

pioneering

ISSUE 13 • MAY 19, 2016 • EDUCATION REIMAGINED

A NOTE FROM EDUCATION REIMAGINED

Kelly Young, Director

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WORTH YOUR TIME

education 
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• connect. share. discover. lead. • pioneering

Dear Pioneers,

We are proud to announce the successful launch of a new national community of practice that occurred last week in Denver. We call this community of practice—by and for learner-centered pioneers—Pioneer Lab. Pioneer Lab is a multi-year inquiry into the learnings necessary to make learner-centered education available to every child in the U.S.

The seed for the idea of a national community of practice was planted in the first phase of this project. When the original 28 people came together to create the vision, they wisely realized that they were not the people to answer the questions of what the new systems would look like. Rather, they realized that the future was already out there in pieces, just not evenly distributed, and that the many answers to what this will look like will be diverse and need to be created by real people in real communities who are bringing the vision to life. With or without Education Reimagined, we know that the work of creating learner-centered ecosystems is happening and will continue to happen. And, we hope to be an accelerant of its progress.

The unique role of Pioneer Lab is to connect people who would not otherwise come together from diverse perspectives and models to accelerate learning, sharing, and co-creation. The two days in Denver were the first of many trainings to come designed to prepare people with common lenses and a “second language” to be able to talk, share, and create together across models.

We are grateful for the leadership of the inaugural group: A+ Houston (TX), Big Thought (TX), Boston Day & Evening Academy (MA), Center for Teaching Quality, Colorado Department of Education, Design39Campus (CA), Lindsay USD (CA), Poudre School District (CO), ReSchool Colorado (CO), and Transcend.

We look forward to the next Pioneer Lab training next month!

Warm wishes,
Kelly Young



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1133 19th Street NW, Suite 410
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Connect. Share. Discover. Lead.

We seek to accelerate the growth of the movement dedicated to transforming education in America. We invite those excited and interested by the possibility of learner-centered education to discover more, join a growing movement, and begin a journey to make this a reality in diverse communities across the country.





NEW DIRECTIONS ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION CENTER

Prince William County, Virginia

Nothing excites me more than students engaging as collaborative partners with their teachers and becoming effective change agents in our school and community. —**Bob Eichorn, Principal**

AT NEW DIRECTIONS, they “turn despair to hope, create happiness from sadness, and mold failure into success.” Serving the “most socio-economically challenged, emotionally in need, and intellectually starved” learners of Prince William County, VA, New Directions has created a new vision for those who have not thrived in traditional public high schools.

Each learner has a personalized learning plan, allowing them to set their own learning goals based on their interests, needs, and passions. With the support of educators, learners hold themselves accountable for their own progress—and they are “knocking it out of the park!” New Directions successes have been recognized by the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network with the Crystal Star Program Award and the National Education Foundation as a STEM Education and Cyberlearning Model School.

Learners emerging from New Directions are equipped to not only pursue their next academic endeavor but are also armed with the survival skills necessary to be healthy, productive 21st century citizens. These kids know how to balance a checkbook, write an essay, and procure insurance and healthcare. In fact, to graduate, each senior has to complete a comprehensive academic portfolio that includes a resume, cover letter, personal budget, college and career goals, and school evaluation. That portfolio then has to pass muster with the principal.

How does one learning environment do all of this? Well, New Directions is **personalized, relevant, and contextualized**. They offer small classes, project-based learning, blended learning, online courses, along with full, partial, and flex day schedules. Their learners receive remediation when necessary and acceleration as needed. They can even take higher ed classes through Northern Virginia Community College and George Mason University. This level of individualization is working—90% of their seniors graduate. Not only this, they graduate in four years (many of them overcoming the time lost from previous challenges).

There is a recognition that learners’ life experiences matter. New Directions gives learners the flexibility to adjust for jobs, family obligations, and community commitments. They also support learners when they encounter challenges—whatever they might be. Educators are there not only as curators of learning but also as mentors and advisors. The Student Services Department is the first in the nation to be recognized as a two-time American School Counselor Association (ASCA) model program as an alternative school. Professional School Counselors provide academic counseling, individualized affective lessons, team building, and health and wellness experiences for all school stakeholders. This **socially embedded** environment is grounded in strong relationships where each learner knows they are seen, cared for, and championed.

The belief that each learner has potential permeates the culture of New Directions. These kids have overcome more than most and are going further than many. We call that inspiring!

LEARN MORE

[Prince Williams’ New Directions Gives Students a Second Shot at Graduating](#)

[WEBINAR Creating, Developing, and Sustaining Successful Alternative Programs and Schools](#)



FACTS & FIGURES

Public High School Charter

800+ learners

ELL or Primary Language other than English: 17%

Learners with disabilities: 19-22% (rolling enrollment)

Free or reduced lunch: 59%

Graduation rates: 90%

College enrollment:

30-40% (2-year)

10-20% (4-year)

10-15% (military)

10-20% (CTE college)

Remainder currently employed, getting ready to get employed (<5%)

CONNECT

Website

[New Directions](#)

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New Visions, New Choices, New Directions: A Conversation with Principal Bob Eichorn

The Education Reimagined Team had a great conversation with New Directions Alternative Education Center principal, Bob Eichorn. Check it out to learn when Bob's passion for education emerged and how he is bringing that passion to bear every day at New Directions.



Bob Eichorn

Q. What got you first committed to education? Are you still committed for the same reason?

A. BOB: It all started with service, and the commitment remains to this day. At a young age, I wanted to help others excel and ultimately achieve their goals. This started with my peers through community service, school activities, and athletics.

During my middle and high school years, this transformed to purposeful mentoring and support for younger learners. I was fortunate to be able to volunteer at a center for students with intellectual disabilities. This gave me my first glimpse into learner-centered education and the impact one teacher can have on one student. Ms. Parker, my 7th grade English teacher, personalized learning for each student in our class. She created an academic stage where all students could direct, act, produce, and edit based on their unique skills, interests, and perspectives. In retrospect, I believe my middle school experience is where the seeds of my calling and mission were planted.

In high school, disenfranchised, at-risk, and challenged students tended to gravitate toward me. I was encouraged by my sophomore English teacher, Mr. Sengstack, to tutor students who were struggling in class. This changed my trajectory of service. I always garnered a great deal of personal satisfaction when helping others. I realized through this experience that each person learns in a unique and individual way; therefore, my service had to adapt and focus on how to best help my peer progress—at their own pace and based on their specific needs. This is when I believe my commitment to education as a discipline began to take root.

As I embarked on my post-baccalaureate journey, my good fortune continued at James Madison University. It was there that substantial growth occurred for me as a person. Walls were smashed, perceptions reformed, and horizons expanded as a result of relationship building and the focus on strategic partnership with others to learn.

Based on what I was given, fast forward 30 years—the result has been that I am able to re-imagine education with my students, my colleagues, and my schools each day, month, and year. I believe our experiences, rather than form us, allow us to reform. As a result, I have

been fortunate to grow in my service. My core belief is that our nation's most socio-economically challenged, emotionally in need, and intellectually starved students deserve the best schools, teachers, and support services. When provided with a learner-centered approach to service, which in my estimation is the foundation for a world-class education, our students become self-sufficient, confident, and motivated life-long learners. They turn despair to hope, happiness from sadness, and mold failure into success. As an alternative educator for 26 years (with decades of service yet to realize), outspoken and relentless advocacy has and will always be my commitment to each of our heroic students.

Q. How did New Directions evolve?

A. BOB: When discussing the evolution of nontraditional or alternative schools in the United States, the majority were formed and remain focused on an exclusionary “last-chance” model for students removed from traditional school settings as a result of disciplinary infractions. An antiquated and frankly broken approach to education, this structure at worst creates student warehousing with a “sink or swim” mentality.

During the 1990's, I was privileged to learn from Teresa Zutter, the Director of Non-traditional Education Programs (retired) in Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS). She promoted a learner- and teacher-centered approach for service provision for our most in need and at-risk students and those that served them. As a result of this foundational support and vision, I was able to collaboratively develop a host of schools and programs during my tenure in FCPS that created a system where personalized learning, skill development, and stakeholder resilience were developed and valued.

My growth in service continued when I was appointed the Principal of New Directions in January of 2008 in Prince William County Public Schools (PWCS). Arriving to a “last-chance” model in its third year of infancy, I was very optimistic. Why? After speaking with the school community, it was apparent the students and staff wanted to eliminate barriers, create opportunity, and develop a unique school culture. We needed a vision, a path to fulfilling it, committed internal and external adult stakeholders, a revolutionary technology plan, and mechanisms for assessing ourselves and our students.

We developed student and faculty leadership teams; revised scheduling based on student needs at school, home, and community; created time for students and staff to collaborate; and established a culture of authentic recognition for personal and school achievements. In addition, we established internal student and staff mentor programs, a host of academic clubs and activities, and partnerships with local community and four-year colleges.

Our evolution included developing a comprehensive digital learning program, an individualized portfolio assessment learning model, and academic remediation and accelerated opportunities based on the needs of each student. Due to rolling enrollment, we revised our transition process, which includes free summer school to complete classes, enroll in courses for credit recovery, or earn new credit toward graduation.

We reflect on our evolution annually with an emphasis on change to support our students in a strategic and purposeful manner. As a result, our enrollment is now 70% elective placement, and graduation rates have increased 300%. Since 2008, New Directions will have graduated over 1,000 students in our traditional program and another 1,000 through our virtual scholarship program. This opportunity affords economically disadvantaged base school students the opportunity to take virtual classes free of charge while remaining in their “home” school. During this period, the

“Outspoken and relentless advocacy has and will always be my commitment to each of our heroic students.”

Bob Eichorn

On-Time Graduation rate of PWCS has gone from 83% to 91.4%. Ultimately, visionary leadership at the division-level allows for transformation at the school-level. Our PWCS Superintendent, Dr. Walts, has been instrumental in encouraging innovation, a catalyst in supporting alternative school redesign, and purposeful in changing the public narrative on alternative education in our community.

Q. We know that learner agency is a foundational piece of the New Directions' model. Can you talk a little about what this looks like in action?

A. BOB: We recognize learners as partners in the development of our school. At the individual planning level, this includes student ownership with course selection, individual schedule creation, and participation in academic clubs and associated school activities based on interest or need. Mid-quarter or semester adjustments can be made based on student activities at home, employment responsibilities, access to technology, or service to the community. In addition and key to the model, mid-course adjustments are made based on student performance. This includes strategic remediation and acceleration sessions during the traditional school week with an emphasis on meeting the student where they are from both an effective and affective learning perspective.

New Directions operates using five master schedules to accommodate a host of learner needs and hand schedules each student. With a rolling enrollment of 750-800 students on site, another 200 in a virtual format, and a subsequent 300 served during summer, our school supports the annual learning for over 1,000 students.

In the classroom, students are afforded with assignment choice, flexible pacing based on learning style, and opportunities to complete assignments based on prior knowledge and mastery. Access to classes based on language development, special needs, interest, and fit/match with a teacher is incorporated based on the initial (and, most importantly, the developing) needs and successes of the student.

Students drive extra-curricular programs and excursions, which include creating agendas for learning, justifications for activities to meet their needs and those of their peers, and creating new programs based on interest.

Q. Your Student Services Department is nationally recognized. Tell us what makes them so central to New Directions?

A. BOB: Everything we do revolves around student and stakeholder service; therefore, having professional school counselors that partner as facilitators of learning with classroom teachers is integral to our ability to develop knowledge, skills, and dispositions in our students.

This partnership is integral as, along with the integration of student voice, it allows us to create a “one voice” approach at New Directions through a unifying vision. Our professional school counselors take the lead in developing academic opportunities, co-teach with our professional educators, and plan school-based events that address the needs of the whole learner. This integration into the learning environment allows for each professional school counselor to better engage with parents and the community, as it relates to the needs and services available for students.

The work of Ms. Jones, Ms. Morrow, and Ms. Fermo is proactive school counseling. Our team engages in research on each student to understand the past, better inform the pres-

“We needed a vision, a path to fulfilling it, committed internal and external adult stakeholders, a revolutionary technology plan, and mechanisms for assessing ourselves and our students.”

Bob Eichorn

ent, and create opportunities for future achievement. Our professional school counselors engage in a comprehensive orientation process, which not only sets the tone for a new student but also serves to provide the blueprint regarding our innovative teaching and learning strategies and the role each student plays in our further development as a school.

This research-based approach to school counseling service also takes the form of assessment coordination out of our Student Services Department. This serves multiple functions regarding alignment and support of student and teacher needs as it relates to state assessment preparation, scheduling, and remediation. Ms. Jones, our Lead School Counselor, collaborates with staff to develop effective and supportive schedules based on the needs of all stakeholders. This strategic approach places the “academic” in school counseling and defines shared ownership in student achievement.

Our professional school counselors lead our Northern Virginia Community College Pathways to Baccalaureate and George Mason University Dream Catchers programs. These 2- and 4-year college partnerships provide our students with access to university mentors, admissions assistance, and additional academic counseling support upon enrollment.

Q. We know that you are in the process of expanding. What will this new and improved campus allow you to do that you can't do now?

A. BOB: October of 2016 promises to be groundbreaking in more ways than one for nontraditional students in Prince William County Public Schools. Three nontraditional schools, New Directions Alternative Education Center, PACE East, and New Dominion Alternative Center, are set to merge in a state-of-the-art, three-story high-tech facility scheduled to be completed in 2018.

The campus, which will be located at the intersection of Joplin and Aden Roads in Manassas, will contain a comprehensive media center, gymnasium, multi-purpose stage designed for the performing arts, and full-service cafeteria.

Planned with input from all three schools, the campus is designed to maximize academic access for secondary alternative and special needs students. Flexible scheduling, advanced placement classes, accelerated and remedial courses, as well as Career and Technical Education (CTE), are just a few of the opportunities that await students in the new facility.

Designed for increased growth, academic equity, and a learner-centered approach to services, the new campus will also have a comprehensive school counseling department, student clubs and academic activities, and athletics. The design includes multiple computer and science labs, an art studio, and an outdoor greenhouse. Classrooms will be outfitted with the latest technology to support 21st century learning and skills development.

Services designed to assist middle school and special needs students to effectively transition to high school and subsequently on to career and college are part of the comprehensive campus plan that includes an accredited alternative school. Students will benefit from a year-round education model that will afford opportunities for summer enrichment, remediation, and acceleration to meet graduation requirements. The physical and academic design will be the first of its kind in Virginia.

Robert L. Eichorn became the Principal of New Directions Alternative Education Center, a Prince William County Public School, in 2008. New Directions has grown to be the largest nontraditional high school center in the Commonwealth of Virginia with an annual enrollment of 850-1200 students and has earned national recognition for STEM Education, Dropout Prevention and Recovery, Digital Learning, and School Counseling. Mr. Eichorn's core belief is the most socio-economically challenged, emotionally in need, and intellectually starved students deserve the best schools, teachers, and support services. Initiatives under his leadership include national alternative school reform, the development of national standards for alternative and nontraditional schools, and expanding STEAM opportunities for at-risk students. A native of Virginia, Mr. Eichorn holds multiple degrees in education from James Madison and George Mason Universities. In 1990, he began his career as an alternative school teacher in Fairfax County Public Schools where he was named Teacher of the Year, subsequently served as an international school principal in Ecuador, and most recently provided leadership as the president of the National Alternative Education Association (NAEA). Mr. Eichorn has been recognized at the state and national level for his leadership.



A VOICE FROM THE FIELD

Mastery-Based Progression in Action: Kung Fu

Back in 2013, founding CEO of The Learning Accelerator (TLA) Scott Ellis reflected on the strong parallels between competency-based education and Kung Fu. Today, his observations still ring as true as ever. And, to top it all off—Scott has since earned his black belt!

Scott also discussed these parallels in an interview with Michael Horn, originally published in Forbes.com, August 2013. [\(link\)](#)

INTRODUCTION

About three years ago, I started learning Kung Fu. There is a studio in our neighborhood, and I was signing my kids up to take classes. I had always wanted to try martial arts but never had a chance when I was young. So I signed up! When I told the instructors I wanted to take Kung Fu along with my kids, they were confused: “You want to take Tai Chi, right? It’s nice and slow. Maybe better for you. Kung Fu is fast; good for the kids.” It took some explaining, but I finally convinced them that I really wanted to do Kung Fu. In my first class a few days later, I was breathing hard, sweating, and my face was very red—so, they kept coming up to me and saying, “Please, sit down. Rest. Have a cup of water.” It took more explaining, but I finally convinced them I was not going to have a heart attack in my first class.



Scott Ellis

Nearly three years later I am a brown belt, which means I have completed 9 of the 13 levels on the path to becoming a black belt, the top level. I have really enjoyed the process, and it has helped me stay in shape and increase my flexibility. But there has been another unexpected benefit for me as well, something that has helped me in my work in education: Kung Fu offers an interesting example of a system of *mastery-based progression* that highlights some themes that may apply to traditional K-12 classrooms.

A key element of innovation being explored today in American education is “mastery-based progression” or “competency-based learning:” how to enable students to learn at their own pace and advance as they master content, rather than just moving forward based on established time requirements in courses and grades. This would be a significant change from the current education system, in which students get As and Bs and all move at the same pace in their classes. As I have been taking Kung Fu, it has helped me get a more detailed understanding of how a mastery-based progression structure might work in the classroom. Kung Fu is entirely based on this structure, and so I have found it a helpful analogy that offers some interesting insights that could be applied more broadly.

STRUCTURE OF MASTERY-BASED PROGRESSION

The structure of progression in Kung Fu is based on belt levels. In class, students wear a cloth belt of the color that shows their level. At the completion of a student’s first class, they are awarded their white belt. As they master new content and skills, they are awarded new belts: yellow, green, purple, etc. until the top level of black belt. (Note: The sequence of belts is a bit more complex than this, and there are multiple levels of black belts—but the key points are the same.) In order to receive a new belt, a student must demonstrate mastery of several different elements: a series of moves called a “form,” a specific kick, two self-defense maneuvers, strength, flexibility, and endurance. Some levels require an additional maneuver, like a one-handed cartwheel or front-sweeping kick. For example, a student who is a white belt is required to successfully complete the following to receive a yellow belt:

Form: Master the form “Cha Phase 1”—a series of basic turns, punches, and kicks that takes about 45 seconds to complete

Kick: Execute a knee kick correctly (kick straight forward up to the level of your waist) and break a 1” thick balsa wooden board within 3 tries

Self-defense: If an assailant grabs one wrist from the front, be able to break out of it using a side circular movement; if an assailant grabs both wrists from the front, be able to break out of it using simultaneous circular movements with both arms

Strength: Do 10 push-ups in a row

Flexibility: Do a side-to-side split effectively and hold it for several seconds

Endurance: Hold a stance with knees deeply bent, back straight, and palms straight forward for 30 seconds

A student who is a yellow belt is required to complete the next level of skills in each category to earn a green belt: They must master a more advanced form, use more challenging kicks and self-defense maneuvers, and do 15 push-ups. Higher levels incorporate weapons, like a staff or sword into the forms.

These requirements are what, in K-12 education, would be called the standards: what students are expected to learn. In order to advance to the next level (the next set of topics to learn), they must demonstrate that they have mastered the current level. It

“Kung Fu offers an interesting example of a system of mastery-based progression that highlights some themes that may apply to traditional K-12 classrooms.”

Scott Ellis

does not matter how long a student has been at a particular level, and this does not affect whether they are ready to move forward. All that matters is whether they can demonstrate that they have mastered the required content.

THE TEACHING AND LEARNING PROCESS

Classes consist of up to 12 students at a time with one instructor, though sometimes a second instructor joins for large groups. Classes are usually grouped by ability level, spanning 2-3 belts. For example, there may be a class that is for white, yellow, and green belts together, with children ages 4 to 12. Teen and adult classes may group all ability levels together. When I started my first class, I was a white belt, and there were some high school students who were very advanced—brown and red belts. Classes last an hour and are divided into four phases: 1) warm up; 2) technique practice; 3) forms; and 4) physical fitness. When the class starts, students line up in order of their belt level, starting with the most advanced.

The warm-up phase lasts about 10 minutes and is done by all students together: stretching, running, and then a series of basic moves. The moves are usually the same for all students, and the instructor often tells the less-advanced students to watch the more-advanced ones who do the moves first.

The technique practice lasts about 20 minutes and is also done by all students together, with everyone working on the same element (e.g., practicing kicks). However, each student will work on the their level's kick. A white belt will work on a knee kick (kicking up to waist level), while a yellow belt will practice a front kick (kicking straight forward as high as they can), and a green belt will practice a jump-outside kick (a kick where they get a running start, jump, and spin clockwise in the air as they kick). All students are receiving instruction on the same element, working in parallel. For example, all students might form one line and then take turns kicking the punching bag 5 times with guidance from the instructor. They then go to the back of the line and watch the other students do the same thing.

The forms phase lasts about 20 minutes and has students separated by ability level. White belts work on Cha Phase 1, showing the instructor what they have learned in previous classes—receiving adjustments or corrections—and then learning the next few moves of the sequence. After a few minutes, the instructor will move on to the yellow belts, who are working on the next form (Cha Phase 2), while the white belts independently practice what they just learned. The instructor will rotate among the different groups, usually coming back to each group 3-4 times during the session to help them improve what they have already learned and master new moves. Students who have learned their entire form will learn the self-defense moves for their level.

The physical fitness phase lasts about 10 minutes and is done by the class together—again back in line based on ability level. Students will do push-ups, sit-ups, and other strength/conditioning exercises together. Then, the class ends.

The instructor plays a central role in the learning process. In the warm-up and physical fitness phases, they lead the class as a single group and serve as role model and motivator—they often need to encourage students to stretch further or finish that last push-up. In technique practice and forms, they provide differentiated instruction, assessing where each student is in their learning and specifically targeting instruction to help them master the next skill. Key drivers of instructor effectiveness are their own deep knowledge of the material and their keen awareness of each student's current stage of learning and the kind of support they need to move forward.

“Key drivers of instructor effectiveness are their own deep knowledge of the material and their keen awareness of each student's current stage of learning and the kind of support they need to move forward.”

Scott Ellis

DEMONSTRATING MASTERY

Over time, students will master all of the elements required for their level: form, kick, self-defense, etc. During the forms phase of class, they can show this to the instructor. Once the instructor is satisfied that the student has mastered all elements, he will tell the student they are ready to take the “belt test.” Students cannot take a belt test until the instructor tells them they are ready. A key requirement for being ready to take a belt test for a particular level is to remember all required elements of every previous level as well.

The belt test is a separate session, unrelated to a class session. All students who are ready to take the test for their level come to the session—it is not separated by ability level. Like the instruction sessions, it lasts about an hour and is divided into a few phases. For the first 10 minutes, the primary instructor gets everyone registered and prepares the assessment sheets for each student (to track their performance), and students work with a second instructor to be sure they remember all the elements they will need to demonstrate. There is then a 5-minute warm-up phase with light stretching and jogging. Then, the test begins.

Each element is tested separately. First, all students take the endurance test, in which they hold their stance. Everyone starts at the same time, but white belts can stop and sit down after 30 seconds, yellow belts after 45 seconds, green belts after 60 seconds, and so on. Next, students must all demonstrate their kicks—each executing the kick for their level several times. Then, students demonstrate their forms. For this part of the test, students are often asked to demonstrate previous forms as well, so they must not only show they have mastered the new form but also that they remember what they have learned before. At the end of the test, students must show that they can use the self-defense maneuvers for their level against an example assailant (an instructor), and then they have three attempts to break a board in half using the kick for their level.

For each of these elements, the master instructor grades the student as “excellent,” “satisfactory,” or “unsatisfactory.” If they are graded “unsatisfactory” on more than two elements, they fail the belt test. They may have to come back to another belt test session in the future, or the instructor may enable them to practice the element and then demonstrate it in the next class. Nearly all students pass the belt tests, and that is the objective: Students are not allowed to take the test until they have demonstrated to the instructor during the regular class session that they are ready.

KUNG FU AS AN ANALOG FOR K-12 EDUCATION

There are a number of aspects of the instruction, progression, and testing process for Kung Fu that may be relevant for innovation in K-12 education and efforts to create and implement mastery-based progression in schools.

1. **Clear and defined standards:** It is very clear to students what they must learn in order to advance. This is defined and documented.
2. **Specific mechanism to demonstrate mastery:** Although nothing in Kung Fu is quantitative, the instructor assesses every student’s ability to complete each of the elements. There is a binary success/failure for a belt test and specific milestones of progression. Instructor judgment and knowledge are essential parts of this process.
3. **Mastery-based progression, driven and controlled by the student:** Every student moves at their own pace. Age and time spent at a particular level are irrelevant. Some students attend one class per week; some attend several. Some practice at

home; some don't. Some are very flexible already or even take other classes (like dance) that build complementary skills and enable them to advance faster.

4. **Combination of shared and individualized learning:** Social interaction and community are fostered by the shared and parallel portions of the classes (warm-up, technique practice, and physical fitness), while at the same time students can advance at their own pace and get focused instruction that enables them to move forward when they are ready.
5. **Separation of instruction and assessment of mastery:** The student develops a certain set of skills until the instructor determines they are ready to demonstrate mastery. The assessment process is separate from the learning process, though the assessment session itself serves as a rigorous workout and an opportunity to reinforce what has been learned.
6. **Public signaling of level of mastery:** Students wear belts that everyone can see, and students line up based on their belt level. This is a contrast to other mastery-based examples like swim classes, where students may be grouped by ability level and receive an award ribbon when they reach a new level, but the ribbon is something they take home.
7. **Public recognition of progression:** When students pass a belt test, they receive their belt at the end of their next class session. When the class is ready to end, everyone sits down. The instructor calls the student to the front and awards them their new belt in front of everyone, and everyone applauds for them.
8. **Students helping each other and modeling skills:** Since many activities are parallel across belts (all have kicks, self-defense maneuvers, etc.) and the more-advanced students have mastered content that less-advanced students are working on, there are many opportunities for students to help each other. Since more-advanced students do common activities first, less-advanced students get multiple demonstrations of what good performance looks like—not just from teachers but also from their peers.
9. **Broader range of content is taught:** There are other things taught in class that are not part of the tests to move to higher belt levels. For example, students often do sit-ups and other conditioning exercises or other types of flexibility exercises (e.g., forward and backward splits) that are not included in the testing process.
10. **Incremental opportunities to supplement instruction with technology:** While the mastery-based component is very clear in this Kung Fu class structure, student learning could be further enhanced by adding an alternative, personalized, technology-enabled approach for students to learn. For example, videos of each form, kick, self-defense maneuver, etc. that are fully aligned with the class sessions and tests could supplement in-person instruction and enable students to learn at the place, time, and pace of their choosing. This would further enhance the ability of students to move forward at their own pace and truly control their learning process.

Scott Ellis was the founding CEO of The Learning Accelerator (TLA) and is a national expert in catalyzing blended learning at scale. He has more than 20 years of experience as an executive and consultant in technology and nonprofits, and deep expertise in strategy, operations, finance, measurement of impact, and management coaching. Scott currently leads TLA's work on tools for competency-based education, incubating efforts to develop open source tools and enablers of scale.

Previously, Scott served as the Chief Strategy Officer and Chief Operating Officer of the New Teacher Center (NTC). He has also served on the boards of directors of multiple non-profits and provided consulting support to dozens of others.

In his career before NTC, Scott spent nearly eight years at Hewlett Packard and was a consultant at McKinsey & Company. He has an MBA from Stanford and an undergraduate degree in government and economics from Harvard.



Khan Lab School: From a Student's Perspective

by Jane Beeler

When I was six, I started school at my local public K-5 school. I was interested in cursive. I was curious and excited to learn it. But, when I asked my teacher if she could teach it to me, she replied that they don't teach cursive at that school until third grade, and I would have to wait two years, despite my deep interest. So instead of getting to learn what I was curious about, everyday I had to continue working on the same worksheets as everyone else in the class. This process drained me of all my curiosity and excitement to be at school and learn. I was pretty miserable at that school.

While my experience in first grade may be common in most schools, I could never imagine it happening at my current school, the [Khan Lab School \(KLS\)](#). At my former school, I felt as though my education was going to be decided by other people, but at KLS, I feel that my interests and skills matter.

I think KLS perfectly demonstrates the five elements of learner-centered education from Education Reimagined: learner agency; open-walled; personalized, relevant, and contextualized; socially embedded; and competency-based. One of my projects in particular is a great example. Last Spring, my family went on vacation in Costa Rica, and while we were there, we spent an entire day introducing [Khan Academy](#) to students and teachers at a local school. I was so inspired by our volunteer work that, when we came back, I decided that my next project at school would be focused on this experience. I chose to create a video to inspire people to dedicate a day of their vacation to volunteer in a local community.



Jane Beeler

THIS IS WHAT THE FIVE ELEMENTS LOOK LIKE AT KLS:

1. Learner Agency

At KLS, our important focus on learner agency is what makes us unique. One of the biggest ways we build agency is by learning to set our own goals. Students at my level of independence have a lot responsibility in setting our own goals, with just a bit of guidance from our teachers, which is the opposite of traditional school. We create our own work schedule and deadlines, based on our goals. We also get to select or create most of the projects we work on.

For my video project, for example, I created the timeline of when I wanted to complete things; there were no due-dates set by the teachers. I also helped plan all of the meetings with my mentors. Like I said, we choose our own projects, so this project wasn't forced by my parents, teachers, or mentors. I chose to do the project myself and was responsible for its completion.

2. Open-Walled

Two of the ways that learning at KLS is open-walled include making time for field-trips and making students' work portable.

Instead of being confined to the small, single roomed building of our school, KLS students take frequent field trips outside of school to see the world in action. We learn first hand about all kinds of things, like wetlands, farms, landfills, transportation, technology, animals, and more.

Because we can do a lot of our work online, it makes it easy to work on our goals outside of school. When I went to Costa Rica with my family, I was able to continue to make progress on my school work, such as in math using Khan Academy, Spanish using Duolingo, and a group project using email, Google docs, and Google chat.

3. Personalized, Relevant, and Contextualized

At KLS, we are encouraged to learn what is interesting and challenging for us. For instance, if I were six years old at Khan Lab School and I was interested in learning cursive, I would be able to immediately set goals towards learning it, regardless of what my classmates were learning.

For my video project, I set goals personalized to my skills and ability. At the beginning of the project, I knew very little about creating and editing videos. But, I was really curious, and I knew I could access the help I needed to learn those skills. What made this project so interesting to me was that I was creating a real video to inspire real people to give back to the world.

4. Competency-Based

There is no question about KLS being competency-based. We go skill by skill and don't rush to the next thing until we fully understand a topic. Everyone goes at their own pace. For example, I have classmates older than I am at a lower math level than I am and students a year or two younger than I am who have more developed writing skills.

While I was working on my video project, my two mentors taught me the skills I would need to make the video, step by step. We started at the very beginning. First, they taught me video and movie vocabulary, then how to videotape, then they showed me tools I would need for the video, then they taught me how to edit the vid-

CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

The most powerful advocates for learner-centered education are the learners themselves!

Are you a learner? Do you have a story like Jane's? A project that you could share about? Or reflections and insights about your own learning environment? We want to hear from you!

Contact us for learner submission guidelines. [\(email\)](#)

eo cleanly. I watched some of the videos that one of my mentors made to see some of the techniques he used. We even went to an iMovie class at the local Apple store to make sure I fully understood making movies and videos. After all this prep work, I felt prepared to make the video.

5. Socially Embedded

At KLS, we often work with people inside and outside of the school. For example, inside the school, we ask peers for help with work first, before we go to the teachers. Also, the older students mentor the younger students every week in math, reading, cooking, and gardening. As a result, all of the students—from five- to fourteen-years-old—have very close relationships and feel like one family. A couple of ways that we work with people outside the school include: bringing outside scientists to the school every so often to teach the younger students science skills, and the older students having mentors from Khan Academy to learn professional skills and for help with projects and goals.

While working on my project, I communicated and built relationships with many people outside KLS. Not only did I work with the students and teachers at the school in Costa Rica that my family visited, but I also worked very closely over many weeks with my mentors at Khan Academy.

As I planned the project with the help of my mentors, we wanted to make sure that lots of people would see the video. We contacted the organization [Give a Day Global](#), which connects international travelers with one-day volunteer opportunities. I coordinated with Kerry Rodgers, the founder of Give A Day Global, who was interested in placing the video on her website. I even interviewed one of her volunteers for the video. I am really proud that my video is now on Give a Day Global, and I hope it inspires many people to give back to communities when they travel internationally.

At KLS, I have learned that if something is exciting and challenging, I will learn it well and not forget it. I know that if I try really hard, I can get an amazing amount of work done by myself. I think that if people give me and other students a chance, we can take responsibility for our own education successfully. And I really, truly believe that as Khan Academy says, “You can learn anything.”

After experiencing both types of learning, at a traditional school and at KLS, I believe that the more successful schools will be like the one I go to now. Being able to learn at your own pace, collaborate with peers, and take charge of your own learning can help even the most struggling students succeed. I wish that every student could experience a learner-centered school like KLS.

Here is a link to my [video](#), and a link to a [blog post](#) that I wrote about the project.

“At KLS, I have learned that if something is exciting and challenging, I will learn it well and not forget it.”

Jane Beeler
KHAN LAB SCHOOL

Jane Beeler is 12 years old and lives in Menlo Park, CA, with her parents, younger sister, and younger brother. Outside of school, she enjoys theater, reading, art, cooking, martial arts, and playing with her cats.



TOOLS & RESOURCES

Thrively

“Every child has a genius.” At **Thrively** ([link](#)), this statement frames everything they do. This website couples its unique, online Strength Assessment—which pinpoints each child’s individual strengths and interests across 23 factors—with curated educational activities and content that put kids at the center of their learning. Learners can explore their interests through “Pathways,” which features career paths as diverse as engineer, nurse, and DJ. They can also delve into online activities called “Sparks,” which are mapped against over 200 different interest areas. A great resource—Thrively allows educators to create collaborative projects based on learner interests. Thrively makes authentic student-centered learning a reality.

Discover learners' genius with the Thrively Strength Assessment [link](#)

Join the passion revolution. See what Thrively has to offer [link](#)

CASEL

Mission: Helping to make evidence-based social and emotional learning (SEL) an integral part of education from preschool through high school. The **Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL)** ([link](#)) brings this mission to life through their work in practice, policy, and research. Primarily focused on brick-and-mortar learning environments, CASEL operates a number of initiatives and partnerships across the country. Two such initiatives are their Collaborating Districts Initiative—a national initiative “aimed at supporting districts’ capacities to promote SEL for all students”—and their “Youth Voice” work—a megaphone for groups already supporting learners to take control of their learning as project designers, developers, and leaders. CASEL dives into the policy world with state scans and policy recommendations—all aimed at bringing SEL to the forefront of the education conversation. Finally, CASEL conducts extensive research and publishes numerous reports on topics such as SEL’s role in shaping overall educational outcomes and finding and developing quantitative assessments to accurately measure SEL growth in learners. They house this research and that of others in their ever-growing CASEL Library, a database of articles and papers on everything SEL.

CASEL Library [link](#)

The Missing Piece: A National Teacher Survey on How Social and Emotional Learning Can Empower Children and Transform Schools [link](#)

Youth Voice [link](#)

UPCOMING EVENTS

Mark your calendars! We will be speaking at some and hosting workshops at others. In all cases, pioneers will be front and center! Join us.

Global MindED Conference

Denver, CO

June 9-10

[Conference Website](#)

National Forum on Education Policy

Washington, DC

June 29-July 1

[Conference Website](#)

Big Picture’s Big Bang

Orlando, FL

July 26-29

[Conference Website](#)



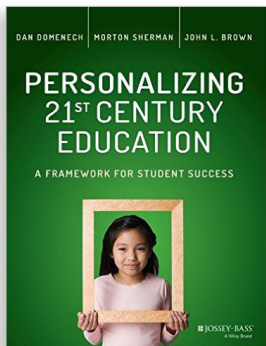
TLTALK RADIO

Host Randy Ziegenfuss and Lynn Fuini-Hetten chat with Bob Crumley—Superintendent, Chugach School District, Alaska.

[Listen here](#)

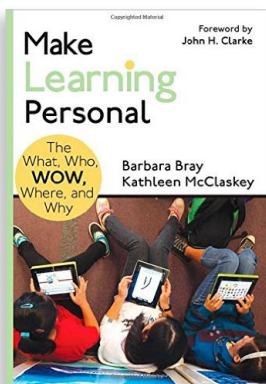


ON OUR BOOKSHELF



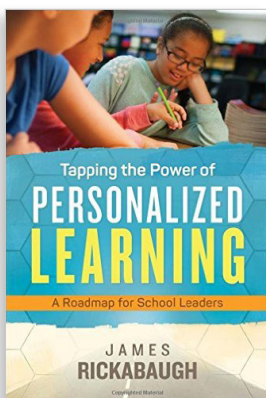
Personalizing 21st Century Education: A Framework for Student Success by Dan Domenech, Mort Sherman, & John Brown

Personalizing 21st Century Education sets out the possibility of a truly personalized education system. Written by Dan Domenech, Mort Sherman, and John Brown, *Personalizing* begins with the present-day education model's origins and history and then moves into a call to action for the complete transformation of the system. More than just a diagnosis of what needs to change, the book showcases learning environments already going deep into the realm of personalization and provides a series of indicators, from the individual- to system-level, for recognizing personalization in practice. No matter where you are on your journey—this is worth the read!



Make Learning Personal: The What, Who, WOW, Where, and Why by Barbara Bray & Kathleen McClaskey

Make Learning Personal asks us to get back to the basics—who, what, where, why, and, of course, wow. Wow? Bray and McClaskey show how an examination of those five “Ws” can produce powerful shifts in learning autonomy—developing learners who are self-directed and self-motivated. Based on the Universal Design for Learning system, the book lays out a framework that broadens the conversation from one just about the who, what, where, and why of learning to the “WOW” of creating experiences that allow learners’ natural love of learning to blossom and flourish.



Tapping the Power of Personalized Learning: A Roadmap for School Leaders by James Rickabaugh

For over five years, the Institute for Personalized Learning has been researching, developing, and testing innovative personalized learning practices—all with one goal in mind: to create a powerful and scalable personalized learning model. *Tapping the Power of Personalized Learning* is the direct result of that hard work. With three core components at the heart of the described model, this book truly has the learner at the center: 1) learner profiles; 2) customized learning paths; and 3) proficiency-based progress. In addition to sharing about their model, Rickabaugh outlines a path for how to get there—a step-by-step implementation guide that takes into account what systems change really requires at the organizational, educator, and community levels. Looking to shake things up? Pick up a copy and get inspired!

WORTH YOUR TIME

Community Partners: Making Student Learning Relevant

How do you leverage the expertise of those in your community for your learners? Make them more than experts, mentors, or community members—make them your “learning partners.”

[Watch here](#)

High School of the Future

Discover Salt Lake City's Innovations Early College High School, where learning is self-directed and mastery-based and learners manage their own schedules and “learn to handle freedom.”

[Read here](#)

At Hofstra, on WRHU, They're Live With the Islanders

Under financial stress, the New York Islanders tapped an unusual partner to keep their games on the airwaves: their local college radio station. Now, Islander games are produced by 18- and 19-years-olds, who are proving their maturity, professionalism, and dedication to their craft every day. [Read here](#)

“The only way to make sense out of change is to plunge into it, move with it, and join the dance.” —**ALAN WATTS**

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