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The Oshkosh Area School District educates about 10,000 students attending 21 school sites in central Wisconsin. Over the past five years the district has developed its Learning without Limits initiative, which provides students with a 21st century learning environment that personalizes instruction and extends learning beyond classrooms. A key element is embedded professional development, provided in schools by technology integration coaches who assist teachers with exploring and implementing ways to use instructional strategies in their classrooms. The district also supports a group of teachers who are finding ways to transform their classrooms as part of a personalized learning cohort. Alex Griffith (left side in picture) is one of these teachers; she works with technology integration coach Kristi Levy (right).

“*My personalized learning journey started* at the conclusion of my first year of teaching, which ended with me crying in my car. I teach at-risk students, and one third of my students failed my class that first year. I had used the curriculum I was given, and a standard teaching approach, and I felt like I failed my students. I was using common assessments, common prompts, common everything—and it didn’t work.

Then I got angry at my failure, and tried something new at the start of the next year. I asked my students: why did they hate school? They said that school forces them to conform to everything. We tell them when to speak, when to go to the bathroom, and what they have to learn. We don’t instead ask what they want to learn, and how to learn it. I thought if I can change that equation maybe I can reach these students. We have a gold mine of talent in every classroom, but when we tell them they have to conform we bury their talent, their interest, their flame. I had to figure out how to reach more students, by doing what they wanted, and working with their interests, their abilities, and their challenges.

*I sought out my district technology* facilitator (Kristi Levy) to help me. I realized that the district was already having conversations about how to

personalize learning, using technology that it was investing in, and I could find the support that I needed. The support from Kristi and the district has been so important.

*Technology supports what we do, but* it is mostly embedded, and we don’t talk about it much. Kristi and I gave an entire conference presentation about personalized learning and never once mentioned tech. I think maybe we could even take a similar approach to instruction with paper and folders instead of computers, if we had to, but without the technology we would be severely hindered. For example, students choose how they are being assessed—some create websites, others produce documentaries, others launch social media campaigns. We can’t do that without the technology.

*Using student voice doesn’t mean the teacher voice goes away.* The teacher is still the guide, still the voice of reason. It’s not one or the other, teacher or student. It’s the combination of both. The most powerful moments in my classroom are when we connect face to face, not with technology. The number one factor motivating students is connecting with them and showing them how much they matter to you. Teaching this way requires that I really know

my students, using more data than was available to me before.

***When leveraging technology through the personalization process, it's amazing to watch students' capabilities.*** Providing the learning opportunities is the true magic, but technology has the power to open so many doors and broaden the horizons of my students. In a world literature classroom, technology does wonders for building empathy and understanding of cultures across the globe.

I truly believe personalizing learning is crucial to maximizing student outcomes, but this year, the students in my classroom needed to scaffold the process of owning their learning. And when you think about it, it makes sense. Kids are still used to a one size fits all curriculum and an education system that still perpetuates a universal model. They need time to adjust to having the driver's seat because for many of them, they haven't had a lot of voice or choice in their learning. They need time to recognize their talents and passions. They need me to model learning at times.

***We've had success, but we're also running into constraints.*** As Kristi says, teachers can only move so far if they are only personalizing within their classrooms, within the school structure—50-minute class periods, semester schedules, etc. The main issue I'm trying to figure out now is that I tell students their work matters more than their grade, but then I have to give them a letter grade because the district requires it. I need to find a way to break this model, but it's been around forever and that's how our universities run. I tell students you're not just a final grade, I want to look at your real mastery, but then I have to give them that final grade that I say is not that important.

***On average, I teach about one hundred fifty kids.*** Trying to keep track of where all of my kids are on all of the standards I need to assess and continuously assessing these skills to determine growth is a daunting task at times. Technology does make my job easier, but large class sizes certainly make it challenging to personalize my curriculum.

***The students in my classroom continue to have a very high passing rate*** and most failures are directly related to truancy. I wholeheartedly attribute the success of my students to the connections we build by truly knowing who they are as learners and to student recognition that I value them as active participants in their learning. By empowering students, they are not afraid to take risks, and they view failure as an opportunity to thrive. By the end of this year, I had students sending shoes and sporting goods to poverty stricken countries, running plastic bottle drives to increase recycling, collecting goods for homeless shelters, teaching others how to spot instances of human trafficking in their community, and even designing campaigns to erase the stigma of mental illness. Through access to technology and personalized learning, students can bring their learning beyond the walls of the classroom. The beauty of personalization is integrating passion back into the learning process. And when students have opportunities to find and exercise their passions, they will floor you time and time again. ■