

Building Momentum for Personalized Learning in North Dakota



A Statewide Effort to Personalize Learning

Across North Dakota, a profound transformation is underway. Through the [North Dakota Personalized Learning Network](#) (NDPLN), schools are proving that when learning environments are intentionally designed around the unique strengths, interests, and aspirations of every student, engagement skyrockets and achievement follows. What began as a [visionary partnership](#) among local educators, state leaders, and [KnowledgeWorks](#) has evolved into a growing, statewide movement. Now anchored by [Valley City State University](#) and fueled by growing state investment, NDPLN is driving systemic impact and fostering deep collaboration and scaling student-centered success across the state.

At Empower[Ed] in Bismarck Public Schools, high school learners demonstrate mastery through internships, projects, community experiences, and personalized pathways connected to their interests and future goals. Educators serve as mentors and facilitators, helping learners take greater ownership over how they learn and show understanding.

At Northern Cass School District, flexible studio models and competency-based learning structures create opportunities for learners to pursue meaningful projects, build durable skills, and connect learning to future pathways. Across classrooms, learners regularly reflect on progress, advocate for what they need, and engage in learning experiences shaped by voice, choice, and authentic application.

At Westside Elementary in West Fargo, learner supports are designed around relationships and belonging. Through the “Wildcat Zone,” learners access flexible supports that help them remain connected to learning, build self-awareness, and navigate challenges throughout the school day.

Each of these schools is transforming learning by creating environments where learners are known deeply, supported purposefully, and actively engaged in meaningful learning connected to their strengths and aspirations.

Grounded in [North Dakota’s Personalized Learning Framework](#) (PL Framework), the network focuses on six interconnected elements of personalized learning:

- Relationships
- Learner Supports
- Learner Agency
- Demonstration of Learning
- Continuum of Learning
- Relevant Learning Experiences

Across the state, schools are bringing these elements to life in different ways depending on their communities’ needs, goals, and stage of implementation. The following spotlights highlight just a few examples of how North Dakota educators are translating the framework into daily practice.



Empower[Ed] Learner Portfolios

Located within Bismarck Public Schools, Empower[Ed] is a personalized, competency-based program for high school juniors and seniors designed around the premise that young people should have meaningful ownership over their learning and demonstrations of mastery. Empower[Ed] organizes learning and provides opportunities to master standards and competencies through projects, community experiences, internships, independent inquiry, and career-connected learning pathways. Educators act as facilitators, coaches, and mentors, helping learners connect academic competencies to their interests and goals.

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

- Transparent standards and competencies guide learning while allowing flexibility in how learners demonstrate mastery.
- Learners choose how they demonstrate mastery through projects, presentations, internships, businesses, and community experiences.
- Demonstrations often happen through conferences with educators where learners explain, defend, and apply their understanding.
- Learners connect learning to personal interests, careers, and experiences both inside and outside of school.
- Educators serve as mentors and advisors in a collaborative environment.

WHY IT WORKS

- Clear competencies detail essential learning goals while allowing for flexibility and personalization.
- Learners are trusted to choose contexts and evidence of learning that are meaningful to them.
- Purposeful applications increase engagement and ownership over learning.
- Demonstrations prioritize explanation, reflection, and transfer of learning.
- Strong relationships create the psychological safety necessary for learners to take risks and advocate for themselves.
- Learning facilitators help students navigate both academic goals and postsecondary planning.
- The model validates learning happening both inside and outside of school.

How This Supports Learners

Learners at Empower[Ed] are deepening ownership of their learning by connecting competencies and academic standards to their future goals. Through projects, internships, presentations, and community-based experiences related to their interests and real-world experiences, learners engage more deeply in academic content. Educators observe stronger engagement, increased confidence, and greater ownership across the program as learners take a more active role in planning, reflecting on, and demonstrating their learning. Through regular opportunities to explain their thinking, collaborate with others, and navigate real-world challenges, learners build durable skills such as communication, self-direction, problem-solving, and adaptability.

Northern Cass Studio Model

For over a decade, Northern Cass School District has undertaken an effort to redesign learning around personalization, proficiency, and learner growth. Serving rural communities outside Fargo, ND, Northern Cass has developed a learner-centered model grounded in standards-based learning, Portrait of a Learner (PoL) competencies, and flexible instructional models.

That approach comes to life through experiences like the district's studio model, where learners engage in interdisciplinary, hands-on projects connected to real-world questions and challenges. During one recent studio experience, learners explored agriculture, nutrition, sustainability, and food systems through greenhouse-based learning while examining larger questions about commercial food production, preservatives, chemicals, and healthy living. Through experiences like this, Northern Cass is building structures that give learners greater flexibility and ownership within their local public school system.

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

- Students progress through learning using proficiency scales and transparent standards.
- Studio experiences allow learners to interact across grade levels while pursuing projects connected to their interests and aspirations.
- Learners demonstrate mastery of academic standards and competencies through projects, presentations, and applied work.
- PoL competencies such as advocacy, communication, and leadership are embedded across learning experiences.
- Learners discuss their goals, strengths, and future pathways with adults and peers.

WHY IT WORKS

- A coherent learner-centered vision and transparent standards help learners understand expectations and monitor growth across grade levels.
- Studio models create experiential opportunities for learners to apply learning in meaningful, real-world ways.
- PoL competencies build shared language around durable skills necessary for success after graduation.
- Educators have embedded learner voice and flexibility alongside clear and rigorous academic expectations.
- Multiple pathways help learners engage in ways that reflect their strengths and goals.

How This Supports Learners

Learners take a more active role in their learning by reflecting on progress, setting goals, and connecting academic work to future pathways. Across classrooms and studio experiences, learners engage in projects and applied learning that strengthen both academic understanding and real-world relevance. As opportunities for meaningful application have expanded, educators report stronger engagement, increased learner ownership, and greater confidence in communication, collaboration, leadership, and self-advocacy. Together, these experiences help learners build the durable skills needed for success in college, careers, and life beyond graduation.

The Westside Elementary Wildcat Zone

Several years ago, educators at Westside Elementary began reflecting on how to better support learners experiencing stress, frustration, reactivity, or difficulty remaining engaged during the school day. Too often, learners missed instructional time while educators responded reactively in the moment. “We realized we didn’t have a behavior problem. We had a regulation problem,” one educator reflected. School leaders wanted to create a more proactive, relationship-centered approach to help learners remain connected to both learning and support throughout the day.

The result was the Wildcat Zone: a structured learner-support system designed to provide space for learners to regulate, maintain access to learning, and build stronger relationships with adults and peers. This space serves multiple functions throughout the day, including time for proactive incentives, quiet workspaces, social skills instruction, and short-term crisis support. Relationships are not separate from the support system. They are what make the system work.

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

The Wildcat Zone includes several clearly defined spaces:

- **Gold Zone:** positive relationship- and regulation-focused breaks connected to learner goals
- **Pit Stop:** reset space for those who need to regulate
- **Work Zone:** quiet, independent work areas
- **Instruction Zone:** small-group social skills instruction
- **Crisis Support:** high-level support for those with more intensive needs

Learners check in digitally and identify why they are there while educators use common language, timers, and decision-making guides.

WHY IT WORKS

Westside pairs personalization with consistency.

- Learners have individualized plans, and supports are tailored to their unique needs.
- Routines are predictable across the school.
- Positive breaks help learners build relationships with adults and peers outside moments of crisis.
- Supports are proactive and skill-based, not solely reactive.
- Ensures all learners regularly experience positive interactions with adults and peers across the school day.

Educators understand learner needs over time and respond with consistent support.

How This Supports Learners

The Wildcat Zone helps learners remain engaged in learning by creating consistent opportunities for support, skill-building, and successful re-engagement throughout the school day. Educators describe stronger learning conditions across classrooms, including improved engagement, increased access to instruction, and more positive relationships between learners and adults. Over time, learners are developing greater confidence in recognizing what they need, communicating with others, and navigating challenges productively. These experiences help learners build self-awareness, responsibility, and communication skills that support both academic growth and success beyond the classroom.

Looking Ahead

The North Dakota Personalized Learning Network continues to build momentum through collaboration, shared learning, and local innovation. These examples reflect how the NDPLN helps schools learn from one another while adapting personalized learning to their own local contexts. At Westside Elementary, personalized learning takes shape through learner supports and relationship-centered systems that help younger learners regulate and remain connected to learning. Empower[Ed] learners demonstrate agency and ownership through capstone experiences and authentic demonstrations of learning. For Northern Cass, flexible studio models and competency-based structures create more relevant and responsive pathways for learners.

While these approaches look different, they are grounded in a shared framework and the common belief that young people learn best when they are known well, supported purposefully, and given meaningful opportunities to grow.

Leaders across the North Dakota Personalized Learning Network emphasize that this work is still evolving. Schools continue refining systems, testing new ideas, and learning from one another through collaboration, site visits, coaching, and shared problem-solving. The goal of the NDPLN is not to help schools replicate a single model, but to support educators in taking meaningful next steps within their own local context.

Throughout site visits and interviews, educators repeatedly pointed to the importance of learning alongside other schools doing this work. Seeing practices in action, asking questions, sharing challenges, and adapting ideas to fit local contexts helped many schools move from isolated innovations toward more coherent systems. That collaborative approach has been strengthened over time through partnerships among districts, state leaders, higher education institutions, and organizations like KnowledgeWorks, which helped support the early development of the network through convenings, coaching, and statewide collaboration structures.

Today, Valley City State University helps support the continued coordination and growth of the NDPLN, and expanding statewide investment is building long-term infrastructure for professional learning, implementation, and continuous improvement across North Dakota.

That spirit of collaboration and continuous learning endures as the next phase of personalized learning takes shape across North Dakota.



Additional Resources

For schools and districts interested in exploring this work more deeply, additional resources are available across the network, including:

- **North Dakota Personalized Learning Network**

Useful [resources](#), [frameworks](#), [professional learning opportunities](#), and [policy context](#) designed to support educators exploring personalized learning in their own communities.

- **South Elementary Case Study**

A deeper look at schoolwide implementation of personalized learning, at a mid-size district who has been working on their model for years. Spotlights include relationships and culture-building, learner supports, and a continuum of learning.

- **Jamestown Public Schools Case Study**

A districtwide implementation journey in earlier stages of development, highlighting how systems, structures, and classroom practices evolve over time. A deeper look at demonstration of learning, learner agency, and relevant learning experiences in practice.

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