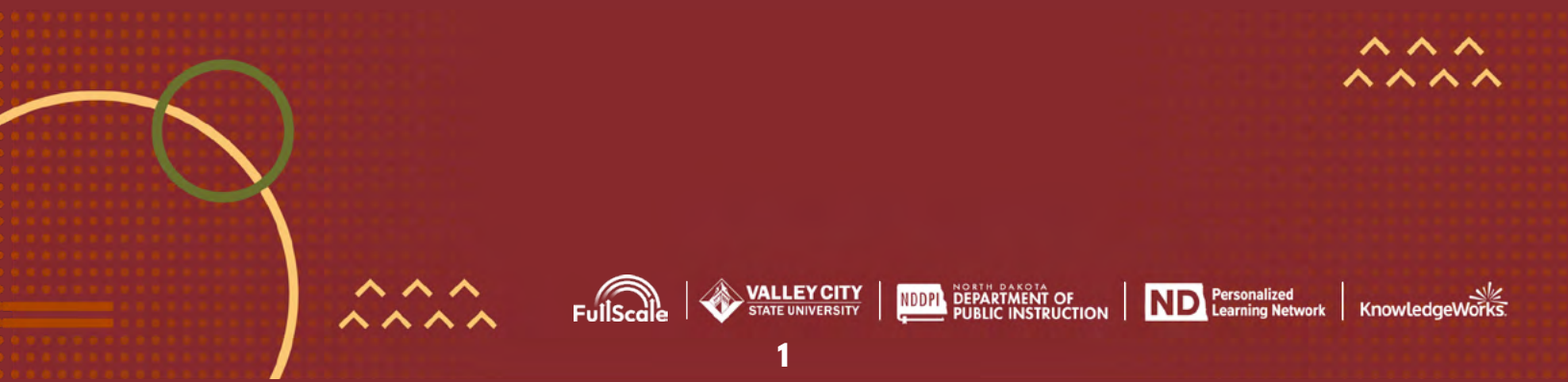


Jamestown Public Schools: Expanding Pathways Through Personalized Learning



A Shared Vision for Meaningful Learning

Mornings at Jamestown High School often begin in motion, with learning unfolding across spaces inside and outside the building.

In a science classroom, learners lean over dissection tables to engage in hands-on applications of their recent unit. Across the building, senior English learners debate self-selected poems in a March Madness-style tournament, using literary analysis and persuasive argumentation to convince classmates which works deserve to move forward.

In the school gym, another group gathers as they prepare for a very different kind of learning experience—an emergency response simulation.



Learners prepare for a hands-on learning demonstration of their emergency response training.

Meanwhile, in the parking lot, students from the drama department—covered in realistic makeup depicting injuries—play the victims as learners in Jamestown’s Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) program come onto the scene carrying emergency kits, assessing injuries, communicating with first responders, and applying protocols they’ve practiced throughout the year. Firefighters, EMTs, and law enforcement personnel observe from the sidelines while representatives from the North Dakota Department of Emergency Services film footage for updated statewide training materials.

The simulation was more than a classroom activity. It was an opportunity for learners to apply core concepts in an authentic setting connected directly to community needs.

Across Jamestown Public Schools, educators are working to create more experiences like these—learning that feels relevant, hands-on, collaborative, and connected to young people’s futures. Whether through career pathways, student design summits, project-based learning, or evolving assessment practices, the district is exploring how personalized learning can help learners move beyond completing school and toward more meaningful engagement in learning that prepares them for their futures. As one district leader asked:

“How do we move from transactional learning, where kids are just accumulating credits and grades, to more transformational learning where they feel empowered to do things that are meaningful for them and that actually make a difference in the community?”

Connecting Agency, Relevance, and Real-World Learning

Located roughly halfway between Fargo and Bismarck, Jamestown Public Schools serves a rural North Dakota community through one high school, one middle school, and four elementary schools. Educators across Jamestown have spent several years exploring how learner-centered practices can expand opportunities and improve engagement, and the district is continuing to build toward districtwide implementation of personalized learning.

That work has included strengthening standards-based learning practices, expanding career-connected and project-based learning, rethinking grading and assessment, and exploring how schedules and systems might better support learner needs and interests.

District leaders are careful not to describe the work as complete. Jamestown’s approach is characterized by strong pockets of innovation, growing district alignment, and a willingness to experiment, reflect, and build over time.

Partnership with [North Dakota’s Personalized Learning Network](#) (NDPLN) has played an important role in that process. Educators repeatedly referenced NDPLN site visits, statewide collaboration, and design support as important influences on their thinking—particularly as the district navigates declining enrollment and explores possible schedule redesigns for the future. Leaders increasingly use those challenges as a chance to ask broader questions about flexibility, relevance, and opportunity.

“We just need to think differently about how we operate,” one district leader noted.

Across the district, that thinking is increasingly shaping conversations about what learning should look like—and what learners, families, and the community need from school moving forward.

Exercising Agency In Reimagining School

Within [North Dakota’s Personalized Learning Framework](#) (PL Framework), **learner agency** focuses on helping learners develop ownership, voice, and active engagement in their learning experiences. As Jamestown explores possible schedule redesigns and broader instructional changes, district administration has created meaningful opportunities for learners to contribute to conversations about the future of learning in their schools.

During a [student design summit](#) hosted in partnership with the NDPLN, middle and high school youth gathered in small groups to discuss the kinds of experiences they believe school should prepare them for—not just academically, but socially and professionally as well.

LEARNER AGENCY

Learners feel empowered to take ownership of the learning process by embracing goal setting, reflecting on their strengths and challenges, building self-efficacy, and leveraging their voice to advocate for unique needs, preferences, and interests.



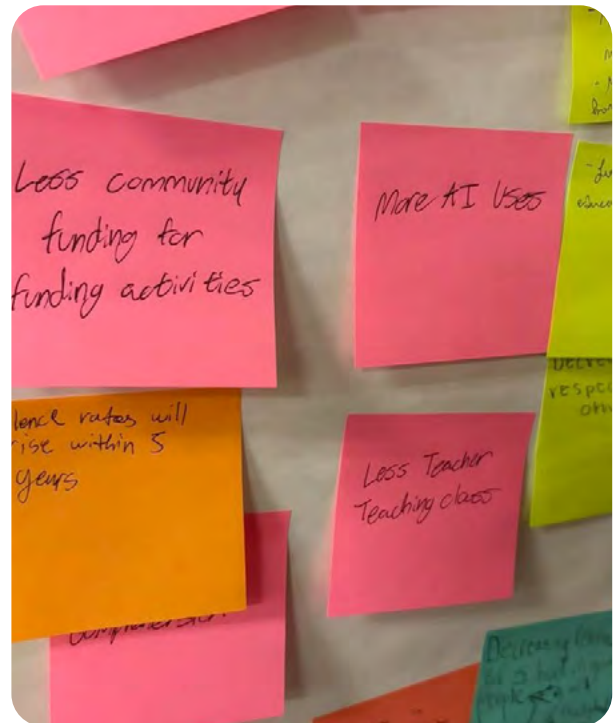
Learners share their predictions for future education trends.

Learners discussed the importance of flexibility, having time in their day to explore new ideas or learning that interests them. They want to have a voice in deciding how to spend their time meaningfully. They also talked about meaningful learning experiences and opportunities for growth, noting that mistakes are a valuable learning opportunity, but school can feel high stakes and not a place to make them. In breakouts, one small group of learners discussed artificial intelligence, communication across generations, concerns about how people with differences are treated, and the importance of learning how to navigate an increasingly complex world. Others reflected on the types of learning experiences that feel meaningful to them and the opportunities they wish existed more consistently throughout their school day.

The conversations are part of a larger coalition process examining possible schedule changes and instructional shifts across the district. Importantly, district leaders did not begin with a predetermined model. Instead, they assembled a guiding coalition, gathered feedback from staff and families, and intentionally included young people in the conversation before decisions were made.

“We could make a decision at central office and just say, ‘We’re moving to a new schedule next year,’” explained one leader. “But that’s not the right way to do it. We’re not building capacity like that.”

For district leaders, one of the biggest takeaways from the summit was the depth of student thinking. “We need to continue this conversation with kids. They have tremendous insight and voice,” one leader reflected.



In Jamestown, learner agency shows up through classroom-level choice and goal setting, while also involving young people more directly in conversations about how learning itself is designed and experienced.

Connecting Learning to Life Beyond School

Across the district, **relevant learning experiences** are designed to help learners connect what they are learning to their interests, future goals, and the needs of the world around them. At the high school level, that often looks hands-on, collaborative, and closely tied to life beyond school walls.

That approach is especially visible at James Valley Career & Technology Center, where learners pursue pathways ranging from aviation and welding to agriculture, automotive technology, education, culinary arts, and health sciences. The offerings represent both learner interests and community needs.

RELEVANT LEARNING EXPERIENCES

Learners engage in rigorous learning experiences designed to support and grow learners' unique strengths, preferences, goals, and interests.

For example, a young man interested in earning a commercial driver's license (CDL) after graduation partnered with local industry professionals to gain access to training experiences and equipment. Through collaboration with a local trucking company, the district arranged for a commercial rig and simulator to support his preparation toward earning a CDL.

Across programs, local industry partners serve on advisory boards that review curriculum, evaluate learning experiences relative to industry expectations, and provide feedback on career progression frameworks. Those partnerships help ensure that learning remains connected to evolving local workforce needs while also giving learners access to authentic professional expectations and experiences.

"Bring your challenges to us," one school leader said. "We've got 700 capable kids at the high school that can help solve those challenges."

The district has also expanded work-based learning opportunities that allow learners to gain paid, hands-on experience while still in high school. These experiences move beyond observational internships by asking learners to apply skills and demonstrate competency in professional environments. This relevance helps make clear connections between learning, contribution, and future pathways.

That same emphasis on relevance and application was evident during the CERT emergency response simulation. Drama students, CERT students, and first responders worked together to create a realistic emergency scenario requiring learners to apply learning under pressure while being observed by professionals from across the community and state.



Career-ready practices and proficiencies are outlined on a bulletin board near the school entrance.

Demonstrating Learning in Authentic Ways

Across the district, educators are increasingly exploring how learners can apply, communicate, and show what they know in ways that extend beyond traditional tests and assignments.

At the high school level, learners regularly complete projects that ask them to synthesize learning across content areas, present to audiences, and connect academic skills to real-world contexts. In one English course, for example, learners curate portfolios of evidence connected to competencies such as collaboration, communication, adaptability, empathy, and critical thinking. Evidence might include research projects, presentations, performances, extracurricular experiences, or community work.

Learners also complete a multimedia capstone project requiring them to develop written arguments, visual campaigns, presentations, and proposals connected to real organizations and community issues before presenting their work to local professionals and community members. Other learning experiences ask them to analyze literature through contemporary media, debate poetry tournament-style, create original adaptations and performances, or defend their thinking publicly in front of peers and adults.

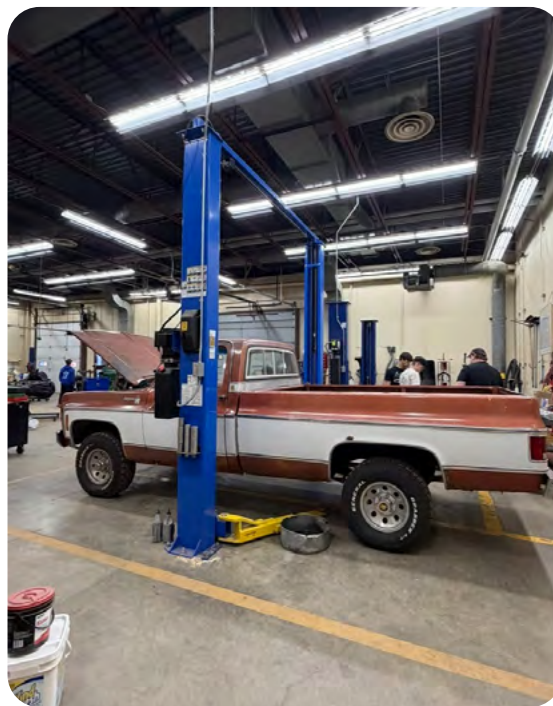
The district's approach to **demonstration of learning** also extends beyond traditional academic settings. The CERT emergency response simulation provides a perfect example—learners applied emergency response training in a realistic scenario observed by first responders and state education representatives. In CTE pathways, learners demonstrate competency through hands-on projects, industry-aligned experiences, and work-based learning opportunities connected directly to professional expectations.

Educators are continuing conversations about the relationship between grading, assessment, and meaningful evidence of learning. As Jamestown prepares for a transition toward standards-based grading at the high school level, educators and leaders are increasingly asking:

- What does proficiency actually look like?
- What kinds of evidence best demonstrate understanding?
- And how can learners show learning in ways that feel authentic and meaningful?

DEMONSTRATION OF LEARNING

Learners progress along a continuum of learning based on mastery of clearly defined, transparent, and measurable prioritized standards and/or competencies. Learners have voice in how and when they show evidence of learning.



As part of applied learning in automotive technology, learners often bring in their own vehicles.

At the middle school level, administrators described ongoing conversations with staff about helping learners demonstrate understanding in multiple ways rather than relying exclusively on traditional assignments and point accumulation. “It’s practice,” one administrator explained. “Think of it as a coach. You practice every day after school, but that’s not the game.”

While those conversations are evolving, they reflect a broader shift underway across the district: moving beyond learning as compliance and towards learning as application, reflection, and growth.

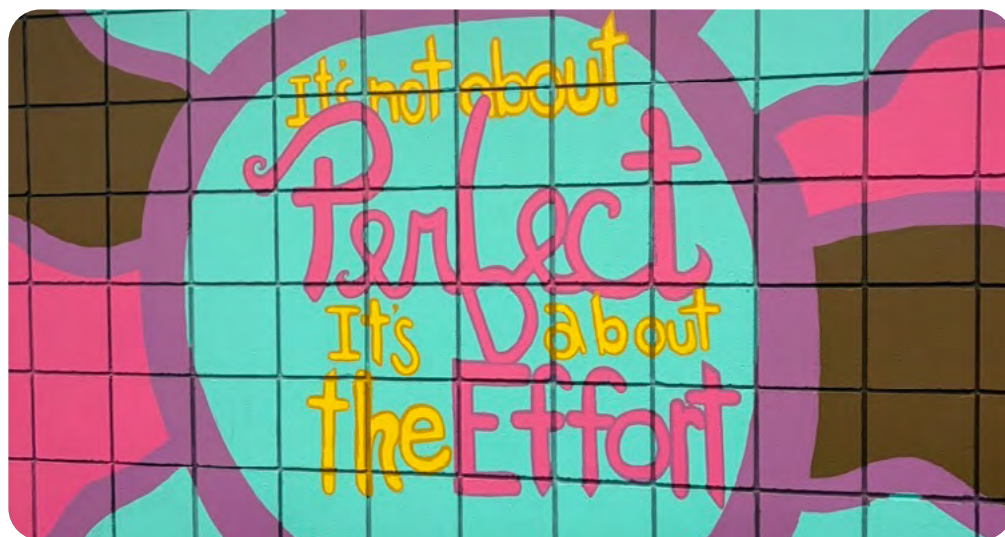
Commitment to Continuous Improvement

Jamestown Public Schools views their work as a transformative journey, one that will continue to require reflection and refinement.

District leaders continue to explore schedule redesign, interdisciplinary learning opportunities, stronger community partnerships, and expanded pathways that allow learners to connect learning more directly to their interests and future plans. Leaders are also working to create more opportunities for educators to collaborate, experiment, and pilot new ideas in supportive environments.

At the same time, leaders recognize that systems change requires patience, trust, and ongoing conversation.

“Start small, but start anywhere,” one leader advised educators interested in personalized learning. That spirit of steady experimentation and reflection continues to shape the district’s approach. Across classrooms, partnerships, and planning conversations, Jamestown educators are not trying to build a one-size-fits-all model of personalized learning. Instead, they are working to create a system where students experience learning as purposeful, connected, and meaningful — and where schools continue evolving alongside the needs of the learners and the communities they serve.



An encouraging mural in Jamestown High School.

Acknowledgements

This case study was made possible with the generous support of KnowledgeWorks, the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction, and Valley City State University.

We extend our sincere appreciation to the educators, leaders, and learners who shared their experiences and insights to inform this case study. Special thanks to:

- Adam Gehlhar, Interim Superintendent of Jamestown Public School
- Dr. Rob Lech, Superintendent of Jamestown Public Schools
- Heidi Eckart, Assistant Director at James Valley Career and Technology Center
- Darby Heinert, Principal at Jamestown High School
- Brian Knox, Principal at Jamestown Middle School

©2026 FullScale, KnowledgeWorks Foundation, North Dakota Department of Public Instruction, North Dakota Personalized Learning Network and Valley City State University. All rights reserved.

