

South Elementary School: Creating a Personalized Learning Culture for Young Learners



Putting Learners at the Center

A giant bulldozer claws through a playground just outside the kindergarten windows, metal crashing against concrete. For the learners working, the noise barely registers. Some sit on wobble stools. Others curl into soft chairs or kneel at low tables. A few work shoulder-to-shoulder on the carpet. Around the room, educators and interventionists move between groups, checking in, redirecting gently, and asking questions like: “What makes you think that?” and “Show me your evidence.” The learners hardly notice the adults (or the large construction equipment) moving around them. They are too engaged in their learning.

At South Elementary in West Fargo, North Dakota, personalized learning is not a separate initiative or isolated classroom strategy. It’s woven into the rhythms of the school day. Learners track their own growth, conference regularly with educators, work in flexible groups, reflect on their learning, mentor younger peers, and make meaningful choices throughout the day—from where they sit to how they demonstrate proficiency. More striking than any individual strategy, however, is the way learners talk about learning itself.

In a group discussion, learners eagerly competed to explain the school’s proficiency scale. They confidently explained their understanding of each step in the scale, connecting it to both mastery and how they feel about their progression. The growth mindset was prevalent among the group, with one explaining, “If you’re a two or a one, we like to say you’re not proficient yet.”

The conversation continued for nearly an hour. Learners interrupted each other excitedly to share examples of projects, conferences, research topics, and moments of asking for more challenging work. They laughed constantly, snapped, and cheered for classmates recognized during morning announcements. They spoke comfortably about standards, evidence, and progression.

Throughout the building, learning is visible everywhere—and so is joy.

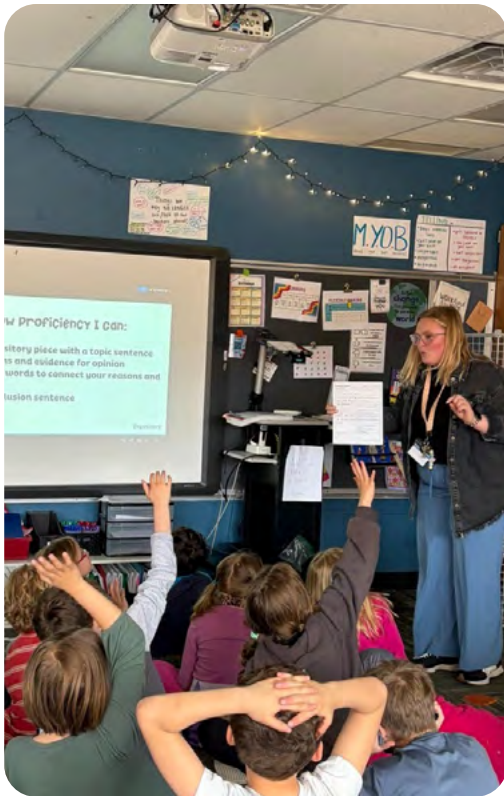


Learners remain deeply engaged in reading breakouts while a bulldozer works in the background.

Building a Culture of Support, Relationships, and Growth

South Elementary offers a compelling example of what can happen when personalized learning is implemented purposefully and sustained over time. As one of the more established schools connected to North Dakota’s Personalized Learning Network (NDPLN), South reflects years of learning, coaching, collaboration, and refinement.

Educators and leaders regularly referenced site visits, statewide convenings, instructional coaching, and opportunities to observe other learner-centered schools as critical in shaping their work.



Learners reflect on proficiency indicators in their writing.

Leaders at South are quick to point out that the transformation did not happen all at once. “It wasn’t until we found the purpose and vision,” one leader explained. “Once we had shared beliefs, we had that foundation to build from.” Rather than attempting to implement every aspect of personalized learning simultaneously, South built its approach piece by piece. Educators entered the work through different elements of the Network’s Personalized Learning Framework (PL Framework). For some, relationships became the starting point. Others focused first on learner profiles, goal-setting, assessment and feedback, or conferencing systems. Over time, those practices became more connected and coherent.

West Fargo Public Schools’ district support also helped make the work sustainable. Educators emphasized that personalization became more impactful as the district strengthened alignment around standards, curriculum, proficiency scales, and assessment. Shared instructional language and common expectations across grade levels allowed educators to focus more deeply on responsive instruction, flexible grouping, and student ownership.

For South, personalized learning does not mean every learner doing entirely different work all the time. Learners still work toward shared standards and common expectations. What changes are the pathways, scaffolds, pacing, groupings, and opportunities for voice and choice that help learners progress toward proficiency.

Over time, those systems have shaped not only the learner experiences, but adult experiences as well. Multiple educators described renewed creativity and enthusiasm in their practice. One educator recalled redesigning math instruction with a colleague because they felt energized by the possibility of making learning more meaningful and responsive for learners. Another reflected on how the work changed her understanding of effective teaching altogether: “It made me really think—what am I being effective at? Am I being effective at compliance? Or am I creating real learning?”

Today, learner-centered practices no longer feel like isolated innovations. They are embedded into classroom routines, hallway displays, intervention systems, recognition structures, and even the language young people use to describe themselves as learners.



Understanding How Learning Progresses

Within North Dakota's PL Framework, a **continuum of learning** means learners have a clear understanding of where they are in their learning, what proficiency looks like, and what steps they can take next. At South Elementary, that continuum is visible everywhere.

Across grade levels, learners fluently discussed proficiency scales, standards, goals, and growth. In classrooms and hallways, competency displays, data binders, and student-created anchor charts helped make learning expectations concrete and accessible.

More importantly, they understood how to use them. In one fourth-grade classroom, learners described conferencing with educators about proficiency ratings and using evidence to justify their thinking. Elsewhere, learners explained how they tracked mastery of standards in binders and worked toward becoming “experts” who could support classmates still developing proficiency.

CONTINUUM OF LEARNING

Learners have access to progressions of prioritized standards and/or competencies that identify the essential knowledge, skills, and dispositions they will be expected to demonstrate throughout their educational career and beyond.

Standard	1	2	3	4
(NBT) Compare two decimals to the thousandths place using symbols $>$, $<$, $=$, based on the value of digits.			3	
(NBT) Applies place value understanding to round decimals to any place.			3	4
(NBT) Multiplies multi-digit whole numbers using strategies flexibly, including the standard algorithm.			3	4
(NBT) Uses concrete models, drawings, place value strategies, properties of operations, and/or relationships to add decimals to hundredths.			3	4
(NBT) Uses concrete models, drawings, place value strategies, properties of operations, and/or relationships to subtract decimals to hundredths.			3	4
(NBT) Uses concrete models, drawings, place value strategies, properties of operations, and/or relationships to multiply decimals to hundredths.			3	4
(NBT) Finds whole-number quotients and remainders with up to four-digit dividends and two-digit divisors using place value strategies while showing the calculation with equations, rectangular arrays, and/or area models.			3	4
(M) Generates conversions between different-sized standard measurement units within a given measurement system, both customary and metric systems.			3	4
(M) Uses conversions to solve multistep, authentic word problems.			3	4
(OA) Analyzes problems using order of operations to solve and evaluate expressions while justifying thinking.			3	4

Educators utilize conferencing to discuss student proficiency levels on a regular basis.

Educators repeatedly emphasized that these systems are designed to build ownership alongside progress monitoring. “Students are owning what they’re learning, and they’re talking about it,” one educator explained.

That ownership was especially visible during small group instruction. South’s instructional model allows multiple educators to work collaboratively within classrooms, creating flexible groupings and targeted intervention throughout the day. Classroom teachers, interventionists, and specialists constantly monitor progress, adjust instruction, regroup learners, and conference individually with learners.

Instruction is personalized through responsiveness to readiness, demonstrated proficiency, pacing, and support needs. Learners move fluidly between levels as their needs change, and educators use shared standards and common assessment language to identify next instructional steps.

The impact is evident in the way learners advocate for themselves. One fourth-grade educator described a student who approached him early in the year and said, “I think these books are too easy for me. Can I go a little harder?” After moving into a more advanced reading group, the learner thrived.

Learners also demonstrated comfort with challenges. During enrichment instruction, an educator intentionally gave her small group difficult riddles and unfamiliar tasks because she wanted them to build confidence in struggling productively, making mistakes, and thinking deeply.

That mindset appeared throughout the building. During one lesson, an educator made an error in front of the class and paused to ask, “Do teachers make mistakes sometimes?”

“It’s cool!” the group called back immediately. “Thanks for letting me learn,” the educator responded before continuing the lesson.

Students are expected to understand themselves as learners. They are encouraged to reflect, revise, stretch, ask for help, seek challenges, and monitor their own progress—and they are given the language and structures to do so.

Creating a Culture of Belonging

Relationships are foundational to learner-centered instruction. When young people feel known, valued, supported, and connected, they are more willing to take risks, seek guidance, collaborate with others, and engage deeply in learning. For South learners, those relationships are carefully built into both the culture of the school and the structure of the day.

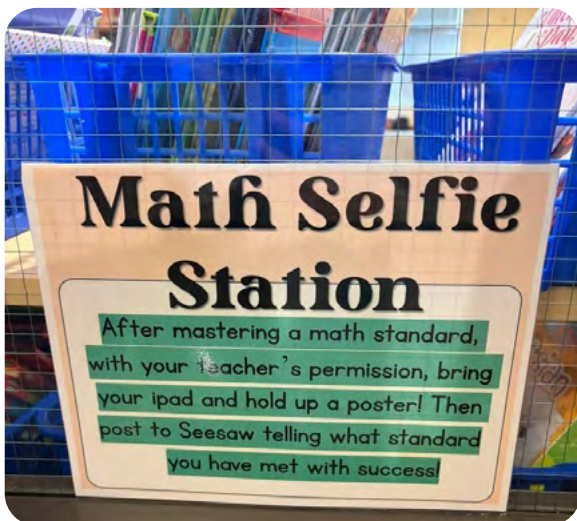
Learners consistently described the school as a place where they feel supported by both adults and peers. Educators build structures that help develop belonging, leadership, and responsibility from the earliest grades.

In one classroom, learners proudly explained the school’s buddy system, where older children partner with younger peers for reading, projects, games, and school events. Fifth graders described how their role changes as they become older buddies. “You’re trying to be an example for them,” they explained.

Learners also participate in ambassador programs, help lead school events, partner with younger readers, and celebrate classmates during morning announcements. Recognition systems throughout the school are tied directly to Profile of a Graduate competencies such as responsibility, reflection, and critical thinking.

RELATIONSHIPS

Learners engage in collaborative learning experiences where the structured environment fosters safe and meaningful social connections that allow them to identify and communicate their needs, preferences, and aspirations, encouraging them to develop their intellectual, physical, and emotional well-being.



A hallway photo booth where learners can celebrate mastery of math standards.

Belonging is visible in quieter moments, too. Visual Culture throughout the school sends the message that everyone in the school is known, seen, and loved. On their lockers, students display one-page learner profiles featuring key information about themselves, including self-identified trusted adults they can rely on for support. Counselor lessons are available to offer conflict resolution and guidance on healthy relationships. Flexible seating options throughout classrooms allow learners to choose spaces that help them learn best. Educators frequently ask learners to explain their thinking, utilize evidence, and share feedback about their own learning experiences.

Throughout the building, adults are exceptionally attentive. Educators constantly circulated during instruction, checking in quietly, noticing confusion quickly, and providing help before frustration could escalate. Even redirection felt relational. Learners responded calmly because expectations, routines, and support systems were clear and consistent.

“The teachers here are very supportive,” one learner shared. “You know there’s always going to be someone there for you.” That sense of trust helps create classrooms where students appear both highly supported and highly accountable—spaces where learners feel safe enough to take risks, ask questions, and fully engage in learning.

Getting The Support Needed to Grow

Throughout the building, **learner supports** are embedded into the school day instead of being treated as separate interventions outside the classroom. Teachers, interventionists, and specialists work collaboratively to provide targeted instruction, scaffolds, and extension opportunities aligned to learners’ current needs and readiness levels. That responsiveness is especially visible during literacy instruction. Learners move between flexible groups based on current data and demonstrated proficiency, while reading specialists and interventionists regularly visit classrooms to deepen instruction. In one classroom, learners rotated through literacy stations while educators met with small groups for targeted instruction. Nearby groups worked on scaffolded assignments connected to the same standards but adjusted for different learner needs.

LEARNER SUPPORTS

Learners have equitable access to a variety of personalized resources and strategies that meet their individual needs, when they need them.



Learners engage in a small group breakout to strengthen reading fluency.

Adults circulate across the room, checking understanding, redirecting when necessary, and providing feedback. Educators regularly analyze assessment data together, regroup learners, and adjust instruction in real time. Shared proficiency scales and common instructional language help create consistency while still allowing instruction to remain responsive. “There are lots of eyes on every student in that room,” one educator explained.

Importantly, learner supports at South Elementary are not only designed for learners who are struggling. Educators repeatedly emphasized the importance of providing challenge and extension opportunities as learners demonstrate readiness for more complex work.

That mindset was visible throughout the building; learners appeared comfortable asking questions, requesting assistance, revising work, and taking academic risks because systems were normalized across classrooms. Flexible seating, conferencing structures, small-group instruction, and visual trackers all helped create classrooms where learners could access learning in ways that worked best for them.

Support does not happen only after a learner falls behind; it’s built directly into the instruction. Learners are consistently met with scaffolds, feedback, challenge, intervention, and encouragement designed to help them continue progressing toward proficiency.

Reflecting and Refining

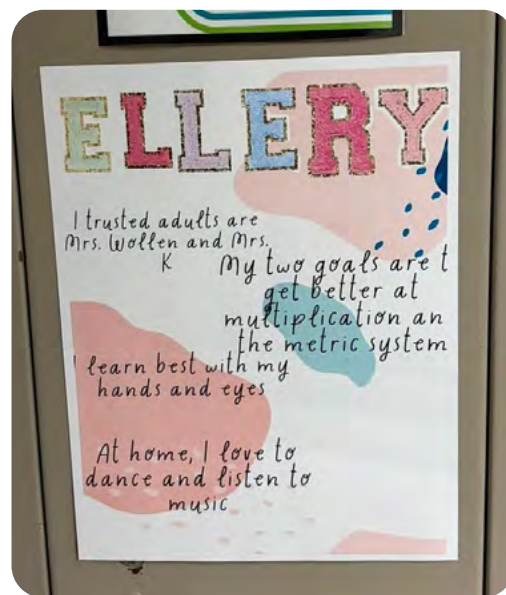
Educators at South Elementary are clear that their work is still evolving. Educators continue refining proficiency systems, redesigning assessments, strengthening intervention structures, and expanding opportunities for student ownership. Staff members regularly collaborate through professional learning communities, instructional coaching, district work groups, and ongoing partnerships connected to North Dakota’s Personalized Learning Network. “The wheel doesn’t stop,” one school leader said.

That spirit of continuous improvement appears deeply embedded in the school’s culture. Educators openly discuss what is working, what still needs refinement, and how to better respond to both learners who are struggling and those ready for a greater challenge. New educators are gradually onboarded into the school’s systems through mentorship, modeling, collaboration, and shared instructional language.



Perhaps most importantly, South Elementary demonstrates what can happen when learner-centered practices are sustained long enough to become cultural rather than experimental. Learners speak naturally about growth, proficiency, reflection, responsibility, and evidence of learning. Educators view collaboration and responsiveness as standard practice. Relationships, ownership, and visible learning are woven into everyday routines rather than isolated initiatives.

The result is a school where learners are not only tackling academic content, but also developing the confidence, reflection skills, and habits that help them navigate learning independently—and where adults continue learning alongside them.



A learner shares their personalized profile on their locker.

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