

# Personalized learning: Meeting the learning needs, skills, and interests of every student

Connections for Classrooms Case Studies: [Fulton County Schools](#)



## Background

During the 2014–2015 school year, Fulton County Schools (FCS) embarked on a plan to restructure the delivery of education to its 94,000 students. Breaking with a traditional one-size-fits-all approach to education, FCS launched a personal learning initiative that promised “learning customized to an individual learner’s needs, skills, and interests”<sup>1</sup> for students in all 96 schools by 2017.

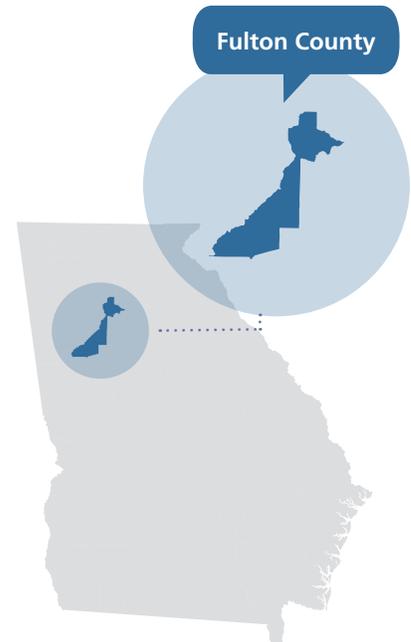
FCS is among the largest and most diverse school districts in the state and serves students in the Metro Atlanta area (see figure). FCS covers a large geographic area and has some of the highest and lowest performing schools in Georgia.

The FCS plan to turn every school into a personalized learning environment was fueled by three student achievement goals: by 2017, 1) 90 percent of students will graduate on time; 2) 85 percent will be eligible for a University System of Georgia college or university; and 3) 100 percent will be career-ready.

District-wide roll out of personalized learning required the alignment of a range of resources, including an infrastructure capable of handling the increased demand created by adding more than 65,000 wireless devices. Upgrades took place in the years leading up to the initiative, but not at the level required to make the transition seamless. In 2014, FCS applied for and received funding from the Connections for Classrooms (CFC) grant program. These funds, along with E-rate funding and additional grants supported needed upgrades.

Instructional technology plays a critical role in the implementation of personalized learning. Kenny Wilder, Director of IT Infrastructure at FCS noted that in Fulton County Schools, “if technology is interrupted, instruction is interrupted.”

**The robust and reliable wireless network funded through the CFC grant made the implementation of the new instructional model, which relies heavily on one-to-one devices, possible.**



CFC Award Amount:

**\$3,469,663.10**

Federal E-rate Amount:

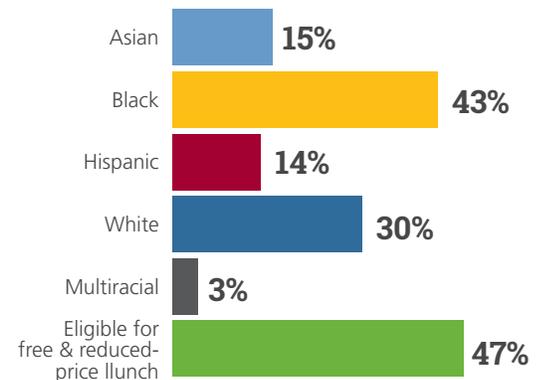
**\$3,410,454.90**

Total

**\$6,880,118.00**



Students in Fulton County Schools 2015-2016<sup>2</sup>



## Personalized Learning Planning

The timeline for FCS' personalized learning initiative provided schools with an extensive planning period to focus on the unique needs of their students and to design instruction specifically to meet those needs, including selecting the tool or tools to best support their instructional plans.

As a charter system, FCS have flexibility and autonomy with regard to how they meet state accountability goals. Decisions regarding school operations are made at the school level, closest to classroom teaching and learning. FCS' planning model prescribed a series of focused steps to transform schools into personalized learning environments, but honored schools' autonomy by allowing them to design their own paths.

Hoke Wilcox, Director of Instructional Technology, credits this bottom-up approach for high levels of engagement with the personalized learning initiative: "There's a lot of ownership. The schools have been able to make choices based on their plans and their visions."

At the outset of the initiative, FCS asked all schools to complete a series of self-assessments including a "readiness" rubric. Schools rated themselves on a range of topics: the capacity of leadership, educator readiness, instructional spaces, the current practice of transformational instruction, and the alignment of the school strategic plan to personalized learning. FCS offered schools the choice to join one of five implementation cohorts, starting with Group One in January 2015 through Group Five, which began in March 2016. In all, 19 schools joined Group One to be among the first to implement personalized learning in the district.

Each school established a planning team that worked to prepare for success during the 12- to 18-month process. During the first meetings, schools identified the areas of greatest need within their schools. At that point, team members attended a series of workshops to confirm their understandings of personalized learning and how it could support those needs. An outside partner organization facilitated design workshops to help schools refine the visions for their instructional models, professional development plans, and communication plans.

A final step in planning was selecting a device to support the team's instructional vision. FCS used a "marketplace" model, and offered schools a set of pre-selected tablet and laptop options from which to choose. FCS sent "kits" to each school and stakeholder group, including teachers, community members, students, and administrators, and all reviewed each kit using a rubric provided by FCS. Each school's selection committee analyzed the responses and brought a recommendation to their School Governance Council for a vote.

## Implementation

Once plans were completed and devices selected, schools were ready to roll out the personalized learning and distribute devices to their students.

Professional development to help teachers with the transition was a key element of implementation at each site. The content of professional learning varied based on the school plan, but in each case, it included a combination of school-level collaboration and external support. In addition, FCS contracted with a local partner to provide each school with weekly on-site support from a coach with expertise in personalized learning and technology integration. According to Dr. Anthony J. Newbold, Principal of Bear Creek Middle School: "The onsite support was a game changer. It has been instrumental in helping us get to where we want to be."

A cadre of middle and high school student leaders were also trained as part of the FCS plan. Student advocates fulfilled different roles at each site, including supporting the distribution and roll-out of the devices (no small undertaking in large schools), representing students' voice in technology decisions, and providing professional development to teachers.

Finally, FCS utilized its district-wide network of teachers, media and educational technology instructors, and district and school leaders called the FCS Vanguard Team to support implementation. Team members based at each school provided job-embedded coaching to peer teachers and school administrators to support effective implementation of best instructional practices that included technology. Members met at the district level to share expertise and experiences and provided feedback to FCS about the initiative and the training needs at their schools.

## Principles of Personalized Learning<sup>3</sup>

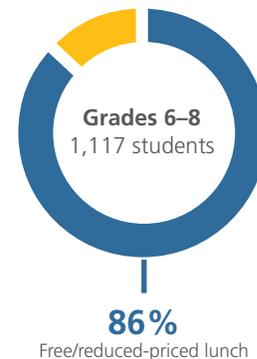
- **Varied strategies:** Students are given more than one way or modality to learn the material or access content.
- **Just-in-time direct instruction:** Direct instruction is available to students when it is needed, by an in-person or virtual teacher.
- **Choice and voice:** Students express their learning styles and preferences as learners in the lesson.
- **Mastery-based assessment:** Students drive curriculum rather than the curriculum driving the students. Assessments are used to demonstrate proficiency and competency.
- **Choice for demonstrating learning:** Students have multiple ways to demonstrate mastery of standards. They can leverage technology tools and traditional tools.
- **Flexible pacing:** Students move through the curricula at the pace that fits their individual abilities and allows for mastery learning rather than a by time-bound learning schedule.
- **Co-planning learning:** Students, parents, and community members are involved in planning and setting goals, pace, determining appropriate demonstration of learning, and defining mastery levels.

## Implementation Highlights

The following presents some highlights of personalized learning implementation in three Group One schools.

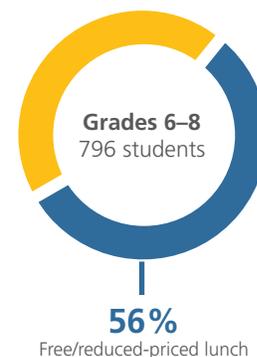
### Bear Creek Middle School

The transition to a personalized learning model at Bear Creek Middle School helped staff focus on student achievement goals in literacy and math. The school implemented a blended, data-driven math intervention featuring station rotation—in renovated classroom space that can accommodate flexible use. To encourage students to work at their own pace, teachers at Bear Creek use a variety of online tools to manage course content, resources, assignments, and recorded lessons (“flipped” instruction). Teachers develop “differentiated learning menus” in an English Language Arts (ELA) course to provide students with the opportunity to exercise choice to meet the demands of a particular assignment and demonstrate mastery. Teachers also created a website to share professional development materials, increasing collaboration and sharing best practices in personalized learning.



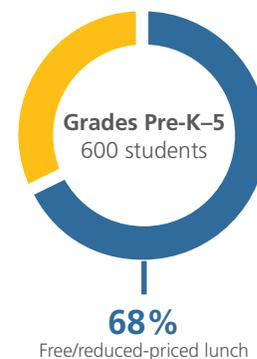
### Holcomb Bridge Middle School

At Holcomb Bridge Middle School, teachers focused their personalized learning implementation on supporting students at all points on the achievement spectrum to direct their own learning, challenge themselves, and gain greater mastery. Specifically, teachers worked on path and pace: presenting students with an instructional goal, and providing them with multiple paths to pursue, encouraging them to take the time they need. Teachers also focused on transitioning students from traditional role expectations where teachers lead and students follow. Teachers described using more real-time data to identify students’ knowledge at the beginning or end of a lesson or unit and then using those data to guide next steps. A student at Holcomb Bridge described her recognition of the importance of personalized learning, “[It] gives us more opportunities to learn the way we need and want to learn.”



### Randolph Elementary School

The implementation of personalized learning at Randolph Elementary School increased the school’s focus on differentiated instruction and providing new learning opportunities to propel all students toward increased achievement. In 2015–2016, the school reported nearly 20 students completed one or more online middle school classes through Fulton Virtual, FCS’ online learning program, which would not have been possible without the implementation of a personalized learning model, classroom devices, and the wireless capability supported by the CFC grant. Teachers described the initiative as leveling the playing field for their students because it allowed all students access to the same curriculum, while meeting each at their levels. The school renovated space to support more collaborative and project-based work and expanded course offerings to stimulate students’ interest. These included online foreign language classes offered in Spanish, Chinese, French, and German to all grade levels, K-5, and establishing a new Science Technology Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) lab.



**“Personalized learning gives us more opportunities to learn the way we need and want to learn.”**

- 7th grade student, Holcomb Bridge Middle School

## Impact

Teachers, students, and administrators noted many outcomes from the early implementation of personalized learning in FCS schools. They include:

**Schools are deeply engaged with personalized learning.** FCS schools embraced all aspects of planning for and implementing personalized learning. School staff and district administrators credited customized roll-out and strong district supports, including a thoughtful, school-level planning process, as significant contributors to schools' sustained interest in and commitment to implementation.

**Personalized learning has "leveled the playing field" throughout the district.** The equitable roll-out of personalized learning to every FCS school provided all students with access to opportunities for self-direction, expanded curricular content, and personal technology. Furthermore, through the greater use of differentiated instruction, teachers offer students within each school the opportunity for academic growth regardless of their levels. As noted by Lakesha Wallace, a 5th grade teacher at Randolph Elementary School: "The most immediate benefit [of personalized learning and integrated technology] is being able to push kids forward no matter what their levels. There's always a tool for enrichment, there's always one for remediation."

**Teachers have changed their practice to facilitate more and lead less.** Teachers implementing personalized learning across FCS changed instructional practice to provide more choices to students regarding path and pace. They provide more resources for and less direction on how to reach classroom goals. Teachers use data more often to determine which students need targeted support and structure classes differently to provide more time for small group or independent work.

**Students are becoming drivers of their own learning.** As a result of changes in teaching practice to emphasize facilitation, students in personalized learning environments make more decisions about how they pursue classroom work and how they are assessed on that work.

**The network is no longer a barrier for students to have a personalized learning experience.** Prior to the CFC grant, a one-to-one device initiative would have overwhelmed the network. Wilder explained that in contrast, "now when they roll out the devices to every student, the school infrastructure is ready to sustain them."

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- Lakesha Wallace, 5th grade teacher,  
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Principal, Bear Creek Middle School

