Pequea Valley School District

Located approximately 60 miles west of Philadelphia in southeastern Pennsylvania, Pequea Valley School District (PVSD) is considered a rural (fringe) district serving approximately 1,500 students in grades K-12.\(^1\) The school district is surrounded by farmland in scenic Lancaster County, and it is comprised of four physical school buildings: one high school (grades 9-12), one middle school (grades 6-8) and two elementary schools (grades K-6).\(^2\) At the high school level, 42% of the student population of PVSD reports as economically disadvantaged (based on Free/Reduced Lunch data in the district) and 15% minority enrollment.\(^3\)

PVSD has long strived to provide a more personalized or customized education for all students within the school district. The district started laying the foundation for this kind of an experience for students when they launched a one-to-one laptop initiative in 2010 and the build-out of a solid technology infrastructure. Having a mobile computing device for each student enabled the district to look more closely at how they wanted the teaching and learning process to work at PVSD. As this technology foundation came into place, district leaders sharpened their focus on the development of a plan to realize their vision of customized education in Pequea Valley.

A Commitment to Customized Learning

Inspired by the book *Inevitable: Mass Customized Learning - Learning in the Age of Empowerment* written by Charles Schwahn and Beatrice McGarvey, the leadership team of Pequea Valley School District formulated a strategy that would establish student-centered learning as the core of their work.\(^4\) The district’s vision statement articulates their goal that PVSD is a place “Where Each Learner Counts.”\(^5\) This vision is coupled with the direct mission of creating an “Ideal Learning Environment” in which all students are inspired to excel. Creating an “Ideal Learning Experience” also means meeting each student at her/his level of interest and ability and also challenging each student in ways that keeps them motivated and eager to return to school each day.\(^6\) Simply walking through the halls of the school, looking at the activity in classrooms, and having even brief conversations with students, teachers, and support staff, it is easy to feel the energy and enthusiasm that exists at Pequea Valley.

The customized learning program has been in existence at PVSD since 2012, and it has been evolving constantly ever since its inception. At the heart of the district’s customized learning program is a collaborative effort of the teachers, administrators, and school board members to provide each and every student with her or his “First Choice.” According to the school district’s Assistant to the Superintendent, Rich Eby, a student’s “First Choice” refers their number one priority or goal to achieve after graduation. For some high school students, this goal would be to attend college or a trade school, but for many PVSD students, the goal is to enter the workforce immediately after high school and be “career ready.” District Superintendent Erik Orndorff elaborated, stating that PVSD faculty, staff, and school leaders are all hyperfocused on “helping kids get what the want as their ‘First Choice’ in life - fulfillment and independence is what we work for in ‘First Choice.’”

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\(^1\) https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/districtsearch/district_detail.asp?Search=1&Zip=17519&Miles=10&ID2=4218900
\(^2\) https://www.pequeavalley.org/domain/3
\(^3\) https://www.usnews.com/education/best-high-schools/pennsylvania/districts/pequea-valley-sd/pequea-valley-high-school-17188
\(^5\) Ibid.
\(^6\) https://www.pequeavalley.org/domain/3
The emphasis that the faculty and staff at PVSD place on college and career readiness is significant. Teachers and administrators alike have taken on the responsibility to truly understand what each student wants or needs upon graduation based on her/his future aspirations. As one building-level administrator stated, “You have to figure out what you want out of the kids when they leave here.” Supporting this statement, a teacher added, “It is all about how do we make learning relevant for building skills that are life sustaining. We’re not just pushing kids to college.” With this understanding, the district personnel personalize the learning experiences for each student by arranging customized internship experiences that are included as part of each student’s curriculum. It is the general philosophy of the district that providing specific workplace experiences through these internships will allow students to get a realistic understanding of what work in their field will look and feel like. One parent of a high school senior who is currently working at an internship location highlighted the fact that such a real-world experience is invaluable for a teenager. She stated, “The time management aspect [of the internship] and the thinking ahead of everything that she has to do for the next day allows my daughter so many more opportunities to be able to kind of grow up faster but not pushing her to do things that she can’t do.”

Another highlight of the customized learning program at PVSD is the fact that all courses for high school students are competency-based, whereby students may work on demonstrating knowledge and skill competencies at their own pace and progress through their coursework based on these learning pathways. The district leverages both blended and fully online course offerings to provide students the flexibility to advance in their coursework in this manner. To a great degree, teachers and school guidance counselors work with students to help them determine which course format would be most beneficial for students. This collaborative approach to determining each student’s schedule has helped to create a tangible culture of trust among the entire school faculty and staff.

At PVSD, many students who have struggled in particular courses within the former traditional model of education are now thriving due to the focused attention customized learning affords. One teacher reported, “We are now able to meet them at their level, where they are able to be successful.” Schoolwide, teachers make it a common practice for students to review their own student performance data on a regular basis; as a result, the students have learned to understand what the data means and what they need to do to grow and to move forward. Another teacher added, “Sometimes kids don’t step up to the challenge; sometimes the students don’t use the opportunities to their advantage. Some do, of course.” The district’s teachers and administrators understand that some students need additional support to learn how to take ownership of their own education, especially if that was not an expectation in their previous learning experience. However, students who are highly motivated have the opportunity to create a large degree of flexibility in their eleventh and twelfth grade schedules due to the competency-based nature of their course. One particular student’s comment summed up the general opinion of many of his peers when he said that completing courses in a self-paced, competency-based manner has “opened up my schedule...I now get to do exactly what I want to do.”

In the earlier years of the district’s customized learning program, the district piloted “Wisdom Wednesdays,” a program in which students who chose to accelerate their coursework could effectively “earn” the second half of the day to explore their passions outside of school. The success of this original program grew over the past few years to the point that students now can create multiple half-day or full-day opportunities through working ahead or structuring their schedules to allow for these extra opportunities. One school-level administrator stated, “This empowers students tremendously.... Students recognize that their school is different and provides more customized opportunities and experiences than other schools do.”
Efficacy Inspired by Leadership

Today, the students, parents, faculty, and staff of Pequea Valley School District are enjoying the benefits of the customized learning program that has matured since 2012. Of course, the effectiveness of the program did not develop overnight. The ongoing thoughtful and strategic conversations within the school’s leadership team, faculty, and parents are directly responsible for the program’s current degree of success. According to school Superintendent Orndorff, establishing a culture of trust and collaboration was a critical foundational factor in the development of the customized learning program. “Culture development has been and still is a major area of focus for sustaining our program,” noted Orndorff. “We work on the development of trust 80% of the time.”

The strong culture of trust and collaboration has clearly manifested in a tremendously high level of self-efficacy among students, faculty, and administrators. Orndorff credits this self-confidence in learning (students), teaching (faculty), and leading (administrators and school board) to what he calls “top-down empowerment.” Empowerment within PVSD begins with the school board, and this body actively encourages the district- and building-level administration to take risks aimed at making the customized learning program even more effective. This empowerment is also consciously practiced by the entire administration team as they encourage teachers to incorporate new strategies and approaches to teaching and “to seize the opportunity” to make the student learning experience as highly personalized as possible. As one building-level administrator articulated, “The most important part is that it is not driven by administration... Teachers are coming to us saying we have this idea, what do you think about it, could we give it a try, and they have ownership of it, and they figure out how to make it work!” In turn, teachers then empower students to have agency over their own learning and drive their own curricula and schedules. As a result, a districtwide culture of expectation, risk-taking, and relevance has emerged. “Students now come to us now and say I want to have this internship, this experience” reported one teacher. Education is now far more relevant to the students, and they recognize the opportunities that they have in their school district.

The impact of effective leadership at PVSD was also evident in the ways in which the district has not only identified but also operationalized their customized learning model, particularly as related to technology, infrastructure, and the use of instructional spaces. For example, significant financial and human resources were allocated by the school board and district-level administrators to provide the computer hardware, classroom devices, digital curriculum, and technical support needed to support the customized learning program, according to the district Director of Technology, Ashley Rednak. The district also invested in high-quality digital curriculum. Rednak added that technology department team members would frequently assist teachers in the classroom as they introduced technology for the first time; risk-taking with using technology was overtly encouraged by administration and supported by the technology support staff members. “Just creating that small change in culture over time made it so much easier for us to move forward” noted Rednak. Other shifts or adjustments to the new learning model included changing layouts of learning spaces, adding multimedia resources, changing furniture, and adapting the role of the librarian. Renak confirmed that “all of these small things over the course of the first four years prior to implementing customized learning really made an impact on our ability to influence change, make change, and continually change.”

District- and building-level leaders unanimously agreed that maintaining a commitment to “breaking down” the traditional time-based structures related to student and teacher schedules was necessary to support customized learning for every student. Administrators proactively reach out to and collaborate with teachers to monitor the effectiveness of current schedules and are eager to make changes that will improve the experiences of students and teachers alike. One teacher underscored the sentiments of several others stating, “There is a true feeling of teamwork and camaraderie.”
The concerted efforts of the PVSD administrative team to develop a culture of trust and to empower students, teachers, and each other has created a level of collective efficacy that is very apparent within the halls and classrooms of the district. Teachers are clearly excited when they speak about the value of the program for students. One teacher said that the new model of learning has definitely “made a lot more work for me - but it is much better for the kids.” Another teacher, and 18-year veteran educator in the district, explained that the leadership of the school district is a key reason why the customized learning is so successful. The teacher reflected on how far the district has come offering, “It’s a different world than what used to be here. It is a shift in mindset that was gradual. It used to be all the reasons why you couldn’t do stuff, and now it is more like an encouragement to bring an idea to the table and see what we can do about it.” Teachers within the district’s customized learning program are now more motivated to think creatively on how to bring valuable experiences to students, and they have strong belief that their work with students on a daily basis is truly making a difference in the lives of the students.

A Look Ahead
As PVSD continues to forge ahead with the continued development of its customized learning program, assistant to the superintendent Rich Eby explained that preparing students for their “First Choice” futures will remain a priority. District personnel will continue to develop deeper relationships within the community’s workforce to expand regional opportunities for student internships and real-world experiences. PVSD Superintendent Orndorff insisted that the work specific to the development of a team mindset among the students, parents, teachers, and administrators will also remain a priority - and that protecting the existing culture of trust at all levels is paramount. But he is also offered a few words of reminder about why this work is so important: “What fires me up is changing a kid's life for the better,” added school Superintendent Orndorff.