Constructing a Personalized School Environment

Personalization is a matter of organizational design rather than of individual teachers’ values and practices, the authors point out. They use as examples three very different but highly personalized schools.

BY MILBREY W. McLAUGHLIN AND JOAN TALBERT
WITH JOSEPH KAHNE AND JUDITH POWELL

In a personalized school environment, relations among teachers and students are founded on intimate, personal knowledge about one another’s lives outside as well as inside the classroom. Individuals in such an environment subscribe to what Nel Noddings calls an “ethic of caring” that goes beyond the boundaries of formal, classroom-based roles.

Many practitioners and policy makers are interested in personalization because it is thought to be a powerful means of promoting students’ commitment to school and their engagement in learning. For example, learning theorists argue that the learner’s knowledge is a critical consideration when one is teaching for understanding or promoting higher-order thinking. Thus teachers need specific information about students’ learning styles and current understandings in order to help them relate new knowledge to existing categories and to support their understanding of a domain. Using this instructional “scaffolding” – or moving from what students know to what they need to know – is an especially important technique in engaging students who are at risk of academic failure. More generally, a teacher’s personal knowledge of the learner makes it possible to find connections between a student’s life and the subject matter and to foster an active student role — which, in turn, promotes learning.

For students of all degrees of academic involvement, personal bonds with adults in the school have a greater capacity to motivate and engage than do traditional forms of social control that emphasize obedience to authority and conformity to rules. This more intimate form of social control appears to have particular benefits for at-risk students. Anthony Bryk and Yeoq Meng Thum, for example, found that student attendance is better in schools in which students perceive adult authority as “fair and effective.”

Fair and effective authority is well-informed and timely, incorporates knowledge of the individual, and works to prevent the build-up of problems or misunderstandings.

A personalized environment also rewards teachers. Teachers working in personalized environments rate personal contact with and the ability to get to know students as among the most satisfying aspects of their teaching. In addition, in a 1989 survey of secondary school teachers, the Center for Research on the Context of Secondary School Teaching (CRESST) at Stanford University found a strong relationship between the extent of teachers’ knowledge of their students and their sense of professional efficacy. Teachers who operate in relatively impersonal school settings point to the inability to know their students as people...
as one of the most frustrating and con- 
straining aspects of teaching. 7

Personalized environments engender 
the most fundamental sort of accounta-

bility. For better or worse, neither teach-
ers nor students can hide in a personalized 
environment. In part, this accounta-

bility is interpersonal, an obligation or 
"contract" between teachers and students 
that is similar to those in other personal 
relationships. But this accountability is 
also a result of the general level of knowl-

dge about the actions and behaviors of 
individuals within the school environ-

ment.

The personal affirmation and account-

ability associated with a personalized 
school environment can be a source of 
motivation for all youngsters, but espe-
cially for students who are at risk of fail-
ing or who are disengaged from school-
ing. A lack of connection is often a con-
sequence of feeling "invisible" or anonym-
ous in the school setting. For many stu-
dents at risk of failing or dropping out, 
this lack of belonging or personal con-
nection in school is mirrored in their out-
of-school lives, thereby amplifying the 
importance of personal relationships in 
school.

While many practitioners agree that 
a personalized school environment is a 
good thing, it seems to be a rarity. Re-
searchers who have looked inside schools 
and classrooms typically depict them as 
impersonal, harsh, and competitive and 
find little attachment between teachers 
and students. 8 A Phi Delta Kappa study 
of at-risk students, carried out in 276 
schools across the country, concluded 
that teachers' lack of information about 
the students in their classrooms was one 
of the most important and troublesome 
issues turned up by the research. 9 When 
Gene Maeroff studied a successful mid-
dle school, he noted that the personalized 
environment he found there "exists in few 
other schools." 10

Furthermore, there is little systematic 
information about what personalization 
implies on a day-to-day basis for the role 
of teachers and for the organization of 
schools. How do you achieve personali-

zation, and how do you sustain it? What 
does personalization mean with regard to 
what goes on inside and outside of class-
rooms? Data from an ongoing study of 
diverse secondary school contexts, car-
rried out by the CRC and the Center for 
Policy Research in Education (CPRE), 

have begun to describe a personalized 
school setting and the organizational 
practices and structures that support it.

CONSTRUCTING A PERSONALIZED 
SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

We studied three very different schools, 
all of which are distinguished by a highly 
personalized environment for teaching and 
learning. These schools serve differ-
ent communities, have different lev-
els of financial and administrative sup-
port, and pursue different missions.

Greenfield is an independent school lo-
cated in an affluent, primarily white com-

munity. 11 Its student body of approxi-
ately 140 students in grades 9-12 is 
served by a faculty of 20. Greenfield's 
students typically are alienated from the 
public schools; many have histories of 
school failure, substance abuse, and trou-
ble with various forms of social authori-
ity. Many of these students and their fam-
ilies see Greenfield as "the last chance." 
Yet one of the first things a visitor to the 
school notices, apart from the highly in-
dividualistic hair and dress styles, is the 
cheerful demeanor of students and the re-
spect they show one another and their
A CLIMATE OF CARING AND RESPECT PERMEATES GREENFIELD, IBSEN, AND BAYSIDE.

teachers. Students say that they "love the school" and that the key to their success at Greenfield is that teachers recognize them as individuals and give them personal support. Greenfield succeeds to an impressive degree in enabling students to move from disaffection and failure toward success. Almost all Greenfield students complete high school and go on to productive involvement in college or in the workplace.

Ibsen is a public performing-arts magnet school with a student enrollment of about 1,300 in grades 4-12. This inner-city school serves a student population that, by virtue of its socioeconomic characteristics, would be expected to have a high dropout rate, a significant proportion of disruptive students, and a low level of academic achievement. With the exception of two racially isolated schools, Ibsen has the largest minority population in the district. The ethnic makeup of the school is 50% white, 33.5% African-American, 9% Hispanic, 4% Filipino, 2% Asian, and 1.5% other minorities.

The school's profile of success is distinctive — not just among schools serving youngsters termed at risk by virtue of their ethnicity and socioeconomic status but among affluent schools in the same district. Ibsen's high school dropout rate is the lowest in the district. More than 80% of its graduates go on to college, and two-thirds of them enroll in four-year colleges. All students perform above the district norms on proficiency tests and at the norms on criterion-referenced tests. And not only do students at Ibsen do well on these indicators of educational success; they also excel in dance, theater, and chorus. The school's principal and teachers say that Ibsen's personalized environment — the sense of family and of caring for each individual — is a major factor explaining these accomplishments.

The Bayside Electronics Academy is a vocationally oriented school located within a large public high school. It was designed explicitly to motivate and support students identified as at risk of dropping out. Of the 130 students who attend the academy, 46% are white, 39% are Hispanic, 11% are African-American, 3% are Asian, and 1% come from other minority groups. An active mentoring program that involves individuals from local businesses serves as an important resource for Bayside students and teachers. Students who were interviewed about their experiences at the school talked at length about the numerous social and academic challenges they encounter and about how their personal relationships with teachers, students, and mentors foster their success.

Greenfield, Ibsen, and Bayside are very different educational institutions with very different missions. Yet teachers and students within them speak of these schools in much the same terms. They repeatedly compare their schools to a "family" that cares for them and gives them security. In these schools, authority is based on intimacy, personal knowledge, and individual responsibility — not on rules. Such authority blurs the boundaries of students and teachers' identities and roles. For students, a personalized environment breaks down the distinction between the institutionalized world of school and the "outside world" of friends, family, and social life. For teachers, a personalized environment diminishes the separation between their professional and personal lives.

A commitment to personalization pervades these schools. It is embodied in the pictures of students and staff members posted throughout the building; it is evident in discourse among students and teachers. A climate of caring and respect permeates classrooms, lunchrooms, and corridors.

Predominantly positive sentiments about the workplace are another distinguishing feature of Greenfield, Ibsen, and Bayside. Students are enthusiastic about school, and attendance problems are minimal — even at Greenfield and Bayside, which serve alienated young people. Despite the enormous demands on their time and energy, teachers in these environments stress their sense of satisfaction and professional pride. In all three schools, teachers speak of being challenged and of feeling valued as professionals and as human beings.

ISSUES OF ORGANIZATIONAL DESIGN

A personalized environment does not "just happen." Rather, it is the product of deliberate and strategic choices about organizational structures and routines. These very different schools share common components that foster and sustain personalization.

Choice and scale. At the broadest level, these schools share features that define them as institutions. Each is a school of choice; students have elected to be there. For two of these schools, demand is greater than the number of available spaces. Ibsen's long waiting list led a district administrator to jest that "you have to have a note from your congressman to get your child into Ibsen." Meanwhile, Bayside Academy accepts only about 30% of the students who apply there each year.

Greenfield's tuition (which amounts to approximately $7,200 per year) and specialized mission limit its pool of applicants. Nonetheless, Greenfield's headmaster stresses the importance of students' choosing to come to the school: "Students aren't sentenced to Greenfield."

To varying degrees, each school is also a school of choice for teachers. All of Greenfield's faculty elected to teach in its demanding environment; the original Bayside teachers were volunteers as well. Teachers at Ibsen are mixed in this respect. A majority of the performing-arts faculty members have chosen Ibsen as the best teaching environment they could hope for in their specialties, and the "oldtimers" on the academic faculty selected the school. More recently, faculty members have been assigned to the school, and many have exercised choice by "falling in love" with the school and choosing to stay. Others have chosen to leave an educational environment that they could not fit into. Choice establishes important conditions for personalization because the students and teachers have selected the norms of a personalized en-
vironment and of the community that supports it.

Relatively small size is another factor that supports personalization. It is simply easier to establish and maintain personal contact in a small organization than in a large one. However, while both choice and small size support personalization, a personalized environment does not necessarily follow from these conditions. Other magnet schools that we studied, for example, were as impersonal as the "regular" public schools. We also visited small schools in which individuals appear to have little more personal knowledge about one another than do individuals operating in large, comprehensive high schools. The most important considerations in the creation of a personalized environment are the organizational scale and the structures and activities developed within the school to enhance personalization.

The school norms and supports essential to an organizational scale that allows for personal knowledge do not occur spontaneously. Members of the school community must consciously and continually work to construct a personalized environment. In the schools we have described, we found the following features of organizational design to be most critical to a strong ethos of personalization:  
- school-level structures for communication and collective problem solving;  
- broader teacher roles;  
- personalized instructional strategies; and  
- strategies for revitalization and recommitment.

School-level structures for communication and collective problem solving. These structures provide the regular, detailed information needed by individuals in the school setting as well as the opportunities to reflect upon it. Each of the schools described here facilitates the exchange of information and encourages students and staff members to solve problems in a variety of ways.

Greenfield's communication mechanisms are perhaps the best developed—as would be expected, given its mission of working with troubled students. A weekly two-hour faculty meeting provides the opportunity for teachers to discuss students' problems and solicit their colleagues' advice about them. A teacher explains: "The first item on the agenda at staff meetings is 'individual students'; anyone who has a concern of any kind puts the name on the board, and the student is discussed by the entire group."

Another strategy central to Greenfield's high level of personalization is the "core groups." Each teacher meets for one period each day with the same small group of approximately six students for a review of their academic work, a discussion of personal problems, and general advising. The core group also serves as the focal point for student activities and social events.

Bayside Academy generates much the same kind of intimate, detailed information, but it uses different means. Students and teachers are assigned to groups that remain stable for three years and take on the characteristics of a family. Students say that this familiarity and stability make them more comfortable with the classroom and therefore more willing to participate actively. One student explained that, since he saw the same faces in all of his classes, he was not "afraid to talk out." Teachers at Bayside work as a team and communicate daily about their students. And, as at Greenfield, Bayside teachers meet with students in small groups to discuss academic and personal issues.

At Ibsen, a much larger school, the capacity for communication and problem solving is established by a variety of administrative arrangements, policies, programs, and norms. The school's wide grade span and the practice of assigning students to counselors alphabetically insure continuity in the students' contact with adults in the school—and give families with more than one child at Ibsen the same counselor. During the time that students spend at the school (sometimes as much as nine years), responsible and caring adults get to know them, their parents, and their siblings very well. School policies insist that academic and personal problems be addressed—not through a mechanical application of rules but through personal communication between teachers, students, and their parents.

In addition to these formal arrangements, administrators and teachers at Ibsen enforce a strong norm of caring for students that is modeled by the principal and other administrators and is supported by an "adopt-a-student" program for the students who are most at risk in the school. Students' problems, as well as their accomplishments, are noticed by adults in the school, and caring teachers get a regular and timely flow of information about their students from counselors, other teachers, parents, and peers—even from the students themselves in regular interactions outside the classroom. All these arrangements are critical in enabling timely communication and problem solving in a school as large as Ibsen.

Broader teacher roles. Another defining feature of the personalized environments at Greenfield, Bayside, and Ibsen is the broadening of teachers' roles. Teachers in each of these schools routinely interact with students in situations outside the classroom and have assumed responsibilities that extend beyond the conventional instructional role.

At Greenfield, the core groups involve students and teachers in social activities and extracurricular projects and provide opportunities to share information and concerns about life outside of school. The performing-arts curriculum at Ibsen generates many opportunities for teachers and students to work together—designing and constructing sets, planning productions, rehearsing, and so on—and for students to shine in nonclassroom activities. Teachers at Bayside Academy go beyond conventional classroom roles by participating in such informal activities as after-school softball games and by maintaining formal out-of-school associations with the mentors from industry.

Personalized instructional strategies. The personalization evident in out-of-classroom interactions can combine well with the daily business of school: teaching and learning. A personalized classroom is not only (or even necessarily) one
in which instruction is "individualized"; it is a setting for learning in which knowledge of the individuals involved — teachers and students — enters into the negotiations that frame the participants' roles. Classroom practices in such settings are designed to maximize student involvement on several levels: whole-class discussion, cooperative groups, and individual projects. Teachers at Greenfield, Bayside, and Ilhoven achieve open academic discourse and high levels of student participation by using their knowledge of the students' cultural and personal experiences to make the classroom "safe" and instruction relevant. In turn, active student participation supports the process.

Teacher flexibility and autonomy are at the heart of a personalized instructional environment. Teachers in such schools have the discretion to make decisions for and with their students regarding academic work. At Ilhoven, students and teachers fulfill the requirements of academic work while meeting the demands of intense involvement in the performing arts. With classroom life regularly interrupted by rehearsals and performances, students and teachers must work together to coordinate in-class and out-of-class learning activities; negotiated learning contracts make students responsible for seeking and using learning opportunities.

At Greenfield, goals for students are individualized to reflect their academic attitudes and their varying degrees of persistence. The headmaster explains: "For some, the goal is just getting through high school. For others, it's matriculation in the appropriate college — and being able to operate there." Teachers at Greenfield listen to students' stories about delayed or unfinished homework assignments and respond on the basis of knowledge about the students' particular circumstances.

Greenfield's grading and assessment policies also highlight the individual. The school sends reports to parents approximately every two weeks. While this reporting generates more work for teachers, they see it as an important way of communicating with the home and as an opportunity for them to reflect systematically on their students. In addition, grades at Greenfield reflect individual effort and accomplishment. Students are given credit for the work they have completed. The school's policy of awarding partial credit allows students to accumulate credit toward graduation at their own pace; they cannot fail because they did not cover a specified amount of material in a given time.

Bayside Academy allows similar individual negotiations about homework and class activities; in addition, its faculty members are able to design curricula with their students in mind. The school principal and the district office give the program staff considerable latitude in instructional matters. For example, the school is exempt from the district requirement of administering English proficiency exams; as a result, teachers are not constrained to design the curriculum around these tests. The administration's nonintrusive management style enables teachers to decide how best to serve the needs of their students.

Feedback about performance is also an important aspect of a personalized instructional environment. Bayside teachers monitor student progress closely. Monthly evaluations reward achievements and note weak points; at this time the contract between students and the school is reviewed systematically.

In short, instruction in these personalized environments is jointly constructed by teachers and students. The patterns of authority and pedagogy contrast markedly with the mode of instruction in most classrooms (especially high school classrooms), where teachers struggle to motivate passive learners or attempt to control disruptive students.

**Strategies for teacher support and revitalization.** While authority based on personal knowledge and caring is an extraordinarily potent source of motivation and social control, as well as a rewarding option for teachers, it is also exceedingly draining and enervating. Teachers in personalized environments must largely give up the "emotional protection" and private space available to teachers in a traditional, rule-based setting in which interactions are framed almost entirely in terms of instructional tasks and outcomes. In a personalized school setting, the demands of teaching encompass the whole personality, and even the best and most committed teachers can feel exhausted and depleted by their work.

There are heavy costs that accrue when traditional forms of authority are rejected and replaced with personalization. Teacher burnout is a predictable consequence of this intimate, intense school environment. Indeed, such was the fate of faculty members in most of the alternative or "free" schools of the past, which were characterized by high teacher turnover. However, burnout has not been a problem in the schools we have described here, because organizational strategies exist to revitalize and support the faculty.

Greenfield's school environment demands the most from teachers in terms of emotional involvement with students. Yet, despite the drains on their personal time and emotional energy, Greenfield's faculty members reported the highest level of professional satisfaction of any teachers in the CRC sample and were the most likely to say that they would choose teaching as a career again if they had the choice.

In addition to the strategies of communication and collegial support described earlier, Greenfield has developed specific programs that are intended to energize the faculty and renew their commitment to the school. For example, before each school year and sometimes at midyear, faculty members go on a weekend retreat during which they review school goals and accomplishments, plan new approaches, and collectively celebrate their mission and their institution. The teachers report that other strategies are also essential to morale and to their ability to sustain their intense involvement with students. One is the ongoing, hands-on support for instruction and instructional innovation provided by the headmaster.
Another is the flexibility permitted in teachers' schedules. A very effective English teacher, for example, who felt she couldn't maintain a full-time schedule after nine years, has been able to cut back on her hours. In her view, this concession has enabled her to sustain the energy that is necessary for the job she loves.

At Bayside Academy and Ibsen, the program director and school principal respectively are essential to nurturing and sustaining teachers' commitment. Each of these women has close contact with faculty members, encourages their growth and involvement, and brokers resources to supplement their work. Each school has a special staff that enables teachers to concentrate on teaching. Bayside Academy's bilingual aide is in constant contact with students' families and so provides important information to teachers as well as critical signals of interest and caring to students. Ibsen's attendance officer and school counselors play much the same role.

Bayside's mentor program is a source of extra resources -- both material and human -- for the school, but it is equally important for the special motivational support it provides to students and faculty members. Teachers at Bayside Academy also draw significant support from their colleagues through team teaching and cross-disciplinary teaching. Bayside teachers profit too from other organizational accommodations to their demanding role, such as reduced teaching loads.

In short, each of these schools affords its faculty members the same care, concern, and individual consideration that it expects them to give their students.

Personalization is a matter of organizational design rather than of individual teachers' values and practices. For most organizations, the primary task to be performed determines the institutional structures, routines, and roles. Bayside, Greenfield, and Ibsen have clearly assigned top priority to the task of establishing and maintaining a personalized educational environment. From this decision, all else follows: the rewards, the supports, the routines, the expectations, the moral and intellectual authority that govern day-to-day interactions. Personalization in these schools is pervasive; all aspects of organizational behavior inside and outside the classrooms are consistent with the ethos of personalization.

These schools remind us that authority within a school setting is both interpersonal and institutional -- earned and granted within social relations and defined in terms of organizational rights and obligations. Each of these schools has vested authority in the personalized working relations among its adults and youngsters. Each has its own strategies to help create and maintain this kind of authority. And each is a school in which students and teachers together are actively engaged in the enterprise of education.


4. Not everyone agrees with this general statement about the value of personal knowledge. Jack Frymier and Bruce Gansneder report that some professionals argue that knowledge of students represents an "intrusion" and that such information "is not only unimportant but is also detrimental," because it is used to "label children and stereotype them." See Frymier and Gansneder, "The Phi Delta Kappa Study of Students at Risk," Phi Delta Kappan, October 1989, p. 146.


11. "Greenfield" is a fictitious name, as are the other school names used in this article.

12. The feature of "extended teacher roles" was identified by Anthony S. Bryk and Mary Erina Driscoll as distinctive of the social relations within a communal school. See Bryk and Driscoll, The High School as Community: Contextual Influences and Consequences for Students and Teachers (Madison: National Center on Effective Secondary Schools, University of Wisconsin, November 1988).