“Spotlight School”

Northern Cass School District

Located in the town of Hunter, North Dakota, Northern Cass School District 97 is roughly 25 miles away from Fargo and is classified as a distant rural district. The district's student body is primarily White/Caucasian, with 5% minority student enrollment, and 14% of Northern Cass students and families qualify for the national Free and Reduced Lunch program.¹ The district’s small size (serving roughly 650 students in grades PreK-12) makes it possibly a perfect place to deeply transform traditional education models - and that is exactly what this learning community has committed to do. Northern Cass is heading into the final year of a three-year journey to implement a personalized, mastery-based learning program that allows students to advance based on their own readiness, not simply by seat time. By the fall of 2020, all Northern Cass students will plot their own individualized pathways to high school graduation; their schedules will be largely self-determined and customized to suit each student’s unique needs, interests, and post graduation goals.

Making the case for radical change as a moral imperative might be hard enough when things are not going well or student achievement is demonstrably low, but it may be even more difficult to “sell” in a district where the students are excelling based on most objective measures. The district has a 96% graduation rate and regularly outscores the state average on most testing measurements.² However, Superintendent Cory Steiner asserted adamantly: “Personalized learning is not just something we are going to do [at Northern Cass]; it is the right thing to be doing.”³ There is a consensus that personalization is not just a buzz-word here at Northern Cass, but that it is at the very core of what they feel every student deserves.

Start with the Why

The mission of Northern Cass speaks to the commitment of the school district to student-centered learning: “We believe that every learner can change the world - so we provide a world-class education.”

At Northern Cass, the pivotal moment in embarking on this journey came during the district’s 2016 accreditation renewal process. District staff followed up with students to assess their after-graduation outcomes, and discovered some concerning trends. As a group, the students were experiencing less success than their high school achievement data would indicate should be expected. Students’ college GPAs were lower than their high school grades; in addition, Northern Cass graduates seemed to struggle to find their pathways after high school. Some of them transferred schools midway, switched majors, and in some cases, dropped out altogether.⁴ As district leaders began to look at more ways to prepare students for “life after high school,” they began to brainstorm ways to provide more hands-on, internship-style experiences. Thus, the idea for Jaguar Academy was born - a “school within a school” model that provided students who opted in more flexibility in their schedule and choice over their areas of focus. That shift, in turn, meant that high school students would have more opportunities for hands-on career exploration, including job shadows and internships. “We needed to help kids find their passions before they left school,” said teacher and learning facilitator, Melissa Uetz.⁵

The district started with a pilot program that they called “Jaguar Academy.” In this opt-in model, participating students have a personalized schedule, remaining with their age-based cohorts for some classes, but attending this school-within-a-school for up to three periods a day. During these times, students move through a blended learning experience of teacher-led seminars and digital course content, taking greater control over their own pacing and goal-setting. Using this model, Northern Cass students earned over 50 credits during the 2017-18 school year; those who demonstrated mastery on the grade-level standards early could move on to more advanced coursework or accrue credit for off-campus learning experiences, such as community internships or other “open-walled” experiences. Those who needed more time to master the standards could take that time, and the flex schedule made it easier to access the targeted support they needed to help them achieve. From there, other changes began to ripple out. "Teachers said,

¹ https://www.usnews.com/education/best-high-schools/north-dakota/districts/northern-cass-97/northern-cass-high-school-14824
² Ibid.
⁵ Ibid.
‘If this is good for kids, why not bring it to all of them?’ Our conversation went from Jaguar Academy to ‘What if we tore the whole system down?’” Steiner said.

**The Transition to Personalized Learning**

As the school began conversations to build their new model of learning, leaders and teachers visited a number of personalized, student-centered education settings, including the Harrisburg School District in South Dakota, Lindsay Unified School District in California, and RSU 2 in Maine. At each location, the team learned more and thought deeply about what their own model could look like. Currently, the school district is heading into their last implementation year on the quest to fully personalize their learning model, including moving to a fully proficiency-based curriculum aligned with learning standards, exchanging traditional A–F letter grades for Marzano proficiency scales, and doing away with grade level designations in favor of learning levels.

The district has done a lot of background work to identify priority standards and to build a rigorous yet flexible curriculum. The model is an evolving one, said Steiner, with deeper implementation in some areas more than others. At the early elementary levels, students in K–2 attend math classes and reading classes based on their mastery levels of specific standard sets; the groupings are re-examined every four or five weeks based on student growth and need. Later on, in the later elementary grades, personalization may happen within the class, with some whole group lessons or seminar-style discussion, but with personalization as to their book studies, for example. In math, the students move according to standard mastery. As students progress through the middle and high school levels, they begin to work at different levels within a given standard, with choice about how they approach the mastery, and how they apply it in order to demonstrate mastery. At the high school, the district, after several site visits to other high schools, has also implemented a flex mod schedule to make it easier for students to access teachers for targeted help and time for teachers to collaborate with one another during the day. The flex schedule also extends the personalized scheduling available in the Jaguar Academy to all Northern Cass high schools. While self-pacing sounds like a great idea, the teachers and administrators at Northern Cass also understand that this level of time management, self-regulation, and ownership is a lot to ask of students (and sometimes adults). Teachers are poised to step in if a student gets more than three weeks behind or ahead of an expected “teacher pace.” Students who struggle will get extra support. Students who speed ahead will engage in a conversation about next steps. Superintendent Steiner added, “Maybe we let them fly. Or maybe they want to do an independent project, or work as a peer teacher, or go back to work more on a competency where they’ve struggled.”

The move to personalized learning is even changing the vocabulary that is used at Northern Cass as well to reflect the shifts in thinking that accompany the external changes. For example, at Northern Cass, students are referred to as “learners,” while teachers are referred to as “educators” and classrooms are “learning centers.” As Mr. Steiner says, these changes might seem small, but signal the new ways of thinking about the teaching and learning process that district leaders expect to see as they move more deeply into personalized learning. “For any system to function at peak efficiency, common language is essential.”

**Leading Change for All Stakeholders**

“Just because something is different doesn’t mean it is wrong,” Superintendent Steiner has reminded the students, teachers, and families of Northern Cass. Change is hard, and sometimes messy. He quoted W. Somerset Maugham when he said, “We do have a right, at times, an obligation, to change our beliefs, though the longer we’ve held on to them, the harder it is to admit they haven’t served us, or anyone else, for a very long time.” The changes at Northern Cass affect everyone – students, families, teachers, and administrators alike. However, as Steiner reiterated, there is reason to change: “It is our belief the traditional system hasn’t served our learners at the level they deserve... to be honest, in the traditional system, some of them were getting left behind.”

The instructional shift was difficult for some Northern Cass educators. When the student is not dependent on the teacher for content delivery, then the teacher’s role changes to more of a facilitator, connector, and learning coach. Adjusting to this new style of education can be a challenge. In order to support teachers

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6 Ibid.
7 https://hechingerreport.org/whats-school-without-grade-levels/
9 Ibid.
during the transition, the school district has taken advantage of a unique opportunity through North Dakota State University’s teacher leadership academy model. A program that was adapted from a model developed at Kansas State University, the leadership academy allows teachers to take on initiatives in their content area or educational setting; in lieu of traditional research papers, teachers wrote manuals or created resources to help explain the learning model to students, parents, and families. Meanwhile, the district also reworked teacher assignments. Two years ago, for example, the elementary teachers stopped being generalists (teaching all core classes to one grade level) and started to specialize, operating in content area departments rather than grade levels. The idea is that teachers will encounter students in a more broad range of ages and abilities – but only in their academic areas of expertise.

From the student perspective, there is more freedom and autonomy. One student shared that she enjoyed being in control of her own learning and pacing: “I can just lean back and do my stuff instead of always watching the clock and wondering, when can I get out of here?” Mr. Steiner reported that the students were ready for more before the adults were in some cases. At a meeting of the Student Leadership Council, one of the students finally told him, “You all are talking about owning our learning: it’s okay. We’ve got this!”

The transition to a personalized model seemed to hit two specific groups the hardest, according to district leaders. One group were parents who have secondary level students in 11th and 12th grade. These families worried that the change to competency-based learning and lack of traditional grading might mean less success in terms of college acceptance for their students. In order to ensure that this was not the case, Northern Cass worked closely with colleges to verify that their transcripts would be accepted and would translate correctly for student GPAs. Another group that was initially concerned about the change were people (students, parents, teachers, and leaders alike) who self-identify at “not being good with technology;” for those individuals, the technology-based platform was intimidating at first. Ongoing training and communication have helped break down a lot of these initial fears of the unknown. In addition, the district runs a Parent Task Force, a group that meets for two hours monthly to help address these and other concerns.

**Early Investments in Technology Pay Off During Innovation**

Looking ahead and preemptive planning early on helped stave off some, but not all, growing pains in the area of technology. The district is very clear on their stance that technology is, first and foremost, a tool to enhance the learning experience. While it is an integral part of personalizing the opportunities available to a student, technology in no way replaces the teacher. To prepare for their transition, the district gradually increased Internet speeds over time, growing from a 56K frame relay to a 250 Mbps connection today, which exceeds FCC standards for supporting the district’s 1:1 device program in grades 6-12. Northern Cass students have had access to high-speed internet for about a decade; however, district leaders continue to invest in technology hardware, software, and infrastructure to support increased use of online, blended, and personalized learning practices.¹⁰

One of those key investments occurred when the district rolled out computing tablets for use in K-5 classrooms. Initially both students and teacher struggled with the implementation - not because the devices did not work or the curriculum was glitchy, but because the network infrastructure was not ready for the additional load. The solution that Northern Cass settled upon was to install access points in every classroom to ensure ease of access in all learning areas. The district will continue its upgrade and refreshment of wi-fi access points across its campus. Tim Keckler, Technology Coordinator for Northern Cass, acknowledged that, much like personalized learning itself, that technology work is never done. “It’s an ongoing effort,” said Keckler.¹¹

Darin Eller serves as a technology integration specialist for Northern Cass. However, his perspective as a former teacher helps him articulate how incredibly important high-speed internet was for expanding learning opportunities in his own classroom. “The classroom shrinks when you don’t have access,” he says. Increased infrastructure allowed his students to imagine and engage with a world beyond their textbooks. “When you’re connected,” said Eller, “it opens up a whole new level of learning, for both teachers and students.”¹²

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¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.
Today, Northern Cass students are leveraging technology to solve the real-world problems that they see impacting their own community. A Northern Cass 8th grade social studies class was recently recognized as finalists in the 2018-19 Samsung Solve challenge.13 The app they designed gives a person calling 911 an array of options to choose from when communicating with first responders. The students coordinated with multiple first-responder agencies to design the app and its capacities, which include regular phone conversation, video chat capability, or text communication if other options aren’t available. EVA (which stands for “Emergency Video Assistance”) also has an emergency procedure system that callers can access that will walk them through multiple life-saving processes such as CPR or what to do to help a heart attack victim. The relative isolation of the school district was part of the students’ inspiration, said Northern Cass student Jana Russiff.

“Our school is 30-45 minutes away from Fargo, so it’s kind of far and it takes first responders a really long time to get out here. We really didn’t like that,” Russiff said.14

**Becoming an Advocate for Change**

Not only is the school district of Northern Cass working to fully implement and refine their own model and to change the lives of their own students, they are leading change in their state as well. In 2017, Senate Bill 2186 was passed, in part with the support from Northern Cass leaders. The new bill allows schools and districts to apply for waivers from specific parts of the administrative code, offering the opportunity to disrupt traditional structures such as seat time, instructional hours, or learning that only happens on campus during school hours. Fewer districts have been as vocal as Northern Cass, however, about their intention to also do away with grade levels as part of their instructional model. The move to learning levels versus traditional grades is necessary, said Steiner. “We can’t keep structures that would allow us to fall back into a more traditional system,” he added. “If we’re going to do this, we’re going to have to manage without grade levels.”15

On becoming a model school for others wanting to better understand the work of personalized, competency-based education, Steiner is excited for Northern Cass to be recognized as an exemplar. If a school like Northern Cass can achieve this level of innovation in their rural context, this model should be widely available to anyone truly wanting to make change. “On their way to visit Lindsay or another of these pioneering schools, they can stop in North Dakota,” Steiner said, “because there’s a school out in the middle of a cornfield that’s doing this transformative work.”16

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14 Ibid.

15 [https://hechingerreport.org/whats-school-without-grade-levels/](https://hechingerreport.org/whats-school-without-grade-levels/)

16 [https://knowledgeworks.org/resources/north-dakota-school-district-bold-changes/](https://knowledgeworks.org/resources/north-dakota-school-district-bold-changes/)