

GEORGE LUCAS EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATION

ADMINISTRATION & LEADERSHIP**Personalized Learning at Its Best**

Technology can be an incredible resource in personalizing education, but it isn't sufficient—teachers need proper support to implement it.

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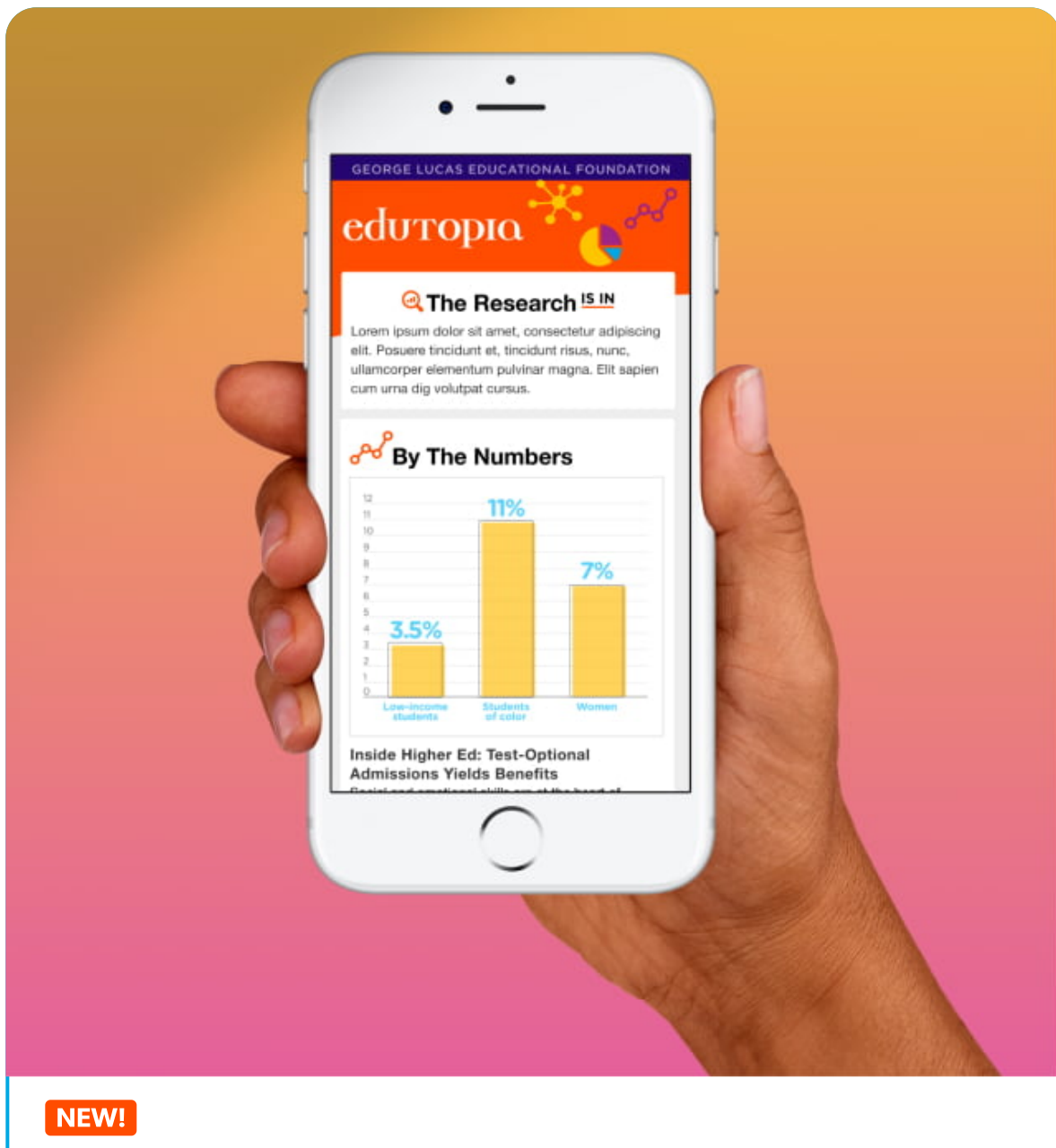


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As a second-year English teacher, I had a problem: I wanted to teach my sixth-grade students the wonders of English via a robust, recurring series of highly engaging grammar lessons designed to ensure that they would never conflate “their” with “they’re,” but their

skill levels were in vastly different places. To be effective, my lessons needed to be personalized for each student.

Back in 2003, personalizing meant curating a library of individual lessons, developing a diagnostic assessment, and handwriting personalized pathways for each of my students. I spent the better part of a year putting my idea into action, assessing and reassessing students, refining lessons, and running around like a mad man during classes to reach all 96 students.



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Since then, I've been lucky to be part of multiple personalized learning implementations using different platforms at a variety of schools. I've seen all angles of technology-based personalization—as a teacher, an administrator, a consultant, and a student.

Personalized learning at its best seeks to accelerate student learning by tailoring the instructional environment—what, when, how, and where students learn—to address the individual needs, skills, and interests of each student. Students can take ownership of their learning while also developing deep, personal connections with each other, their teachers, and other adults at school.

In short, personalized learning should free teachers to meaningfully connect with students because strong relationships with kids are the heart of teaching.

While technology has caught up with my aspirations for personalized instruction, a new challenge has emerged: Some administrators think that because technology is a big part of a particular program, it can mask challenges teachers have with management or expertise. This just isn't true. Strong tech needs strong teaching, and great teachers need great support.

4 KEY POINTS FOR ADMINISTRATORS

1. Everyone needs to believe in the why: In a *famous TED talk*

(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u4ZoJKF_VuA), Simon Sinek argued that everyone in a school or district has to understand the why of personalized learning. This should be a given with any new school initiative, but it's especially true with personalized learning because personalized instruction sounds like something teachers and leaders should already know

—and on the surface it looks familiar to the instruction happening in traditional schools—but in practice it’s radically different from traditional teaching.

To that end, it’s imperative for administrators to go beyond their mission statement and dig deep into whatever foundational research underpins the personalized learning program so that teacher buy-in is based on a clear understanding of the magnitude of this shift.

2. Define mastery for teachers: Teachers need to know what student mastery looks like, but it’s equally important to give them a clear picture of what their own mastery will look like. Without a clear definition of proficiency, teachers can either feel overly confident or—more likely—be overly critical of their own progress. Having a clear timeline with a flexible scope and sequence that allows for “just in time” training is key to articulating a vision for professional growth and avoiding burnout.

Good personalized learning requires just as much training for teachers as traditional teaching, but with different emphases: Planning and assessment are de-emphasized so that relationships, social and emotional learning, and context can be the focus.

3. Encourage teachers to make it their own: While a lot of personalized learning relies on a curated set of lessons and projects, it’s still vital for teachers to leverage their experience within the platform to maximize student learning. This means incorporating best practices for teaching and learning into daily routines rather than simply using provided lessons as a script.

This includes marrying the overall school culture with the *culture desired for the personalized learning space*

(<https://www.newclassrooms.org/2017/10/23/going-from-neighbors-to-roomies-establishing-a-positive-culture-in-a-shared-space/>)

. The personalization program should not dictate the culture of the learning environment—the program needs to be flexible enough to enhance the mission and vision of the school. The best implementations are those where educators can say that their school has a specific vision for learning and the given program is an element of that vision. The weakest

implementations are those that are reliant on the program to define or redefine the vision for learning at the site.

4. Prioritize mentoring: The single most important by-product of personalized learning is that it allows teachers to focus less on creating curriculum and assessments and more on the students themselves. Students who have an adult mentor on campus and meet with them regularly are *far more likely to go to college and graduate*

(http://www.mentoring.org/new-site/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/The_Mentoring_Effect_Executive_Summary.pdf).

Mentors can be cheerleaders who celebrate student success, sounding boards for student frustrations, guides who help students stay on track, counselors who keep students focused on long- and short-term goals, and most importantly companions on the learning journey. If you ask teachers why they wanted to teach in the first place, most will identify one of these roles as a driving force behind their desire to educate. In a traditional environment, however, it's challenging to balance these roles with concerns around planning and assessment.

Helping teachers leverage their time to prioritize mentoring work is vital. They aren't doing less work in this new space—they're doing different, and perhaps more important, work.

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