

# What Is Personalized Learning and Why Is It so Controversial? Five Questions Answered

*Editor's note: The term "personalized learning" is becoming more common. Indeed, [39 states](#) mention personalized learning in their [school improvement plans](#), as required by the Every Student Succeeds Act. Not only are states [legislating](#) personalized learning, but philanthropists are [funding](#) it and, in some cases, families are [pushing back](#) against it. Penny Bishop, a researcher who focuses on [learning environments](#), answers five questions about personalized learning. Her edited answers are below.*

## 1. What is personalized learning?

As one education writer [observed](#), the term has been used to describe "everything from supplemental software programs to whole-school redesigns." In its most basic form, the goal of personalization is to customize learning to an individual student's needs by giving the student greater control of the learning. What students are given control over, however, varies based on the type of personalized learning environment.

## 2. What types of personalized learning are there?

Two of the most common types of personalized learning are pace-driven and student-driven.

Pace-driven personalization enables the learner to move

through the material at his or her own pace, typically through an online curriculum that adapts to the learner's needs and skills along the way. This addresses the problem that human beings do not learn at the same rate, even though most schools organize students by age. [Khan Academy](#), an extensive online set of instructional videos, tools and exercises, is one well-known example of this approach. The academy lets students slow down or speed up based on their level and rate of mastery. Although students have greater control over the pace of their learning, the curriculum is pretty much already established.

In student-driven personalization, students play a bigger role in what they want to learn based on their goals and interests. That is to say, the curriculum itself – not just the pace at which a student moves through it – is personalized. Students work both individually and collaboratively, often on projects that align with the questions and issues they wish to explore.

In Vermont, where personalized learning plans have been mandated in grades 7-12, for instance, students might choose to learn about genetics and nutrition through [dairy farming](#). Or students might study [forest ecology](#) and population growth guided by the United Nations' [sustainable development goals](#).

### **3. Is personalized learning something to worry about?**

As with most educational reform, personalized learning is controversial. With pace-driven personalization, some parents report that their children are spending [too much time in front of computer screens](#). This is particularly a problem for families who already struggle to limit their children's screen time at home. In other cases, students complain that personalized learning leads to an overreliance on technology and a [lack of meaningful interaction with teachers](#). Initiatives such as [Summit Learning](#), a personalized learning program [developed by Facebook](#) and funded by the [Chan](#)

[Zuckerberg Initiative](#), have experienced significant [backlash](#) over similar issues.

Student-driven personalization has not met with the same concerns about isolation, as learning is often collaborative and connected to the local community. However, student-driven personalization often replaces traditional grading practices with [competency-based assessment](#), a grading system based on students showing that they have learned certain skills. Some families worry about their [children being disadvantaged](#) by competency-based assessments as they apply to selective colleges and universities. The reason is because competency-based transcripts may not include traditional GPA or class rank information, which parents worry could affect their children's chances of getting into their desired schools.

## 4. What's the long-term impact of personalized learning?

It's too soon to assess the effects of personalized learning on students' life outcomes. The implementation of personalized learning is [challenging](#). Educational researchers and policymakers are still figuring out [how to measure what it looks like](#) in practice. And educators don't know enough about which strategies are most effective. With [millions of dollars](#) being invested, however, personalized learning [continues to spread](#) across the nation. And [states](#) are paying more attention to studying both how it's being implemented and what kind of results it's getting.

Early evidence suggests that personalized learning can improve [student achievement](#) and student engagement, but exactly how it does so remains unclear. My colleagues and I at the [Tarrant Institute for Innovative Education](#) study student-driven personalization within a statewide policy context. [Our research](#) shows that students are deeply engaged by having more say in what and how they learn. They find a great sense of

agency in doing real work that matters and that holds personal and social significance. Families notice the new levels of engagement demonstrated by their children and even learn new things about them. And teachers are inspired by their students' perseverance and commitment when delving into learning that is personal.

## **5. Will personalized learning replace teachers?**

Our research shows that teachers remain a crucial element in the schools of today and the future. Far from making teachers obsolete, student-driven personalized learning requires an expanded set of [skills and dispositions](#) from teachers, one that demands they are even more responsive to the evolving interests and needs of their learners. For example, in order to help students achieve their learning goals, teachers need to scout out a wide array of resources and match these with each student's skill level. While challenging, understanding each student's needs and interests in this way can help strengthen relationships.

In fact, thoughtful implementation can bolster [students' relationships with teachers](#), as well as with their peers, families and communities, by inviting learners to share their identities, curiosities and questions with others. While teachers in traditional settings may opt to invite similar sharing, understanding students on a personal level is an essential component of the personalized learning environment. Making learning personal shouldn't mean isolation. On the contrary, it seems the best of learning is both personal and social.

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