

# A Regional Scan of Individualized Learning

## Prepared by:

Daniela Berman  
Sengsouvanh (Sukey) Leshnick  
Jennifer Hogg  
Shelley Kuang  
Sara Miller

March 23, 2018



This page is deliberately left blank.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2016, the Bush Foundation launched its individualized learning strategy with the goal of supporting its region—Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota, and the 23 Native nations that share the same geography—to become the national leader in individualizing education to meet the needs and ambitions of all students. The Foundation defines individualized learning as education that makes learning more relevant for all students in terms of:

- **Who they are (cultural relevance).** Create learning environments that welcome and support students from all cultures and backgrounds.
- **How they learn (instructional relevance).** Help students learn in a manner and at a pace that meets their individual needs.
- **What they want to do (career relevance).** Help students imagine a career and provide them with support that is tailored to get them where they want to go.

In spring 2017, the Bush Foundation commissioned Social Policy Research Associates ([SPR](#)) to conduct baseline research on the state of individualized learning across the region in order to inform the Foundation’s education initiative. The goal of this research is to (1) capture the level of awareness and understanding of individualized learning concepts throughout the region; (2) document the conditions that foster individualized learning at the school level; (3) identify the challenges to implementing individualized learning practices; and (4) document existing individualized learning strategies and practices adopted by schools in the region.

This report is informed by a survey of school leaders and telephone interviews with school and district leaders, state education leaders, experts in the field of education, and aligned organizations (those working directly to support the region’s schools and districts to implement individualized learning). We describe the level of awareness around and understanding of individualized learning, as well as key practices, lessons, and challenges facing schools as they implement individualized learning strategies.

## Primary Data Sources

## Description

Primary Data Sources	Description
Telephone Interviews	<p>SPR conducted exploratory telephone interviews with 41 individuals across the following five categories:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>School leaders</b> from Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Native Nations selected by the foundation for their knowledge and experience with individualized learning strategies (n=23);</li> <li><b>State education leaders</b> (n=6);</li> <li><b>Aligned organizations</b> (n=4);</li> <li><b>Field leaders</b> (n=4); and</li> <li><b>Bush Foundation staff</b> (n=4).</li> </ul>

## Primary Data Sources

## Description

### School Leader Survey

SPR designed a school leader survey to elicit information about knowledge and awareness of individualized learning. SPR administered online surveys to 2,433 individuals across the defined region and received a total of 158 unique responses, representing 303 schools within the region.

## Understanding and Awareness of Individualized Learning

### INTERVIEW DATA

Education leaders noted that individualized learning represents a fundamental shift in how we conceptualize learning and the role of school in a child's life. They acknowledge that traditional models of school no longer work to prepare students for success in today's economy and global society, and believe that individualized learning represents a fundamental and necessary shift in the culture of education. School leaders generally believe that individualized learning means meeting learners at their individual achievement levels, differentiating support based on their unique capabilities, and actively engaging them in the process of learning. However, education leaders differ widely in what they believe are the essential characteristics of individualized learning, and in what terms they use to name the approach.<sup>1</sup>

Awareness of individualized learning has grown substantially over the last two to five years, yet there remains a broad continuum of actual understanding of the concept. On the one hand, knowledge of individualized learning is widespread throughout the region, but understanding of concrete individualized learning practices and how to implement them varies widely and is often limited to specific schools or teachers.

## Implementation of and Strategies for Individualized Learning

### INTERVIEW DATA

Districts and schools implement individualized learning using a range of approaches. Most districts introduce individualized learning as a top-down strategy, while allowing it to simultaneously build organically from the ground up. While there are a few whole-school models focused explicitly on individualized instruction, the majority of districts start by implementing individualized learning within a subset of grade levels, subjects, or pathways.

Districts and schools most commonly use the following structures and practices to make learning more relevant: alternative or flexible schedules and learning spaces,

---

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this report, we use the term individualized learning as a unifying concept for the variety of approaches and principles that our interviewees named.

multi-age classrooms, a focus on student agency, project-based learning, and strategic use of technology. Very few interviewees indicated that students' cultural backgrounds currently influence their individualized learning practices.

## Supporting Teachers to Individualize Learning

### INTERVIEW DATA

Because individualized learning is a significant shift from the conventional way teachers engage with students and learning in the classroom, teachers require in-depth support to make that change. Schools and districts use professional learning communities, districtwide professional development, outside organizations or consultants, conferences, and book studies to equip teachers with the knowledge and tools they need to implement individualized learning. Many interviewees noted that a particularly effective method is direct observation of individualized learning “in action,” which helps bridge the gap between knowledge and implementation.

Interviewees unanimously agree that student success and growth with individualized learning necessitates non-traditional measures of achievement, but there is a lack of existing, reliable tools to capture this information; as a result, most schools continue to rely on standardized assessments to measure student learning. There are, however, some promising examples of assessment practices to support individualized learning. Districts and schools are beginning to measure success with individualized learning using tools such as rubrics, surveys, online learning platforms for formative assessment, and direct observation of student learning.

## School Leader Survey Findings

### SURVEY DATA

A survey capturing a broad sample of schools across the region revealed the following trends:

**Understanding of individualized learning.** The vast majority of respondents are at least familiar with the terms used to describe student-centered approaches, most often learning about individualized learning through professional development. However, while 97 percent of respondents indicated that they are at least familiar with individualized learning, only 61 percent reported they are currently implementing it in their schools to any degree.

**Practices for instructional relevance.** Most respondents design flexible learning environments in their schools or districts, and have strong student data systems that allow teachers to better individualize to students' unique needs. Many allow for individualized pacing but less frequently implement practices around student choice. These common individualized learning practices are more likely to be implemented in specific grades or classrooms than throughout the entire school.

**Practices for career and cultural relevance.** The vast majority of schools (96 percent) connect learning to real-world situations. While a majority of schools also report

encouraging culturally relevant practices, these practices are more common among respondent schools with more diverse student bodies.

**Challenges to and supports for individualized learning.** Overall, the most significant barrier to implementing individualized learning is “moving away from traditional notions of ‘what school looks like.’” Respondents also reported that financial resources, enhanced professional development, and resources for teachers would be the most helpful forms of support for implementing individualized learning.

## Challenges and Obstacles

### INTERVIEW DATA & SURVEY DATA

**As identified through both qualitative interviews and the survey, the following overarching challenges are slowing the progress of individualized learning:**

- There is a lack of shared understanding and vision for individualized learning.
- Buy-in from teachers, key district staff, and the broader community can be difficult to obtain.
- Schools must balance individualization with state regulations and accountability requirements that can hinder innovation.
- Limited funding is available to offer the necessary resources to implement individualized learning.

## Recommendations

**Based on the findings of this report, we present the following considerations for the Bush Foundation as it continues to support the region with individualizing learning:**

- Establish a network of schools to share learnings.
- Support local teachers and/or community members as champions in order to build a broad base of support for individualized learning.
- Continue to provide schools with the financial resources, professional development, and instructional resources they need.
- Engage with state leaders to explore opportunities for school flexibility.
- Reflect on the continuum of understanding when designing outreach strategies and materials for multiple audiences.
- Adopt a learning orientation when measuring outcomes of individualized learning efforts.
- Continue to emphasize equity as a core tenet of individualized learning.

The Bush Foundation recognizes that students are the best engineers of their own learning and school leaders are the best architects of their own redesign. With the findings from this report, the Bush Foundation will continue to shape its work of inspiring, equipping and connecting people, schools, and communities to bring individualized learning into the region and carve pathways to deeper learning for all students.