

# Making it Personal

Essential Elements of Hawk Ridge Elementary's Personalized Learning Approach

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**H**awk Ridge Elementary School in Charlotte, NC is a designated Personalized Learning School that is empowering its students and teachers to make teaching and learning more effective. The school's administrators and educators — along with parents, students, and other community and business stakeholders — are embarking on a range of efforts that are focused on the same vision: to personalize the learning experience to meet the individual needs and potential of each student.

At first glance, Hawk Ridge may seem like any other school with similar strengths and challenges. But after just a few minutes of walking through its hallways it quickly becomes evident that the school is anything but ordinary. From one hallway to the next, students are engaged in substantive discussions with each other and with their teachers. Creativity abounds — the school's walls are covered in student developed products, and its halls are specifically designed as gathering spaces for student collaboration. However, this personalized and collaborative culture did not happen overnight. It is largely the result of a dedicated and distributed team of leaders committed to a vision and culture of personalized learning.

## Personalized Learning in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools

Aims to develop the **whole child** and empower them to take **ownership** of their learning by providing them with multiple **pathways** to demonstrate **mastery learning** in order to be successful and productive 21st century citizens in an ever-changing world. Being a CMS Personalized Learning school is a chance to break the status quo and make instructional shifts needed in the classroom.

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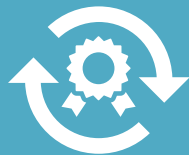
## Demonstrating Leadership and Fostering an Effective Culture

The empowering culture at Hawk Ridge Elementary is immediately evident upon entering the building. A visitor is greeted promptly by students who run the information desk and is provided with relevant school materials. The principal, Troy Moore, does not even have a formal office, but rather spends his time in classrooms and shared spaces throughout the building. The comfort level and collaboration among the staff and Mr. Moore are evident the moment he enters the classroom — everyone is at ease and ready to share. His one-to-one conversations with teachers cover both the promises and the issues that are characteristic of a transition to personalized learning. Teachers are not hesitant to share these challenges with him, but they are also proud to share student artifacts and data that demonstrate success. In leading his school, Mr. Moore has employed a number of strategies that foster an effective school culture (see below):

## Strategies that Foster an Effective School Culture



Developing a shared vision



Ongoing professional development



Structuring a school redesign more conducive to personalized learning



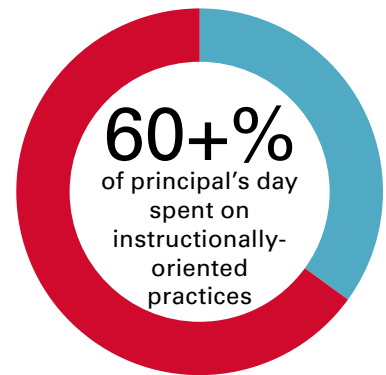
Establishing trust among students, teachers and administrators



Mr. Moore’s decision to forego a formal office resulted from the research he was conducting on effective principals around the world. He was inspired by the work of [John Goh, Principal of East Merrylands Public School](#), an innovator attempting to break through the barriers of legacy practices in school leadership in Sydney, Australia. Among many ideas Mr. Moore has borrowed from Mr. Goh, he has embraced the idea that a principal benefits most from being around his or her teachers and students, and that this naturally leads to the elimination of a formal office. In its place, Mr. Moore keeps his computer on a desk in the office of his financial secretary, Sharon D’Aries. Ms. D’Aries, who is able to work from both Mr. Moore’s computer and her own, also serves as his School Administration Manager (SAM). In this role she meets with him each day for 30 minutes, holds him accountable for the previous day’s work, and helps set the schedule for the following day. She also manages Mr. Moore’s emails, calendar and communications with various stakeholders.

The [National SAM Innovation Project](#) is a process designed to focus on time management, delegation skills, and

data tracking to increase the instructional time focus for principals. Data shows that Mr. Moore spends **more than 60% of his day on instructionally-oriented practices**. On a typical day, he can be found working on his laptop in a Learning Commons area with students, spending 30 minutes or longer viewing a classroom activity, and engaging in discussions about instructional practices with teachers.



### 1. Developing a Shared Vision

Each person at Hawk Ridge Elementary — administrators, students, teachers, and parents – has an understanding of the school’s vision for personalized learning and its role in daily instruction and learning. In his effort to develop his staff’s understanding and interpretation of personalized learning, Mr. Moore headed a distributed leadership team that includes:

- Jennifer Beauregard, Assistant Principal
- Jill Thompson, Personalized Learning Program Manager
- Emme Barnes and Carrie Stoehr, Multi-Classroom Leaders
- Jennifer Pait and Tiffany Bernd, Talent Development Teachers

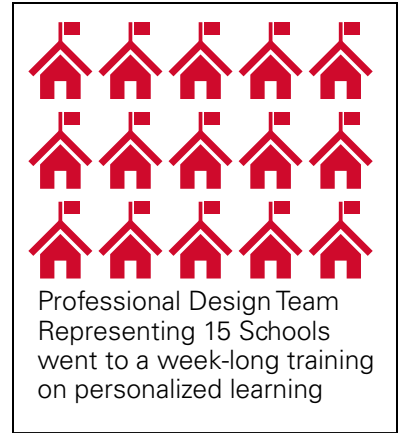
Teachers recognize that administrators and other school leaders are moving out of their comfort zones to improve teaching and learning for their students. Rather than the teacher-centric approach that is still commonplace in many schools today, Hawk Ridge Elementary takes a more student-centered approach to learning. This approach is evident in “Genius Hour” (see **Tangible Efforts and Strategies** below) and is reflected in the ease at which students can explain their own personalized pathways and learning goals.

Parents are also deeply engaged in this work and vision. They partnered with the School Leadership Team to gain a more complete understanding of personalized learning and the data that accompanied it. Their representatives within the School Leadership Team held four focus groups (totaling 100 parents) and solicited feedback in order to better understand parental concerns and to foster effective communication practices. As a result of this engagement, students now maintain data notebooks and, in some grades, also reflect on their experiences in a journal on a daily basis. Guided by these data notebooks, students are then asked to have “data chats” with their parents each Thursday night, and these chats are scaffolded by a series of questions that are provided to parents in advance. Many parents have noted that this process has resulted in meaningful conversations with their children about their learning and mastery of content.



## 2. Providing Ongoing Professional Learning Opportunities

Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools and Hawk Ridge Elementary emphasize professional learning that is ongoing and job-embedded. The district invests in a Personalized Learning Program Manager to work with and coach several teachers throughout the school year and sent professional learning design teams representing 15 of its schools to a week-long training in personalized learning in the summer of 2014. This process has been well documented and can be further explored at the district's [personalized learning website](#).



*We created a **Personalized Learning Course Catalog** that breaks down the professional learning sessions by our 'Personalized Learning cornerstones.' This allows principals and teachers to guide their professional development based on their needs. Each principal also received data based on their school's Personalized Learning Growth Model that they could use to help to steer their PD selections.*

– Jill Thompson



These teachers are also engaged in their own personalized learning pathways, and the Professional Learning lead and other coaches work with them on an ongoing basis to support their professional growth. Each teacher's plan is different depending on their professional needs and goals. The school also has Multi-Classroom Leaders that work with teachers as coaches. Ongoing professional learning opportunities are an essential and expected part of each day at the school.

*It was an honor to be chosen by NCPAPA [North Carolina Principals and Assistant Principals' Association] to participate in Cohort 1 of Distinguished Leadership in Practice – Digital Learning held at the Friday Institute. The opportunity to collaborate with 40 other principals (moving forward with digital integration) from around the state and the high quality researchers and professional developers at the Institute for the last two years have been integral in my understanding of what the possibilities could be for Hawk Ridge Elementary.*

– Principal Troy Moore



## 3. Implementing a School Re-design

Hawk Ridge Elementary underwent a significant school re-design with personalized learning in mind. Since technology is used throughout its classrooms, spaces that had previously been computer labs were reimagined as open collaboration spaces or Learning Commons Areas. These spaces now resemble coffee shops or commons areas with colorful furniture that can be moved to suit different collaborative environments.

Classrooms also have furniture that is conducive to different arrangements based on the type of teaching strategy being employed. The school partnered with its PTA to provide an Adopt-A-Class option for parents. Students and teachers worked together during *Genius Hour* to propose what their classroom environment could look like to support effective collaboration and independent activities. Using the research that their teachers had performed over the summer on learning spaces, they solicited proposals for classroom redesign from parents. The response rate was extremely high, and resulted in the purchase of modern, mobile furniture for classroom use.

Each pair of classrooms also has a small space that they can design to meet their needs. Some teachers have built their own interactive classroom libraries, while others have integrated a checkout system designed by students. Others function as reading nooks for students or project "rooms" for small group interaction.



Given Hawk Ridge's aggressive redesign, Mr. Moore, with the help of a Hawk Ridge parent, was able to secure a partnership with [VS America](#), a leading innovator in modern education furnishing. The company furnished an entire 4th Grade classroom with their new Shift + line as a showcase room.



Hawk Ridge also [partnered with Chili's Restaurant](#) to build an interactive, project-based learning (PBL) classroom with a dining room and kitchen that were modeled after those in an actual restaurant. Teachers have developed several PBL lessons tied to multi-disciplinary standards so that all students have the opportunity to experience the school's "restaurant." These standards include those related to measurement, money, persuasive writing, and communication.



#### 4. Establishing the Trust of Students, Teachers, and Administrators

Moving to personalized pathways, collaborative spaces, and efforts like Genius Hour in which students create and collaborate based upon their own interests (see **Tangible Efforts and Strategies**) requires an extensive and explicit trust among students, teachers, and administrators. This trust-building began when a Personalized Learning Team of ten "early adopters" attended the week-long training described in the Providing Ongoing Professional Learning Opportunities section above. This training resulted in the development of a personalized learning framework that would be adopted throughout the entire school. The trust building process then continued as administrators and Multi-Classroom Leaders co-taught with teachers to foster a sense of camaraderie and ensure that the school community understood that the entire staff was fully invested in this instructional shift. Mr. Moore's decision not to have an office resulted in teachers feeling more comfortable with his regular presence in their classrooms during the first semester. It quickly became evident that this presence wasn't punitive in nature, and that he encouraged a culture of risk-taking in the transition to personalized learning. He understands and conveys the idea that this transition would not be possible without teachers taking risks and learning from their mistakes. Mr. Moore says, "an open and safe environment where teachers are free to take risks and fail is crucial to encouraging the innovative spirit within teachers to truly move a school forward within a more personalized learning environment for students." He also goes on to say, "teachers who do not demonstrate the willingness to take risks and fail are in danger of remaining status quo which is not generally the mindset of staff members at Hawk Ridge."

Mr. Moore knows each of the 905 students in the building by name and greets many of them with a high-five; and they are equally excited to see him. The students are clearly comfortable sharing about their school and describing the shift towards personalized learning with any visitor, and this sense of student agency is prevalent.



**905**

Both the total number of students enrolled and the total number whom Principal Moore knows by name

This student agency is also evident in how students demonstrate ownership over their own personalized pathways. They see themselves as driving their progress, and they have a clear sense of what they need to

do to move forward on a particular set of standards. Teachers rely on students to track their progress and to ask for help when needed. This trust of students results in them feeling comfortable in asking for assistance when needed, both from their teachers and fellow students.

*“I have always felt very supported in CMS. Zone superintendents and senior leadership have always provided me the opportunity to work through new initiatives provided I was able to support them with research and we as a school were able to deliver results over time. Our selection as a Personalized Learning Model School for CMS has given our school access to guidance from several departments and excellent professional development and coaching from the Personalized Learning Department led by Jill Thompson.”*

– Principal Troy Moore

### Tangible Strategies and Results

While the overall culture and leadership are essential, some specific efforts and strategies have accelerated Hawk Ridge’s impact through personalized learning. These include:



#### Genius Hour

For the first hour of each school day, every student in the school participates in *Genius Hour*. Modeled after the work of Angela Maier (see: [The Passion Driven Classroom](#)) and A.J. Juliani (see: [Inquiry and Innovation in the Classroom](#)) teachers emphasize student choice and agency in guiding them through experiences that highlight their individual passions. For some, this might include gymnastics or dance, while others might gravitate toward dinosaurs, technology,

or music. Those who discover common passions will often collaborate with one another in order to deepen their understanding of a topic or area of study.

Teachers have learned to relinquish control and trust that their students will use this time effectively, while still providing consistent feedback and prompting to help advance their work. This work is done in a fluid fashion, with

students often beginning and ending projects in rapid succession (and working on multiple projects simultaneously!). Examples of these projects include:

- **A gymnastics club** created by fifth graders for second and third graders. The students developed the curriculum, created and disseminated permission slips, and held multiple sessions with the younger students.
- **A website** created by two students in order to raise money for issues they champion, such as childhood cancer and autism. The students are exploring ways to develop products to raise money for these causes.
- **A series of podcasts** created by two other students that take the form of a “talk show” for the school. These podcasts combine music with other entertainment and [are available on the school website](#).
- **A Claymation** created by a team of five students, and the team has produced several videos and has plans for a complete series.
- **An examination** of the history of architecture created by a student who wanted to understand its importance and presence in her own community.
- **The School Store**, run entirely by students, donates its proceeds to [Pencils of Promise](#), an organization that builds schools in third world countries. The store donated \$3,200 this year alone to the charitable organization.

These examples demonstrate how student interest can guide the development of the “4 Cs” – collaboration, communication, creativity, and critical thinking. The school’s *Genius Hour* expands learning opportunities while also serving as a safe space for educators to guide and experience personalized, self-directed learning themselves.



### Commitment to Personalized Pathways

Hawk Ridge is committed to using personalized pathways to help students meet all ELA and math standards. Building upon an approach from [The Reading and Writing Project at Columbia University](#), the school’s Multi-Classroom Leaders have worked with teachers on a variety of personalized approaches to ELA instruction. In mathematics, each student is taught through a scaffolded set of opportunities and assignments. These can include small group work, self-directed experiences, one-on-one instruction, teacher-led “strategy” groups (small groups formed by the teacher using the intentionality of the previous day’s data to determine who is in need of the same instruction and what that short ten minute instruction will focus on), and a variety of others. Some specific examples include:

- On any given day, a heterogeneous class of students may be working on between four and seven pathways ([example](#) of an fifth grade, objective-based pathway). In some grades, this can include options based upon learning preference (e.g., audio, visual, and tactile) and in others each student will advance at his or her own pace based on a pre-assessment.
- Students have a clear understanding of where they are, where they are going, and what it will take for them to get there. They understand what they need to accomplish by the end of the year.

- The data collection process is intensive, and the school is planning to transition to Canvas Learning Management System in the fall of 2015. Students track much of their own learning with data notebooks; and, as noted earlier, often use data journals to reflect on their own learning. They use these notebooks and journals every Thursday night during “data chats” with their parents.



**Team Teaching**

Teachers are assigned a partner with whom to develop and implement personalized learning pathways. Hawk Ridge has always used a PLC approach to planning instruction. This approach to instruction — both collaborative and shared — is not always easy for teachers. However, the pairing of educators makes personalized pathways more manageable, especially in higher grades where students are more varied in their mastery across pathways or units of study.

Full Model Team Teaching in 4th and 5th grade at Hawk Ridge supports the following:

- **Improved Teacher-to-Student Ratio:** The support structure for student learning is extensive, and this structure results in more individualized support for each student. Two teachers combine with a teaching assistant, gifted education teacher, and a Multi-Classroom Leader that can often result in a student-teacher ratio of only 10:1. This allows for more intensive small group instruction; one-on-one support and checkpoints; opportunities to administer checkpoints and assessments when students are ready; and student ownership of their work.
- **Job-Embedded Professional Learning and Coaching:** When teachers work together along with Multi-Classroom Leaders, they have a support structure in place that can provide modeling, which is a critical characteristic of effective professional development. The teachers tend to be able to draw upon their own strengths and learn from those of their partners on a daily basis.



**Technology Infusion**

While not the focus of the personalized learning initiative, technology and digital learning are omnipresent throughout Hawk Ridge Elementary. Students in each classroom use Chromebooks, iPads, laptops, desktops, and other technologies as they work through their pathways. Students can access what they need when they are ready, and the school has already demonstrated that students working on an adaptive learning program (e.g., Dreambox & Compass Learning) as a “supplemental” part of their personalized pathways are seeing greater growth gains on MAP (Measures of Academic Progress) Assessments in math than those who are not using it at all.

Other students use digital learning more organically during *Genius Hour*. Many of the products and planning referenced in previous sections are made more efficient and professional through the use of technology, and students use the different tools and resources much like working professionals. This organic use of devices and digital resources helps students see them as tools for learning, not just as technology for technology’s sake. At Hawk Ridge, the use of digital learning is thoughtfully integrated into learning goals, not as something to be placed on top or to the side of learning experiences that were already taking place.



**Movement toward Opportunity Culture Approach to Staffing**

Hawk Ridge is in the process of moving toward the strategic staffing initiative based upon [Public Impact’s Opportunity Culture](#) work. This provides schools and principals with the flexibility to provide differentiated pay based upon the number of students a particular staff member is accountable for in terms of achievement. This model fits well with Hawk Ridge Elementary’s previous approach of job-embedded, ongoing professional development and support. It also promotes teacher retention by creating a natural leadership pipeline for the many highly effective teachers in the school.

## Next Steps

Hawk Ridge fully recognizes that they are still very early in their journey towards personalizing learning for each of their students and have identified the following next steps in this process:

- **Enhanced Digital Learning:** Hawk Ridge opted to start with the pathways in a pencil-and-paper form to demonstrate that all educators move towards personalization and to ensure that the focus stayed on instruction and learning, rather than technology. While many of the pathways involve digital learning and link directly to work through QR codes, the majority of its record-keeping and playlists remain on paper. Maximizing the potential of technology and digital learning will become more realistic as the systems continue to evolve and as the district moves toward Canvas.
- **Personalized Pathways that Address Learning Preferences, Differences and Interests:** While some grade levels are beginning to address learning preferences (e.g., audio, visual, and tactile) and offer choice, others still have a largely uniform path for students (i.e., although they do allow for their own pacing and competency). This is an area where the curriculum and pathways can continue to expand as educators become more comfortable with the approach and have more time to develop and test alternative approaches and progressions of learning to address students' learning differences.
- **Problem-Based Learning:** The personalized pathways provide a context that can support further development of Problem Based Learning (PBL) and scenario teaching within the pathways. This is an area for Hawk Ridge educators to continue to explore and expand as they develop the next iteration of pathways.
- **Student Agency:** Hawk Ridge has laid the groundwork for student agency and can continue to foster and encourage authentic student ownership of his or her own learning through the pathways, data chats, and project based learning.
- **New Leadership:** At this writing, Hawk Ridge is about to undergo a leadership transition in their school. Mr. Moore has made the difficult decision to leave the school after nine years. The new principal will have an opportunity to build upon this accelerated progress, while also establishing his or her own style. The systems in place may need to be more thoroughly documented in order to ensure a clear understanding of the work accomplished thus far. The clear school focus, district vision, and strong school supports should ease the transition.

The teachers and support staff at Hawk Ridge Elementary have worked extremely hard this year to bring this implementation year of personalized learning to fruition. While there have been an equal measure of speed bumps, setbacks and celebrations of success, the staff has grown closer to one another and have ignited a deeper passion to truly meet the individual needs of every learner in their classroom. "The staff at Hawk Ridge is an amazing group of educators who are active researchers and early adopters, committed to building quality and lasting relationships with their students and who genuinely enjoy working together," says Mr. Moore. "The level of instructional culture that has been developed and continued at Hawk Ridge since its inception in 1999 is difficult to find or replicate." Despite this difficulty, Mr. Moore and his team have provided a model for personalized learning from which all schools can draw upon.

**For more information on Hawk Ridge Elementary's Personalized Learning program the following resources have been provided:**

- [Hawk Ridge Personalized Learning Weebly](#)
- [Hawk Ridge Elementary Pre-Tour Video](#)
- [Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools Personalized Learning Initiative](#) #cmspl
- Hawk Ridge Elementary named #9 Best Elementary School in America by [bestschools.org](#):  
[Video](#)  
[Ranking](#)
- [Feature](#) on Dad Volunteers with the Hawk Ridge "Hawk Dads Program":
- [Hawk Ridge Elementary Website](#)
- Follow Hawk Ridge on Twitter: [@HRESPrincipal](#) #HRES