaborating on activities of shared interest. The benefit for the field at large of embracing a stronger role for networks in personalized learning is the possibility of creating a pathway to scale that does not depend on limited grant funds or unpredictable legislation. Instead, networks tap the substantial existing capacity of those working in the sector while also modeling the type of open, participatory systems that we aspire to provide for students. Networks are not the entire solution for accelerating the personalized learning sector, but they are a key piece of infrastructure that is well worth strengthening.

THE RISE OF PERSONALIZED LEARNING NETWORKS

Network activity in the field of personalized learning has rapidly increased over the past few years. Although networks have long helped promote approaches that serve the needs and aspirations of individual students, the personalized learning movement has only recently matured from focusing on individual school models to spreading good practices, bringing new energy to the promise of networks.

A number of different networks have newly emerged or recently increased their activity related to personalized learning. Some of these networks are place-based while others are national. Some are focused on particular models of personalized learning, while others focus on advancing knowledge around certain aspects of personalization or building communities

of practice. Other networks extend well beyond personalized learning. Though these networks take different approaches, all of them focus on transforming schools and systems to better serve students' individual needs, interests, and future aspirations.

Even though networks are playing a more prominent role in the personalized learning field, researchers have not deeply analyzed the diversity and interplay of network approaches and their potential to advance personalized learning. To explore this question, FSG began research in late 2016 on the unique role networks are playing in the development and spread of personalized learning. After conducting extensive research and interviews, we convened more than 60 leaders from 35 personalized learning networks to apply lessons from network theory to the work of personalized learning networks, explore key trends in the field, articulate the role that networks play, and explore the opportunities and challenges this work entails.

DEFINITIONS FOR THIS BRIEF

PERSONALIZED LEARNING: Though there is no one definition or model of personalized learning, the term generally refers to a broad range of educational approaches focused on “tailoring learning for each student’s strengths, needs and interests—including enabling student voice and choice in what, how, when, and where they learn—to provide flexibility and supports to ensure mastery of the highest standards possible.” – *Mean What You Say: Defining and Integrating Personalized, Blended and Competency Education*, iNACOL (2013).

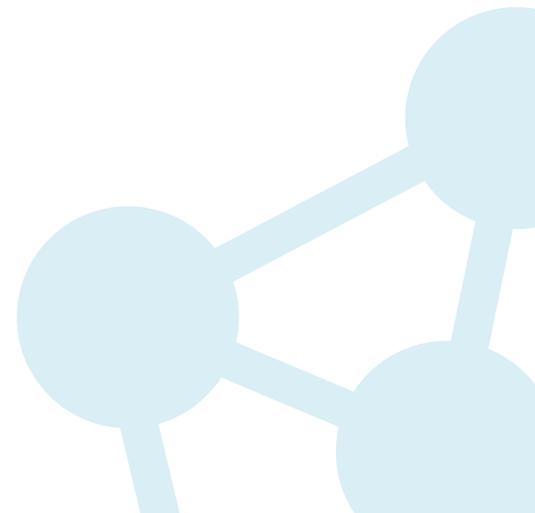
NETWORKS: Similarly, “network” is a broadly used term that generally refers to a group of connected entities that work together in an intentional way. For the purposes of our research, we have focused on networks of organizations that rely on interactions within the network itself to advance their work. Please see the appendix for further readings on network theory.

This action brief builds on FSG’s research and the meeting of network leaders by summarizing the specific roles that networks are already playing to advance personalized learning. We also pose a series of strategic questions about how networks can continue to develop and be supported. Lastly, the brief provides a reference point for those who are working to advance personalized learning, including network leaders, researchers, policymakers, funders, education innovators, and others.

BROADER CONTEXT: TRENDS IN PERSONALIZED LEARNING

Personalized learning, when executed well, presents an opportunity to improve student engagement and outcomes, better prepare students for the future, and address persistent inequities and disparities. While others have explored the potential of personalized learning in greater depth, the following trends, briefly stated, provide useful context for understanding the rise and role of networks in the field:

- **Public attitudes** about education are shifting in ways that favor increased personalization, especially as a means for schools to better prepare students for the future. The public at large is dissatisfied with the status quo in education: Recent studies indicate that only 25 percent of the general public give the nation’s schools an “A” or a “B” grade,ⁱ and that only 33 percent of parents believe their local public schools are doing an excellent or good job at preparing students for the workforce.ⁱⁱ
- **The ubiquity of technology** in everyday life has extended to the education sector. While still evolving, an education technology boom can help educators, students, and parents tackle old problems in new ways. Moreover, technology is helping to foster networks by enabling virtual communities and faster dissemination of new ideas and approaches.
- An early-stage but **developing evidence base** supports personalized learning. For instance, recent large-scale studies by the RAND Corporation provide early findings about student outcomes, challenges, and opportunities associated with implementing personalized approaches.^{iii, iv}
- **The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)** presents a unique opportunity for state and local education agencies to enable personalized learning. ESSA shifts significant control from the federal to the state and local levels, giving educators and officials the flexibility to define student success and methods of assessment, accountability, and instruction while removing many past policy barriers to personalization.^v



Despite this moment of opportunity, many obstacles continue to limit the development and spread of personalized learning, and attaining quality at scale is far from inevitable. Challenges include:

- Limited **public awareness** of personalized learning approaches as well as the predominance and inertia of traditional school models. Though many parents may be dissatisfied with the status quo, many are unaware of the alternatives, and public demand for personalized learning specifically remains low.
- Though the **evidence base** for personalized learning is emerging, research is still preliminary. Our understanding of what works best under particular conditions for particular groups of students is limited. We still need to better understand how personalized learning approaches **affect disparities in education** and to develop deliberate approaches for addressing equity.
- Personalized learning is **hard work**, particularly in its early, messy stages. Many educators lack access to the specialized support and expertise that allow them to implement new procedures quickly and effectively.
- Practitioners are broadly **skeptical of powerful funders and policymakers' interest in reform**. As a result, the field is beginning to look beyond approaches that are top-down, replication-based, or “command-and-control” for alternative avenues to take programs to scale.
- Similarly, despite the flexibility and opportunities for states and districts associated with ESSA, the current **federal political context** is tumultuous. Potential cuts to federal funding for education could slow innovation.



TABLE 1:
SUMMARY OF TRENDS AFFECTING THE ADVANCEMENT OF PERSONALIZED LEARNING¹

AREA	POSITIVE TRENDS	NEGATIVE TRENDS
PUBLIC ATTITUDES AND SCHOOL STRUCTURES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discontent with the current system • Growing understanding and interest in personalized learning • Broadening definitions of student success 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited scale of personalized learning • Predominance of traditional school models • Structures and systems that discourage schools and teachers from exploring personalized learning
DEVELOPMENT OF PERSONALIZED LEARNING	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emergence of multiple proof points • Availability of multiple resources about personalized learning for administrators and educators • Significant advances and opportunities in technology access and educational technology offerings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nascent long-term or large-scale research on personalized learning • Lack of a common understanding of personalized learning or definition of core principles of personalized learning • Lots of “noise” in the education technology space, including ongoing data privacy and interoperability concerns
SHIFTS IN POLICY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Major opportunities for scaling new models at the state level under ESSA 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Turbulent and unpredictable national political context • Limited public resources for implementing personalized learning
INCREASING EMPHASIS ON EQUITY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intentional focus of many personalized learning organizations on equity • Potential for personalized learning to help address disparities in education through deliberate attention^{vi} 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Risk of assuming that personalized learning will lead to equity in education, when in fact it could exacerbate disparities in the absence of a deliberate focus on addressing them • Lack of racial diversity in the personalized learning field

¹ Table 1 provides a summary of key field trends identified by participants at the personalized learning networks convening.

THE VALUE OF NETWORKS IN ADVANCING PERSONALIZED LEARNING

In the face of these trends and challenges, networks are particularly well situated to address many of the needs of the personalized learning field. We believe that increasing network activity can enhance the quality and efficiency of implementing personalized learning in part by offering an approach to fostering change that differs from paradigms predominant today. Top-down approaches to scaling personalized learning that focus on replication are impractical and likely to face resistance.

Yet, if all schools were to develop their own innovations in isolation, the results would be of variable quality and hyper-fragmented. Networks offer the possibility of a third path—a method for bringing personalized learning to scale that balances coherence with flexibility and caters to individual contexts while building strength greater than the sum of the parts. Our research suggests that networks can help advance personalized learning in the following ways:



Networks provide a channel for spreading innovative education models that allow for fidelity to shared principles and practices while still allowing schools and districts the flexibility to customize approaches to meet local needs and context.

Example: Big Picture Learning

Big Picture Learning works with a diverse range of communities to design schools that cater to local needs but also share specific elements—including a unique advisory structure, interest-driven personalized learning, and individualized real-world internships.^{vii}



Networks provide space and ownership for innovators to develop and implement personalized approaches **while providing them with a community** for support, learning, and sharing their experiences and findings. In this way, schools, districts, and entrepreneurs can embark in new directions without going it alone.

Example: Future Ready Schools

Future Ready Schools is a pledge-based initiative through which districts receive support and resources to help them envision, plan, and implement a digital learning strategy without the need to adopt a specific model.^{viii}



Networks can provide mechanisms for rapid prototyping, knowledge sharing, and large-scale evaluation.

Example: The Education Innovation Clusters (EdClusters)

The Education Innovation Clusters (EdClusters), facilitated by Digital Promise, work locally to help educators, researchers, entrepreneurs, and other stakeholders collaboratively develop learning practices and tools.^{ix}



Networks are well suited to the messiness and complexity required to change systems.

Implementing personalized learning at scale requires coordinating many actors, including parents, educators, district leaders, and state policymakers. Networks are adept at flexibly working across these multiple levels and adapting to shifting conditions and needs.

Example: The Great Schools Partnership

The Great Schools Partnership simultaneously provides direct coaching to individual schools and districts while coordinating important communities of practice. These include a regional League of Innovative Schools as well as the New England Secondary School Consortium, a partnership of education policymakers from five states.^x

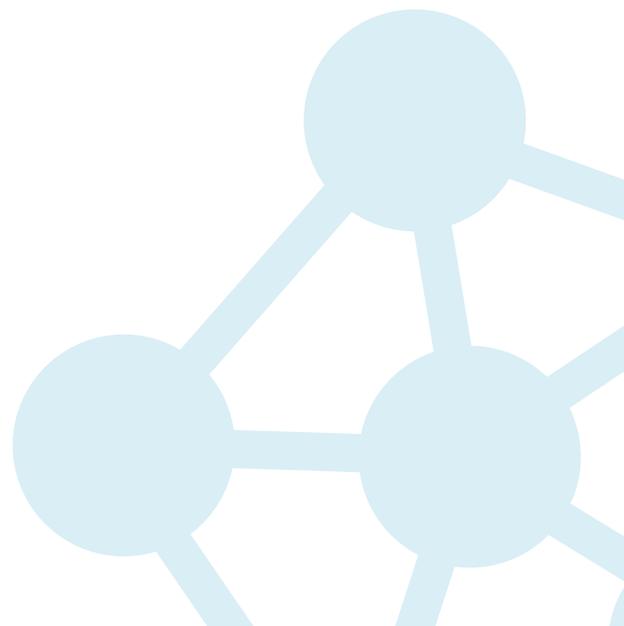


Networks foster resiliency by sharing knowledge and support among members. In a field as relatively young as personalized learning, and during a period of policy and funding uncertainty at the federal level, resiliency is important both to guard against adverse events and to help network members weather periods of unpredictability.



Networks model democratic values. Students in personalized learning schools are often asked to be engaged participants in their learning, exhibiting agency and ownership while working constructively with peers. Yet the ways that adults organize themselves in the education sector seldom reflect these ideals, instead preferencing standardization and control. The *very process* of engaging in networks—sharing knowledge, acting with autonomy, distributing authority—influences the result of that process and models for adults and students the participatory culture we hope for in our schools.

While networks have clear potential, it is important to note they are not a panacea for the challenges of personalized learning or large-scale education reform. Developing and sustaining quality networks is difficult. They are neither the tool for every problem nor the top priority for every organization. Instead, networks function a bit like an electrical grid. They're part of the background infrastructure, forming critical connections and creating channels for sharing ideas, resources, and inspiration. Just as phone, electrical, and broadband grids have catalyzed industrial and information revolutions, networks can increase the speed and quality of personalized learning adoption.



NETWORK ROLES IN ADVANCING PERSONALIZED LEARNING

So how, specifically, do networks advance personalized learning? Through FSG's research on the landscape of personalized learning networks, we identified five roles (different but not mutually exclusive) that networks are already playing to further the development and spread of personalized learning.

While each of these network roles makes important individual contributions to the advancement of personalized learning, they are also mutually reinforcing. For instance, promising concepts from networks focused on *tool and practice development* might receive investment from networks focused on *model discovery*. *Regional systems facilitators* might work with schools that implement approaches from *model adoption and improvement networks*. Across this ecosystem, *national movement builders* identify trends, conduct research and advocacy, and convene to enable field-wide progress.

Individual organizations may span more than one of these roles through different initiatives that they lead or participate in. Additionally, many of these networks also do work that cuts across these categories by conducting research, sharing results, exploring messaging strategies, and helping schools and districts work through the mindset shifts, professional development, and change management that is often needed to successfully implement personalized learning.

This is only one way of describing the roles of personalized learning networks. Others have considered the role of networks from different perspectives.^{xi} While the descriptions vary, they are largely complementary and further validate the importance of networks to personalized learning.

Below, we provide a deeper overview of each network role:

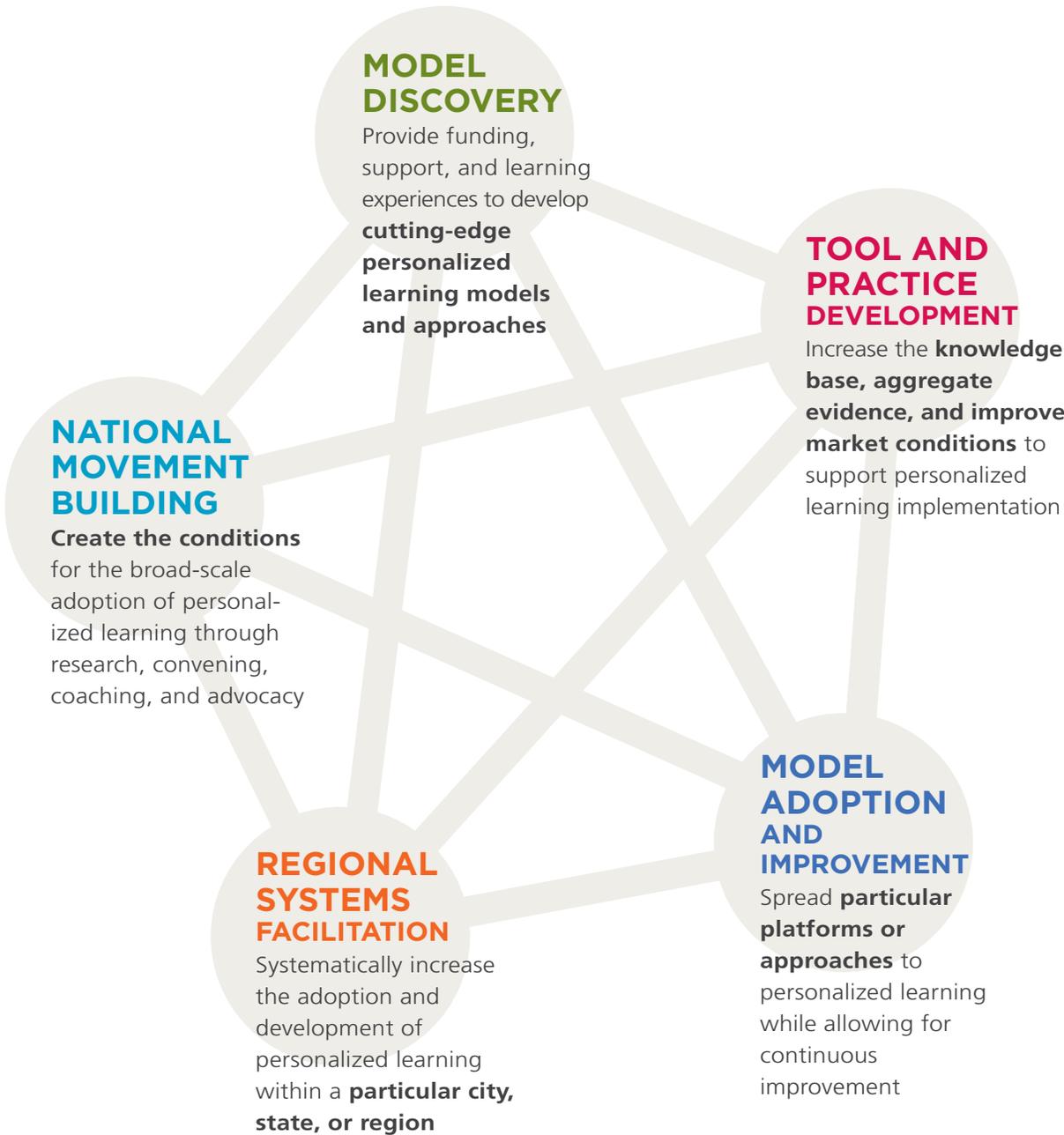
MODEL DISCOVERY

Model discovery networks provide funding, support, and learning experiences to develop cutting-edge personalized learning models and approaches.



What they are: Model discovery networks are generally structured as portfolios within a venture capital-esque organization or as cohort-based challenge grant programs administered by foundation intermediaries. Both models typically support members with direct technical assistance and a peer-learning community as they develop their models and explore what works.

FIGURE 1:
NETWORK ROLES IN ADVANCING PERSONALIZED LEARNING²



² The five network roles in advancing personalized learning were developed through FSG’s research process and validated and refined in partnership with the participants at the personalized learning networks convening.



Why they matter: Model discovery networks provide flexible capital and pool the risk of promoting innovation. In particular, model discovery networks give educators the opportunity to take large leaps by piloting comprehensive, whole-school approaches. They play a crucial role by extending the number and diversity of personalized learning approaches. At a field level, they provide examples and improve the odds of creating highly effective practices that will work in different contexts. The lessons from model discovery networks will be vital for early-majority and late-majority adopters to incorporate into their own work.

Example: Silicon Schools Fund

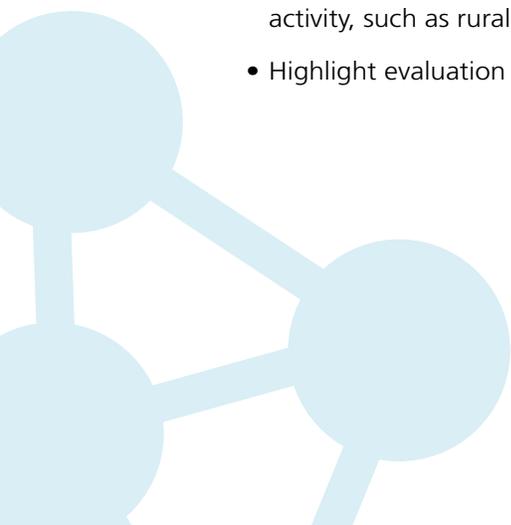
Silicon Schools Fund is a regional funder in the San Francisco Bay Area that supports a network of entrepreneurs to transform and launch new schools focused on personalized learning. By maintaining a close geographic focus, Silicon Schools develops deep local knowledge and connections, which, in turn, enhances their ability to support members in navigating the local context and creates a strong investment pipeline. The local focus also fosters tight interaction among members. For example, Silicon Schools provided support and connection to a group of Directors of Personalized Learning from across school systems. Those self-described “Wizards” in turn created an informal community of practice for sharing lessons and challenges with one another.^{xii} In this way, Silicon Schools has helped to make the Bay Area a leading hub of personalized learning innovation.

Example: Next Generation Learning Challenges (NGLC)

NGLC’s work has cultivated tight-knit communities of innovators who are producing some of the most robust learning about innovative practices and models in the field today.^{xiii} As an initiative of EDUCAUSE, NGLC supports several challenge-grant-based initiatives for innovators across the country to develop, evaluate, and codify different approaches that incorporate personalized learning. NGLC supports Regional Funds that seed innovation and catalyze clusters of “breakthrough” schools within cities or regions. Additionally, NGLC supports initiatives focused on field-building challenges that are cited as crucial priorities by its school-design grantees, such as the Assessment for Learning Project. As part of the non-negotiable conditions of receiving NGLC support, initiative members participate fully in learning and evaluation efforts and in in-person meetings with their peers.

Opportunities for Model Discovery Networks:

- Focus on identifying and spreading promising approaches within networks of schools, along with testing strategies for taking singular innovations to scale.
- Continue to increase the diversity of available models by focusing on areas where there is less activity, such as rural and non-STEM-centered personalized learning approaches.
- Highlight evaluation and learning approaches that are appropriate to early-stage innovations.



TOOL AND PRACTICE DEVELOPMENT

Tool and practice development networks increase the knowledge base, aggregate evidence, and improve market conditions to support personalized learning implementation.



What they are: These types of networks are generally complex, multi-site, grant-funded research projects that are operated by universities. However, they can also bring together researchers, entrepreneurs, and educators to promote rapid-cycle prototyping of different educational tools and approaches.



Why they matter: Tool and practice development networks provide foundational R&D for the field that advances practice and helps make the case for personalized learning.

Example: Assessment for Learning Project (ALP)³

ALP is a field-building initiative focused on improving and catalyzing new approaches to systems of student assessment. Since 2015, ALP has provided grant funding to 17 diverse projects spanning schools, districts, networks, and states to implement and learn from new assessment models. ALP projects receive support from a roster of technical assistance providers and participate in a community of practice that meets virtually and in person. All of ALP's projects are organized around a shared learning agenda focused on rethinking assessment. Through a network-based model, ALP is able to compare and learn from multiple promising approaches to assessment, and it can share insights with a wide range of partners.^{xiv, xv, xvi}

Example: Education Innovation Clusters (EdClusters)

EdClusters, a network of local communities of practice facilitated by Digital Promise, accelerates the development of evidence-based learning tools, technologies, practices, and models. Members play reinforcing roles: educators co-design and provide feedback on new practices and technologies, academic researchers support research and evaluation, and entrepreneurs bring capital and lead product development and commercialization. Digital Promise provides technical assistance, develops working groups, and hosts annual meetings to share lessons, create connections, take stock of the field, and explore ways to strengthen practice within each EdCluster and as a national network.

Opportunities for Tool and Practice Development Networks:

- Continue to focus on developing a research base to inform advocacy and to improve practice.
- Make findings more accessible to raise awareness of personalized learning and create more advocates.
- Continue to strengthen communication with venture and philanthropic funders to elevate best practices that warrant investment and expansion.

³ ALP is led by the Center for Innovation in Education at the University of Kentucky in partnership with Next Generation Learning Challenges and 2Revolutions.

MODEL ADOPTION AND IMPROVEMENT

Model adoption and improvement networks spread particular platforms or approaches to personalized learning while promoting continuous improvement



What they are: These networks provide specific principles, tools, and resources to help schools or districts adopt either whole-school models or specific instructional practices while still allowing the flexibility to customize and improve on those approaches. Model adoption and improvement networks are often structured through a central entity to coordinate technical assistance and shepherd ongoing refinement to the core model or practices.



Why they matter: Model adoption and improvement networks ensure that educators implementing in personalized learning don't have to start from scratch. They bring extensive experience with specific approaches to learning and often combine non-negotiable principles with flexibility for local context. These networks harness the power of a large community of educators to continuously improve on the central model. Model adoption and improvement networks will continue to play a central role in scaling and improving different approaches to personalized learning, particularly as new models emerge and existing models are refined.

Example: Big Picture Learning

Big Picture Learning takes a network-based approach to scale focused on replicating core aspects of its school model while allowing for local flexibility in school design. Big Picture Learning staff and partners convene annually, bringing together leaders from more than 60 Big Picture Learning Schools in the United States and 100 more around the world. In addition to implementing and improving the Big Picture Learning model, network schools act as work labs and design studios to identify leverage points and develop innovative initiatives for broader change and influence. Big Picture Learning amplifies its practices by participating in coalitions such as the Deeper Learning Network, a network of 10 school networks composed of more than 500 schools working to implement different forms of Deeper Learning.^{xix, xx}

Example: Summit Learning Program

The Summit Learning Program, an initiative of Summit Public Schools, helps educators across the country implement high-quality personalized learning. Schools that are accepted to Summit Learning work to implement certain interrelated elements of Summit's vision for personalized learning, including competency-based progression through an online platform, project-based learning linked to cognitive skills, and mentoring between teachers and students. Summit Learning supports participants through an online technology platform, customizable curricula and assessments, coaching and professional development, and opportunities to collaborate and learn from fellow educators.^{xxi} The program is free and seeks a balance between structure and flexibility so that schools can customize their approach to their own contexts and student needs. More than 330 schools have participated in the first three years of Summit Learning.

Opportunities for Model Adoption and Improvement Networks:

- Strengthen abilities to capture feedback from network members to continuously improve the core model and to share these processes with the field.
- Align with other networks that share common principles to support one another in advocacy and market building.
- Emphasize the rich histories these networks often bring along with the depth of their learning models as an antidote to shallow conceptions and implementations of personalized learning.

REGIONAL SYSTEMS FACILITATION

Regional systems facilitation networks systematically increase adoption and development of personalized learning within a particular city, state, or region.



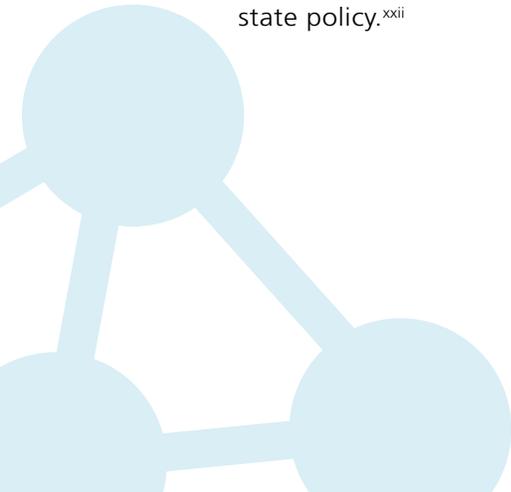
What they are: These networks typically provide coaching, convene local actors, and foster connections across the local education ecosystem. They also facilitate regional initiatives around advocacy, development of new models, and research. Typically, regional systems facilitators are nonprofit intermediaries that receive grant funding and/or support their work through fees received for their coaching services, although some regional systems facilitation networks are associated with state or regional education agencies.



Why they matter: These networks are instrumental in advancing personalized learning at the local level by simultaneously working across multiple levels and stakeholder groups. Regional systems facilitation networks are critical front-line leaders in advancing personalized learning, both through their direct work with schools and districts and through their broader work building awareness and helping to advocate for supportive policies.

Example: Great Schools Partnership

The Great Schools Partnership works across New England to provide tools, resources, and direct school and district coaching. The Great Schools Partnership coordinates a regional policy collaborative, the New England Secondary Schools Consortium, which contains a community of practice called the League of Innovative Schools. Open to any interested school, this professional learning community creates a diverse group with different school types, different innovations, and different points of evolution. The diversity among League members has helped encourage a focus on continuous improvement and sharing lessons from common experiences (such as engaging school boards), rather than a focus on the intricacies of a given approach to innovation. The League's connections to the New England Secondary Schools Consortium allow members to provide clear examples for the state and region and to inform state policy.^{xvii}



Example: Institute for Personalized Learning

The Institute for Personalized Learning supports a network of 70 local and regional Wisconsin districts in implementing personalized learning programs. It provides direct technical assistance based on its design-thinking-based “Honeycomb” model, which allows districts to select and implement different aspects of personalization that resonate in their context. The Institute is an independent division of a state education service agency, and, unlike most profiled networks, works on a fee-for-service basis. By using network practices, the Institute shapes and defines the services it offers to better serve member needs.^{xxiii} For instance, the Institute hosts an annual meeting for its district members; promotes learning within its network by coordinating site visits between member schools; and creates communities of practice around common areas of member interest, such as teacher teams, implementation planning, and district-wide scaling.

Opportunities for Regional Systems Facilitation Networks:

- Continue to strengthen connections between on-the-ground practice and local/regional policy opportunities.
- Increase public awareness to accelerate local movements for personalized learning by using local examples from their networks to make the case to the community.



NATIONAL MOVEMENT BUILDING

National movement building networks create the conditions for the broad-scale adoption of personalized learning through research, convening, coaching, and advocacy.



What they are: These networks are primarily structured as membership-based national nonprofits, although some are specific initiatives within larger organizations.



Why they matter: Through their work, national movement building networks connect lessons learned at local levels to national conversations and advocacy. In this way, national movement building networks help to provide coherence and voice to the personalized learning movement.

Example: Future Ready Schools

Future Ready Schools provides critical support for district leaders who are interested in personalization through its focus on learning over technology, its community and teacher engagement, and its alignment with the Department of Education on policy.^{xxiv} As a national network created by the Alliance for Excellent Education, Future Ready Schools supports over 3,100 district superintendent members and 27 states who have pledged their membership, and is organized around a shared personalized learning framework and planning and implementation process. Future Ready Schools engages its members through free convenings, regional “institutes,” webinars, and a suite of online resources. Additionally, Future Ready Schools works to create stronger regional architecture across the country for peer learning and mentorship.

Example: iNACOL

iNACOL seeks to catalyze the transformation of K–12 education policy and practice to advance personalized, learner-centered experiences through competency-based learning, both blended and online. iNACOL is a national nonprofit that has more than 5,000 members, including educators, technical assistance providers, researchers and academics, entrepreneurs, and others who engage in knowledge sharing and learning through meetings, webinars, the annual iNACOL Symposium, and other events. iNACOL uses its expertise and networks to curate and publish research and resources for the field. In addition, the group conducts policy advocacy and research, publishing state and federal policy frameworks and providing feedback on policies.^{xxv}

Opportunities for National Movement Building Networks:

- Foster field-wide knowledge exchanges.
- Help states take advantage of the opportunities associated with ESSA.
- Capture the stories and momentum in the field to increase public awareness and support for personalized learning.



LOOKING FORWARD: LEARNING QUESTIONS FOR THE PERSONALIZED LEARNING FIELD

Networks are playing a powerful and often under-recognized role in advancing the field of personalized learning. They contribute to foundational research, provide incentives and support innovation, facilitate the adoption of established models, create enabling conditions in different regions, and drum up national momentum. In FSG's research, however, network leaders identified a consistent set of challenges that, if addressed, would improve their work's impact:

- **Balancing differentiation and collaboration:** As networks seek to distinguish themselves, they face a natural inclination to develop branded or proprietary reports, definitions, and approaches. Such knowledge and intellectual capital development is a natural aspect of the growth of many education organizations, but it has also contributed to conceptual overload in the field. To advance the personalized learning field overall, network leaders recognize the need to collaborate on knowledge sharing, advocacy efforts, and simplifying and harmonizing their common language. We heard early discussion about the need for a "network of networks" at our convening of network leaders; yet the challenge of finding the right degree of collaboration remains.
- **Effective network operations:** Although many successful networks exist, an opportunity remains to improve network practice. Many of the leaders we interviewed explained that they faced challenges sustaining member engagement, measuring progress and impact, and developing sustainable business models. Examples drawn from networks in sectors other than education may be helpful in addressing these challenges.
- **Broader movement building:** Despite significant activity in the personalized learning field, many leaders sense that the field has yet to reach a "tipping point" in which funders, policymakers, and the public at large fully understand and value personalized learning.

To help address these challenges, FSG has developed a series of learning questions to guide further inquiry into and development of the role of networks in advancing personalized learning. In answering these questions, networks can strengthen their own practices, enhance collaboration at the field level, and engage with critical partners to help personalized learning reach its potential.

LEARNING QUESTIONS FOR PERSONALIZED LEARNING NETWORK LEADERS

How can personalized learning networks learn from one another's strengths?

Why this question is important: As explored in this brief, the many network-based approaches to personalized learning today adopt different means to achieving their goals. Even within a given subtype of networks—say, for instance, regional systems facilitators—one network might focus on seeding breakthrough innovation while another might lead with policy change. There is no single “right” approach. The challenge, as the field matures, is to create learning opportunities across and within networks so that different organizations might benefit from complementary strengths.

Potential next steps: At the network meeting that FSG convened, we saw the beginnings of this cross-pollination among participants. Additionally, some organizations that work across multiple networks, such as NGLC, have taken steps to share and compare differing theories of change among members. Still, there is considerable room for further action, including the following:

- Helping network leaders identify their relative strengths and underlying assumptions and beliefs.
- Creating learning opportunities that ensure these strengths and differences are understood and shared across other networks.
- Telling the stories of more established and effective networks so that the broader field can learn from their experience.

How can personalized learning networks deploy diverse approaches while still embracing a shared set of beliefs and values?

Why this question is important: Competency-Based Education. Project-Based Learning. Blended Learning. Digital Learning. Deeper Learning. Student-Centered Learning. Student Agency. Flex Models. Playlists...

There are a number of concepts and approaches that overlap or fall under the umbrella of personalized learning. These concepts and the networks that support them are shaped by different educational philosophies and different contexts. This conceptual diversity is healthy for the field, providing a rich testing ground for different approaches, and an array of options to meet the needs of different types of schools and students. At the same time, these approaches boast a high degree of philosophical alignment. At times a focus on standardization, or conversely on over-weighting the differences among approaches, loses sight of the larger goal of changing education systems to focus on the needs of individual students.

Potential next steps: Networks are an ideal structure for agreeing on core tenets of personalized learning while allowing for diversification and adaptation to different contexts. The field does not need a single definition of personalized learning; rather, focusing on areas of alignment can create a basis for advocacy and movement building while promoting a necessary diversity of approaches. Next steps might include:

- Helping the community of personalized learning network leaders continue to unite around the shared principles and core tenets of their respective visions and approaches to education.
- Finding areas of alignment as a basis for collaboration and advocacy.

How can personalized learning networks collaborate on activities that will increase demand and create favorable conditions for personalized learning?

Why this question is important: Related to the problem of creating a shared vision for education, a similarly important question asks what the community of personalized learning network leaders can do together to advance the field. Just as those networks benefit from strength greater than the sum of their parts among their own membership, so, too, could the field benefit from aligned and concerted action across different types of networks.

Potential next steps: Personalized learning network leaders could consider a formal or informal “network of networks” as a forum for collaborating on activities that promise to increase demand for personalized learning, strengthen the personalized learning market, and create favorable policy conditions for quality at scale. Potential activities might include:

- Paying greater attention to the mutually reinforcing linkages between the different network roles (e.g., ensuring that lessons learned by tool and practice development networks inform the decisions of model discovery networks or that national movement building networks are connected to and aware of regional systems facilitators, and vice versa).
- Collaborating on policy advocacy and/or broad public campaigns.
- Developing the infrastructure and capacity to effectively coordinate mutually reinforcing activities among a diverse array of actors.

How can networks help to ensure that personalized learning reaches its potential to address disparities in the education system?

Why this question is important: One of the great aspirations and motivations of personalized learning is its promise to increase equity both by enabling customized, student-centered education and by reducing disparities in access to high-quality educational opportunities. Without a deliberate focus on equity, however, personalized learning risks perpetuating or even exacerbating disparities. Differences in access to personalized environments, variations in the quality and fidelity of implementation, and culturally inappropriate or irrelevant approaches can all cause personalized learning to fall short of its potential.

Potential next steps: Ensuring that personalized learning meaningfully contributes to equity in education will require ongoing attention from the field, but some initial steps for network leaders might include:

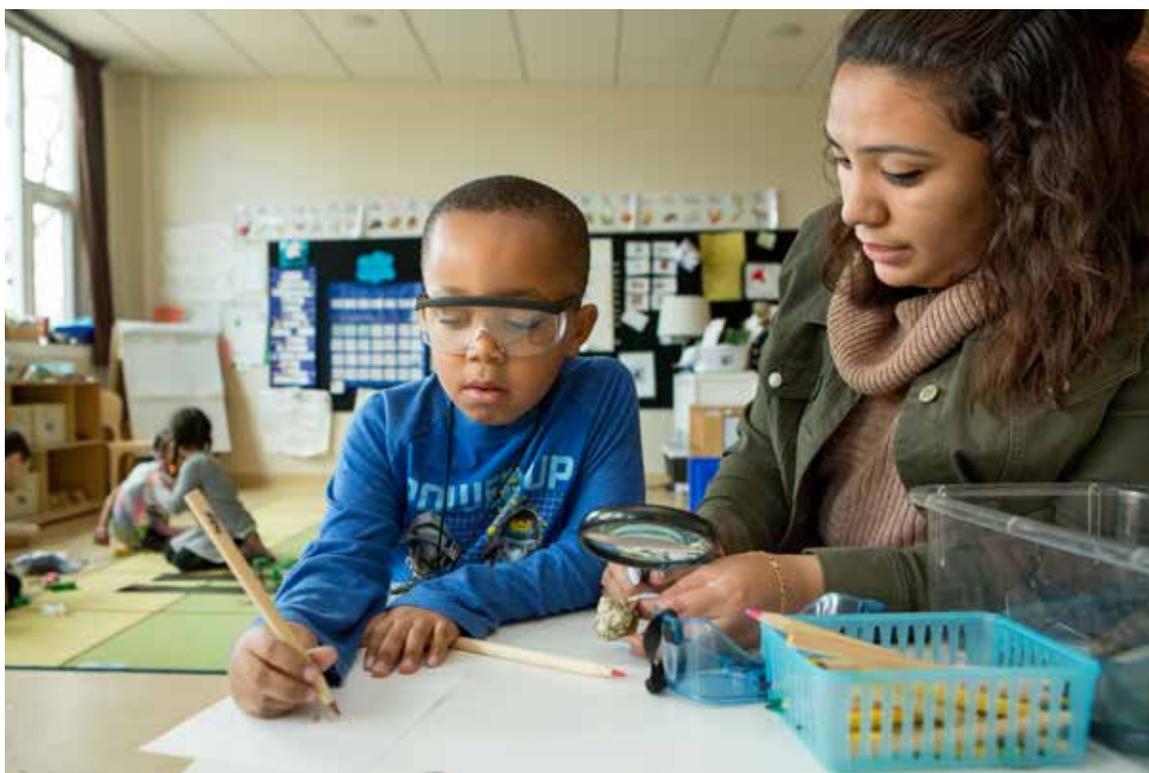
- Recruiting, supporting, and retaining a more diverse pool of staff and leadership in personalized learning organizations.
- Further considering how personalized learning approaches can maintain quality while varying by context to more culturally relevant and responsive implementations.
- Developing and sharing specific strategies, within and across networks, for addressing disparities through personalized approaches.

How can network theory be used to strengthen the practices, communication, and measurement of organizations that spread personalized learning?

Why this question is important: Although many of the organizations and field roles described in this brief are taking network-based approaches, some of them do not explicitly think of themselves in the language of networks. That said, as we saw at the meeting of network leaders that we hosted, providing space for these organizations to think of themselves in terms of networks can help unlock new insights and new ways of approaching their work.

Potential next steps: Network leaders, either on their own or in learning cohorts, could continue to study and apply lessons from network theory in their work. The well-established field of network theory can offer many lessons, both theoretical and practical (from other industries and sectors) that can be applied in the areas of:

- Learning and continuous improvement.
- Strengthening network health and impact.
- Cultivating network member engagement.
- Collaborative governance and operating models.
- Movement building.



LEARNING QUESTIONS FOR FUNDERS OF PERSONALIZED LEARNING NETWORKS

How can funders clarify their goals in the personalized learning field and support networks as part of a comprehensive strategy for developing and spreading high-quality personalized learning?

Why this question is important: Though networks have received some funding to date, much of philanthropy's attention in education innovation has focused on supporting innovative schools or educational tools. This type of work is essential, but by itself will not address the systemic conditions that will help personalized learning reach true scale. As the field matures, foundations should consider networks as an integral part of a broader approach to increasing the development and spread of personalized learning. Furthermore, effective networks should be considered a highly leveraged investment: The funds required to run a network pale in comparison to the collective resources of a network's members, and networks can effectively influence large numbers of entities to change mindsets and behaviors.

Potential next steps: Funders who aim to systemically advance personalized learning should consider networks as part of a mutually-reinforcing portfolio of investments. Networks, however, often operate differently from other types of grantees. Therefore, in addition to including networks in their portfolios, funders need to work with networks in different ways, including the following:

- Offering longer-term grants. Weaving connections between organizations, movement building, research, and other important network-based activities often takes longer to yield impact than more direct interventions.
- Funding field infrastructure work in addition to programmatic work to build shared field capacities around data, interaction, facilitation, advocacy, and more.
- Shifting evaluation expectations from impact indicators to indicators of network health and changing relationships, at least in the early years of their work.
- Loosening control. Network funders need to be comfortable following the emergent energy of the field. A hallmark of a healthy network is distributed leadership and adaptive strategy. As such, foundations should not seek to impose a specific agenda through their support of networks; rather, they should consider it a success when the network itself engages in leadership and decision making.



LEARNING QUESTIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

What role can network formation and partnership play in enabling innovation and the spread of personalized learning at the state level?

Why this question is important: In the current policy context under ESSA, states have a tremendous opportunity to enable and promote innovative education approaches, including personalized learning. As states consider their priorities and develop their plans, networks can provide an important tool for perpetuating flexibility within their state.

Potential next steps: State policymakers who are interested in scaling personalized learning in their states could use the power of networks to build on existing momentum and expertise and to ensure that their schools and districts are well supported and have flexible options for implementing personalized approaches. To achieve these goals, state policymakers can do the following:

- Partner with existing regional systems facilitation and national movement building networks.
- Form new, state-based networks to support communities of schools and districts that are implementing personalized learning.
- Offer regulatory flexibility for network members to test new approaches and learn from mistakes and experiences.



APPENDIX

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- Chan Zuckerberg Initiative
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- Christensen Institute
- CityBridge Education
- Colorado Education Initiative
- CompetencyWorks
- Curtis Ogden, Research Alliance for Regenerative Economics (RARE) and Interaction Institute for Social Change (IISC)
- Digital Promise
- Education Cities
- Education Reimagined
- EL Education
- Future Ready Schools and the Alliance for Excellent Education
- Great Schools Partnership
- Highlander Institute
- iNACOL
- LEAP Innovations
- LearnLaunch Institute/MAPLE
- National Center for Innovation in Education
- New Hampshire Learning Initiative
- New Schools for New Orleans
- New Schools Venture Fund
- New Tech Network
- Next Generation Learning Challenges
- Puget Sound Educational Service District
- Raikes Foundation
- Raise Your Hand Texas
- Rogers Family Foundation
- Silicon Schools Fund
- Silicon Valley Education Foundation
- Summit Public Schools
- The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation
- The Institute for Personalized Learning
- The Nellie Mae Education Foundation
- Transcend Education

Bibliography of Network Theory Resources

Network theory is a well-established research field with many seminal articles, numerous approaches, and various schools of thought. The articles shared below comprise an abbreviated bibliography of some of the key resources from this field, but this list is by no means comprehensive:

- “[A Network Way of Working: A Compilation of Considerations about Effectiveness in Networks](#),” *Nonprofit Quarterly*, December 2013. **Summary:** Concise article introducing the context and core tenets of network theory, drawing on a number of sources from the field.
- “[Building Smart Communities through Network Weaving](#),” Valdis Krebs and June Holley, 2006. **Summary:** Introduction to network theory covering the elements and indicators of effective networks and key concepts, including network weaving and weak ties.
- *Net Gains: A Handbook for Network Builders Seeking Social Change*, Peter Plastrik and Madeleine Taylor, 2006. **Summary:** Paper exploring the key factors and practices involved in building and maintaining effective networks that are focused on social change.
- “[Working Wikily](#),” Diana Searce, Gabriel Kasper, and Heather McLeod Grant, *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, 2010. **Summary:** Article exploring the key principles of adopting a network mindset by applying social networking tools.
- “[The Networked Nonprofit](#),” Jane Wei-Skillern and Sonia Marciano, *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, 2008. **Summary:** Article describing principles for taking a networked approach as a nonprofit, illustrated with several case studies.
- *Catalyzing Networks for Social Change*, Diana Searce, Monitor Institute and Grantmakers for Effective Organizations (GEO), 2011. **Summary:** Guide for grantmakers to develop and implement a network mindset, including a framework for defining networks and their varying approaches, and tools for assessing network health.

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Photos courtesy of Allison Shelley/The Verbatim Agency for American Education: Images of Teachers and Students in Action.

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