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## The Case(s) Against Personalized Learning



To help K-12 educators and policymakers make better sense of this approach, *Education Week* looked at the experiences of schools such as Belmont-Cragin Elementary in Chicago, where students like 13-year old Llocelin Rivera receive tailored instruction in the hopes of boosting performance and closing achievement gaps.  
 —Alyssa Schukar for Education Week

By **Benjamin Herold**  
 November 7, 2017

Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg are backing it with hundreds of millions of dollars. States from Florida to Vermont have adopted supportive laws and policies. And school districts across the country are embracing this emerging education trend.

But as "personalized learning" takes root, it's also coming under greater scrutiny.

Leading researchers say their work does not support the most enthusiastic claims being made by personalized-learning supporters. Education experts are raising questions about implications for teaching and learning. Tech-industry critics are sounding alarms about Silicon Valley's growing influence over public schools. And a small but vocal coalition of parents and activists from across the political spectrum deride the term "personalized learning" as an Orwellian misnomer for replacing teachers with digital devices and data-mining software.

Such resistance is probably not surprising.

When any new educational strategy receives money and attention, questions arise. Like other efforts to improve U.S. schools, personalized learning is getting swept up in decades-long disagreements over how children learn, the proper role of teachers, and who gets to decide how public education is organized.

But personalized learning also faces some unique challenges. The biggest is **lack of clarity** around what the term actually means.

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**Clarification:** This story has been updated to clarify Summit Public Schools' position that it does not use any algorithms to target curricular resources to students.

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In general, personalized-learning models seek to adapt the pace of learning and the instructional strategies being used to best fit each individual child's strengths, weaknesses, and interests. In the digital age, realizing these goals is often seen as dependent on technology—to help measure in real-time what each student knows; to develop "learner profiles"; and to help match each child with customized learning experiences and "playlists."

In practice, though, "personalized learning" is used to describe everything from supplemental software programs to whole-school redesigns.

As a result, the term has become a blank slate on to which supporters and skeptics alike project their own hopes, fears, and beliefs.

To help K-12 educators and policymakers consider personalized learning from every angle, *Education Week* is taking a close look at the perspectives of critics like Tiffany Dunn, a veteran teacher in Kentucky's 101,000-student Jefferson County school system whose strongly held concerns broadly reflect the worries of other opponents.

"This whole thing is coming from the tech industry, which doesn't understand that what kids need is someone to love them and get excited about them," Dunn said. "I'm not aware of any research that says sticking a child in front of a computer for hours on end does them any good."

Do such arguments hold weight? How do proponents respond? What do third-party experts say?

What follows is a breakdown of the three main critiques leveled against personalized learning.

### Argument#1: The Hype Outweighs the Research

“  
**THE  
EVIDENCE BASE  
IS VERY WEAK  
AT THIS POINT.**”

John F. Pane | Senior Scientist | RAND Corporation

No one has studied personalized learning more closely than the RAND Corporation.

And RAND is unambiguous about [what its research shows](#).

"The evidence base is very weak at this point," said John F. Pane, a senior scientist and the group's distinguished chair in education innovation.

Still, the hype around personalized learning has continued to grow. Take, for example, Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg. Along with his wife, pediatrician Priscilla Chan, the founder of the giant social-networking company plans to use his [Chan Zuckerberg Initiative to invest billions of dollars](#) into personalized-learning efforts. Zuckerberg regularly articulates his goal of "[personalizing education for every student](#)."

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Such lofty ambition is common throughout the ed-tech industry. Dozens of companies now tout a wide range of software, platforms, and apps as transformative tools for personalizing student learning.

Schools are buying in: **97 percent of district leaders** surveyed by the Education Week Research Center last year indicated that their districts had invested in some form of personalized learning.

Proponents say it would be a mistake to dismiss all those efforts as misguided, or not based on any evidence at all.

For one thing, RAND has found **early signs** that some comprehensive, whole-school personalized learning models yield modest student achievement gains.

And at its heart, said Richard Culatta, the CEO of the International Society for Technology in Education, personalized learning is about giving students control over their own learning; differentiating instruction for each child; and providing real-time feedback.

**Plenty of research** supports each of those strategies.

What's new about contemporary versions of personalized learning, Culatta maintained, is the use of technology to bring those individual approaches together into a coherent whole. What's happening now should be understood as research-and-development, with many experiments taking place at once, Culatta said.

How can K-12 educators and policymakers make sense of such a confusing, evolving landscape?

Louis Gomez has some ideas.

An education professor at the University of California, Los Angeles, Gomez studies the ways technology initiatives play out inside school systems.

The reality, he said, is that many schools purchase off-the-shelf software and call it "personalized learning," without being able to say what is supposed to change in the classroom. And even when schools do take a broader view, they often fail to recognize that success depends largely on decisions that educators and administrators make on the ground.

That's in part because many versions of personalized learning seek to change or replace fundamental processes that shape the day-to-day life of schools—everything from how teachers prepare lessons to how students are graded.

Inevitably, Gomez said, that causes tension.

RAND's research, for example, has consistently found that even in the best-supported personalized-learning schools, teachers frequently say there's not enough time to truly tailor the learning experience to each child.

Does that mean that schools should ditch the personalized-learning experiments?

No, Gomez, Culatta, and the RAND researchers agree. There's real reason to be excited.

But it's OK to wait for more and better evidence, they said. If you do plunge in, be sure the initial stakes for failure are low, and build in opportunities to learn.

"I would not advise schools to dump massive resources into going fully into personalized learning," said Laura S. Hamilton, the associate director of RAND Education. "Experiment with some new approaches that might be a good fit for your particular school or district, but monitor it very closely."

## **Argument #2: Personalized Learning is Bad for Teachers and Students**

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# “ IT’S BEHAVIORISM ON A SCREEN.”

Alfie Kohn | Author | “Schooling Beyond Measure”

Every student is a unique combination of individual skills, abilities, and preferences, writes Todd Rose in *The End of Average*, which has become a kind of bible for the personalized-learning movement. Therefore, trying to peg each child's learning experiences to some notion of what is typical for most children is both misguided and harmful.

Instead, many personalized-learning proponents suggest, schools should leverage technology to expand the benefits of good one-to-one human tutoring. By pursuing that vision, personalized learning can help children develop the skills, purpose, and passion to not only learn content and skills, but to think critically and build relationships, said Diane Tavenner, the CEO of California's Summit Public Schools charter network.

"Here's what I consistently hear," said Tavenner, describing her interactions with the thousands of educators across the country receiving training on Summit's technology platform and instructional model (which were developed with support from [Facebook](#) and the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative.) "They say, 'This lets me be the teacher I've always wanted to be.'"

But many experts, from across the political and pedagogical spectrum, aren't sure they buy it.

The [sharpest critiques](#) have come from progressives like Alfie Kohn, the author of *Schooling Beyond Measure*.

"It's behaviorism on a screen," Kohn said of personalized learning.

Here's what he means:

First, many critics believe that personalized learning boils down to kids working alone on software, an approach they say ignores the crucial social aspects of learning and reduces teachers to the role of "facilitators."

Because so many different approaches get labeled as "personalized learning," it's hard to say how often that really happens. In the schools RAND is studying, the researchers describe such practices as relatively rare.

But in August, the Silicon Schools Fund, which provides millions of dollars to leading personalized-learning networks, released a [report describing lessons](#) learned during five years supporting the field. Among the concerns were "schools that were often very quiet," because "students were head-down, working on their computers at their exact level." Now, the fund says, most of the groups it supports are trying to reduce the time students spend alone on computers to 20 to 40 percent of the school day.

On a deeper level, Kohn and some other progressive educators believe that real learning happens when students are driven by their intrinsic curiosity to pursue answers to their own questions about the world. By contrast, Kohn said, much of what's marketed as "personalized learning" amounts to little more than breaking knowledge and ideas down into "itty-bitty parts," then using extrinsic rewards to "march kids through a series of decontextualized skills they had no meaningful role in choosing."

Some conservative education-policy experts raise similar concerns.

Michael Petrilli, for example, is the head of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute. Like Kohn, he worries that some versions of personalized learning encourage a "**reductionist type of education**" that "breaks learning into little bits and scraps and bytes of disparate skills, disconnected from an inspiring, coherent whole." That tendency is particularly troublesome in the early grades and in subjects other than math, he said.

But while Kohn worries that personalized learning doesn't give students enough control over their learning, Petrilli fears the opposite.

It's already hard enough to ensure that all students are held to challenging standards and offered rigorous curriculum, he said. Personalized learning's emphasis on offering different content and paths to each student could open the door for watered-down expectations, greater inequities, and more difficulty holding schools accountable.

Tavener, of Summit Public Schools, described both critiques as "legitimate"—but only in those cases where personalized learning is solely about helping students efficiently master discrete information and skills.

That's not the case at Summit, Tavener maintained. She said the strongest personalized-learning models offer the best of what both conservatives and progressives want: high-quality standards and content for students, with opportunities to apply that knowledge via self-directed projects, all supplemented by human mentors and technology tools that help students keep track of their own learning.

Do such claims hold up to outside scrutiny?

There's not yet any definitive answer. But Stanford University professor Larry Cuban, a long-time ed-tech skeptic, recently **spent a year observing** classrooms at Summit and other personalized-learning schools in Silicon Valley. Cuban said he was surprised to find "meaningful, incremental improvements in how teachers organize and teach a lesson"—but not the kind of revolutionary new model of education that Tavener describes.

Overall, the personalized-learning field is still marked by significant unresolved pedagogical tensions, said Benjamin Riley, the executive director of the nonprofit Deans for Impact, which seeks to improve teacher preparation. Among the biggest: the appropriate role for software in the classroom, how much autonomy is best for student learning, and the challenge of maintaining high standards and social interaction when every student is pursuing his or her own path.

Too often, Riley said, proponents gloss over such concerns.

"There are tradeoffs here, and we at least need to acknowledge them," he said.

### **Argument #3: Big Tech + Big Data= Big Problems**

“  
**WHEN  
FACEBOOK  
PROMISES  
PERSONALIZATION, IT'S REALLY  
ABOUT MASSIVE DATA COLLECTION.**”  
Audrey Watters | Founder | Hack Education

Finally, many critics are worried that "personalized learning" is cover for an aggressive push by the tech industry to turn K-12 education into a giant data-mining enterprise.

For parents and activists like Karen Effrem, that belief provokes intense fear and anger.

"We're sacrificing our children's privacy, and we're allowing corporations to make potentially life-changing decisions about our kids, all for technology that doesn't actually help them," said Effrem, the president of Education Liberty Watch, an advocacy organization that supports parents' right to control their children's education.

Evaluating such critiques can be difficult. The proprietary technical engines that drive the personalized-learning movement are largely black boxes, inaccessible to public inspection.

What is clear, though, is student data are the fuel that makes many of those systems go.

Just listen to Bharat Mediratta, a former Google engineer who helped launch personalized-learning pioneer AltSchool, which aims to harvest information about students via everything from classroom cameras to computer keystrokes.

"First, we need to generate the big data," Mediratta **told Education Week last year**.

"Then, we start figuring out how to use it to transform education."

Writ large, that philosophy has prompted worry about the sheer volume of information collected from children in school, especially amid the recent push to better understand students' behaviors, feelings, and mindsets.

Security and privacy are also front-of-mind: Just this spring, for example, popular digital-learning platform **Edmodo was hacked**, resulting in the personal information of an estimated 77 million users being put up for sale on an unregulated part of the internet.

And many **critics worry that algorithms** are increasingly being used to make key decisions shaping children's futures, without any real way for students and parents to understand how those choices are made, or challenge them for possible errors or biases.

Personalized-learning proponents generally acknowledge such fears as legitimate, suggesting they can be solved through dialogue and better regulation.

"As we in the tech world get closer to having a better picture of each student at any given point in time, all of these discussions about data and privacy need to continue," said Kristen DiCerbo, the vice president of education research at global publishing giant Pearson. "It's not too late."

But some critics say that stance presumes that more data-driven personalization in education is both desirable and inevitable, so long as the wrinkles can be ironed out.

K-12 educators and policymakers should question the forces driving that narrative, said Audrey Watters, an independent researcher who maintains the popular Hack Education blog.

The push for more personalized learning isn't happening in a vacuum, Watters maintained. The movement is emerging from the values and technologies that already define Silicon Valley. And it's clear how the companies behind those systems operate.

"When Facebook promises personalization," Watters said, "it's really about massive data collection."

In the consumer sector, critics say, the downsides of that approach are only now becoming evident, after the technologies have already been deployed at enormous scale.

Facebook, for example, has recently come under fire for its role in creating "**filter bubbles**," in which users only see information determined by algorithms to fit with their existing preferences. Critics also decry the ways the company has reportedly sought to identify and manipulate users' emotions, including a **report last May** that it had told some advertisers it could identify when teenagers feel "insecure" and "worthless."

And Facebook is one of several tech giants currently in hot water over the way its platform was **apparently misused** in the run-up to the recent presidential election. Mounting evidence suggests foreign actors targeted unwitting Americans with personalized ads and misinformation designed to influence their voting behavior—a problem made possible by the extensive data that Facebook collects from users, and by the lack of public visibility into the customized information that each user receives. In late September, Zuckerberg, the company's CEO, **apologized** for "the ways my work was used to divide people rather

than bring us together."

Is it crazy to worry there could be similar unintended, unanticipated outcomes if personalized learning systems spread rapidly throughout K-12?

There are key differences between the consumer side of Silicon Valley and the work happening in education, according to Jim Shelton, the president of the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative's education division. Most groups trying to bring personalized-learning technologies to public schools aren't seeking exponential annual growth, Shelton said.

While CZI has given millions of dollars to AltSchool and its big-data-driven approach, the initiative is also supporting models like Summit, which says it avoids algorithmic recommendations and targeting in its platform. And as leaders like Zuckerberg bring their technologies, skills, and experiences into the K-12 arena, Shelton said, they face the burden of demonstrating that the products and approaches they support actually help children learn and grow.

Facebook and CZI "may be related, but they are not the same," Shelton said. "Being deliberate, being humble, and taking a posture of learning are all ways we're trying to be responsible as we do this work."

Still, educators and the public would be foolish to not carefully consider the tech sector's influence in public schools, especially given its recent stumbles, said Ben Williamson, a lecturer at the University of Stirling in the United Kingdom who studies big data in education.

Billions of public dollars are at stake, he said. So are big questions about the fundamental nature of schooling: How do we believe children learn? Who should decide what students need to know and get to experience? How will we determine what they've learned?

"We need to open up a bigger debate about whether we really want Silicon Valley establishing this new model of data-driven schooling," Williamson said. "These are people whose vision for reforming public education puts their own industry in charge."

*Coverage of trends in K-12 innovation and efforts to put these new ideas and approaches into practice in schools, districts, and classrooms is supported in part by a grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York, at [www.carnegie.org](http://www.carnegie.org). Education Week retains sole editorial control over the content of this coverage.*

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