“Our ambitious goal is to transform education into a personal learning path that flexibly adapts to the strengths, interests, and values of each student. We call this project our moonshot because it will require everyone in the organization (students, parents, teachers and support staff) to completely shift their mindset from a traditional one-size-fits-all style of learning to a dynamic, personalized approach that places students in the driver’s seat as stewards of their own learning.”

— from the Vista Innovation Center’s Personalized Learning Web Page
The House of Learning is a visual representation of VUSD’s blueprint for educational excellence and innovation. This graphic depicts family and community engagement as the foundation and personalized learning as the apex. It also expresses the district’s theory of action, highlighting the importance of many systems working together to create the right conditions to transform teaching and learning into an engaging, relevant, and personal learning journey.
One of the hallmarks of Vista Unified School District’s (VUSD) culture and practice is their relentless focus on the “why” behind the work—the learners and the experiences that will prepare them to thrive in their futures. Whether the context is a public forum or a private conversation between a teacher and principal about professional goals, every action, decision, or initiative includes intentional exploration of the “why” for the work.

Moreover, as Nicole Allard, the district’s executive director of educational excellence and innovation, points out, “It’s not a one and done event. We revisit our why all the time because the work is never done.” School and district leaders continually level-set around a common language to describe their work and their vision—articulating, as Nicole says, “who we are, what we believe, and what we want to do.”

The “why” for VUSD’s learning transformation, which began in 2014, was a combination of external factors about the changing world and community feedback from stakeholders, including students, about the learning experience in district schools. Working with industry partners, organizations, and educators from every level of the learning-to-career pipeline, VUSD examined data about the future of the work/learn landscape and listened deeply to students as they expressed a desire for greater relevance in their learning.

Conversations, data analysis, and reflections on current practice focused on increasing relevance to learners’ identities, as well as supporting their future success. What emerged was a shared purpose for transforming student learning at VUSD. “Personal Learning (PL)” soon became the district-wide approach to accomplish the common goals. As Superintendent Matt Doyle explains, relevance was “the meta message of our transformation. We’re committing to transforming the learning experience for kids. And with that we developed what we call the five elements of personal learning. Our personal learning star.”

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A Wide and Inclusive Network: Stakeholder Engagement at VUSD

Vista Unified's Personal Learning Path is a student-centered collaborative journey aligned to core curriculum standards. It builds on each student's strengths, interests, and values.

Personal Learning takes place in a flexible environment, with a 2-way feedback cycle to maximize students' academic achievement, behavioral growth and drive to become stewards of their own learning.
Originally, it wasn’t a star. It was just an arch. Then one of the parents said, ‘Why don’t we make it a star...because we’re shooting for the stars.’ So even though we see it as a star of personal learning, it really has a metaphorical connotation for our community, that they want to be the change.”

Whenever district, school, or classroom leaders tell VUSD’s transformation story, they show this graphic, their community’s shared vision of personal learning, as the way to achieve the VUSD mission: “to inspire every student to persevere as a critical thinker who collaborates to solve real world problems.” The star icon, Matt explains, serves as “a visual reminder of our collective commitment to transformation. The five elements of the PL Star provide very specific clues to help students, parents, and teachers to visualize the future.”

As VUSD leaders point out, however, creating a clear picture of the destination is an essential early step, but then the real journey begins. Using the personal learning star as their focus, Matt and former superintendent Devin Vodicka engaged in conversations with principals. “One of our core beliefs when we started this,” he recalls, “was that the fulcrum of change is at the school level, not at the district level.” He describes this approach, “change agent leadership,” as a fundamental commitment on the part of district leaders to be “servant leaders who would support principals, even if it meant that they were going to do some really audacious moves, because we believed in them.”

In the same way that educators design learning that is aligned to individual students’ pathways and learning profiles, VUSD’s district-wide PL Challenge allows for considerable variation and autonomy across and within district schools in determining the approach to personalization and the pacing of the transformation. All district schools are committed to a unified vision—the five core elements of the PL Star. However, because every VUSD school is empowered to set its own “WIGs” (Wildly Important Goals) around personalization and then innovate to achieve them, personal learning looks different across the district.

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The instructional vision captured in the PL Star served as the cornerstone of a district-wide PL Challenge to transform student learning. Matt Doyle, then assistant superintendent, invited individual schools to apply based on interest and readiness to change. The application process asked principals to indicate how many teachers would engage in the transformation and to identify a learning engine, such as project-based learning or design thinking, that would drive the personalization of teaching and learning at the school.

Schools accepted into a PL Challenge cohort were awarded funding to help them define, interpret, and pilot the five personal learning principles in ways that aligned to their school identities and learners’ needs. Teachers, students, parents, and administrators met quarterly to share their school’s progress. According to Nicole, these meetings might include a video of PL in action or a student talking about a project. “It challenged us to up our game and do what we needed to do,” she recalls.
At the school and classroom level, learners’ identities—their unique profiles as learners—give shape to their learning experience. Personal learning means more than setting one’s own pace for working through a prescribed curriculum. At VUSD educators and learners talk about pathways using the common language of “SIV,” the district’s shorthand for referring to learners’ “strengths, interests, and values.”

Self-discovery may include using tools like inventories of strengths and interests. For example, middle school students at Vista Innovation and Design Academy (VIDA) take a strengths assessment in Thrively and add their strengths, along with a description of them, to the SIV page of their personal brand websites. Robert Chodola, who teaches a college applications seminar at Mission Vista High School (MVHS), points to the RIASEC framework (also known as Holland’s Six Personality Types) or the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator as useful resources to help learners “build a language to talk about their soft skills and values” as part of their college and career exploration. However, Robert notes that it’s the reflection on and discussion of the results that is most valuable.

When describing their district’s model and the PL Challenge, members of the VUSD community are likely to refer to any or all of the PL Star’s themes. However, the principle that leaders, teachers, and learners point to without exception is the Personal Learning Path, which is informed by each learner’s strengths, interests, and values. According to Matt, personal learning “starts with the students and their story. It’s rooted in this idea that students have strengths, and every student has a story. Most importantly, at the top of our star, every student has a pathway, and it’s our job to help them with their pathway.”

The idea of learning as a pathway is not unique to VUSD, but what distinguishes the district is the way it frames this journey from a lifelong perspective. Starting with the P-3 Continuum’s focus on early childhood development, learners progress along what VUSD calls the Career Superhighway, “an uninterrupted career development pathway from preschool through employment for students to discover their strengths and interests and transform these into talent capital that aligns to the demands of the global marketplace.”

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Many VUSD educators echo Robert’s point about the value of individual reflection as a foundation for student ownership of learning. For this reason, developing skills in self-reflection can begin at a very early age for VUSD learners. For example, at T.H.E Leadership Academy, an elementary school, third graders establish their own WIGs—individual goals—and reflect on and track their personalized journey to reach them.

At Mission Vista High School, educators work together to convert key concepts and standards from their subjects into “I Can” statements. This student-friendly language enables learners to reflect meaningfully on their learning and exercise agency over how they will make progress. To illustrate, Stacy Eyton, chair of the math department, describes how she invites learners to articulate their level of understanding of the “I Can” math concepts on a regular basis, everything from, “I’ve got it, and I’m ready to move on” to “I’m a deer in the headlights—help me out!” From there, she and students work together to find ways to move past any barriers. Students also write reflections to discover the source of mistakes they make on assessments so that they can understand and persevere.

According to Nicole Allard, “One of the unintended positive consequences was that the need to see kids has been amplified. PL has been amplified. Kids are in different places, socially, emotionally, and academically. Teachers were able to literally glimpse into students’ homes and see them as individuals. It either opened their eyes or cemented their thinking about why we need to figure out where students are, who students are, what their interests are, and the importance of relevance to real life.”
Currently, two of VUSD’s middle schools are magnets. However, Nicole reports that plans are underway to make every middle school in the district a school of choice, with a lottery-based application process, by the 2023-2024 school year. In this way, learners and their families can select from among many personalized approaches and explore potential pathways at an early age.

In addition to exercising agency within individual courses, VUSD learners are also empowered to choose a personal pathway by selecting a school or a strand of focus within a school based on their interests, the ways they learn, and their goals for the future. MVHS, for example, is a dual magnet high school with emphasis in two learning strands. In California, a magnet school is defined as “a public school that usually focuses on a special area of study, such as science, the performing arts, or career education.” The areas of focus at MVHS are Arts & Communication and Science & Technology. Learners can pursue the strand of their choice, select from a wide variety of core and elective classes, and create unique pathways that may culminate during senior year in designing a largely self-directed capstone project called My Vision Personalized, or MVP, to showcase their learning during their four years at MVHS.

For example, the personalized approach at T.H.E. Leadership Academy is centered on the “Leader in Me” program, a leadership and life skills approach based on the work of Dr. Stephen Covey. At VIDA, middle school learners use design thinking to solve real-world problems and address issues that matter to them. Roosevelt Middle School, by contrast, embeds personal learning in an Artful Learning Model, an interdisciplinary approach grounded in the artistic process. Rancho Minerva Middle School offers multiple opportunities for students to participate in Career Technical Education (CTE), which exposes them to three career paths like photography, coding, and medical/laboratory science.

Through difficulties. As Stacy explains, “I don’t want them to just sit there at a stoplight and not go left or right or straight. We don’t all reach the destination at the same time and we take different routes.”
Enabling Conditions for Personal Learning

Two of the points of the PL star address elements that support but do not define personal learning—technology infrastructure and the learning environment. As Matt says, “Technology is a tool, not the driver.” Nicole adds, “I kind of secretly love that technology doesn’t automatically come up when people talk about personal learning at Vista. We’ve always made a point that technology is not personalized learning. It supports personalized learning.”

Like so many other districts, she notes, VUSD adopted a 1:1 approach during COVID to support all learners to have the devices they needed to access the curriculum, and the district does provide some common platforms. All schools, for example, use Canvas as their learning management system and the Google suite of tools and applications. Beyond that, Nicole points out, there’s a lot of choice at the school level to select the technology that serves them best. Principals have personal learning funds, and, working with the district information technology department and Nicole, they can “choose tools that match their brand and identity as a school.”

According to Matt, having a flexible and learner-centered environment is another key enabler of personal learning. Although he acknowledges that many people he meets do not take the physical learning environment as seriously as they do other elements, he sees the learning environment as an important factor. “Oftentimes, our environments, particularly at our high schools, demean students,” he says. Matt illustrates by telling the story of visiting Vista High School and seeing football players sitting sideways at their desks. “I went up and asked them why. I knew the answer, but I wanted to ask them. The answer was, ‘Well, I would love to sit frontways, but I just can’t fit.’ So this idea of the environment is really important, even things like the furniture, because it values students and their strengths. Change the environment, change the behavior.”

Nicole agrees that, although “we know that flexible spacing doesn’t cause PL, we do believe that even little things like not having chairs connected to the desks can make it easier to collaborate.” As examples of ways VUSD is rethinking learning spaces, Nicole observes that classes are no longer arranged in rows. Instead of the traditional desk-and-chair furniture Matt describes, learners work at tables or detached desks with white boards in place of desktops.

Now that devices are ubiquitous and content can be accessed digitally, entire rooms are being repurposed. At one school, a computer lab has been converted to a flexible learning space with movable white boards and kite tables. At others, school libraries are removing shelves to create more flexible work spaces, such as couches and cafe tables where learners and teachers can collaborate.
All members of the VUSD learning community are committed to the goal of personalizing learning. It is the “why” behind VUSD’s learning transformation. At the same time, Nicole explains, the district’s approach to change combines holding to that shared vision with individual agency, applying equally to school leaders and classroom educators.

Nicole explains that the district needs “to provide multiple access points to our leaders” and recognize that some principals—and teachers, too—are more comfortable than others with taking on the role of change agent. To illustrate, she uses the analogy of getting into a swimming pool. Some are “cannon-ballers,” who have thrown themselves whole-heartedly into all elements of personal learning. Others, she says, are “toe-dippers,” who are committed to the vision but are trying out more incremental changes.

This kind of adult agency is apparent in the way VUSD is tackling the final element of the PL star, competency-based education, which district educators refer to as their moon shot. “Every student’s on a pathway, and that pathway shows their growth over time. But every student’s growth is at a different rate,” Matt explains. “The reason we called it our moon shot is because it’s something we believe in, but we knew that it would probably take a long time to get there.”

At the district level, Nicole reports, COVID has accelerated the work to rethink assessment and grading with a focus on competency. For example, the school board recently approved—unanimously—a redesigned district-wide performance framework. The new framework centers equity and calls for using a fuller range of measures, such as data on learners’ connection and wellbeing, as well as providing multiple and varied opportunities for students to demonstrate their academic learning. The pandemic, Nicole says, called attention to “the need to assess students differently. Assessment has to be authentic, meaningful, and rigorous, and it has to incorporate care, connection, and wellbeing.”

MVHS, which joined the district’s PL Challenge in its second year, has supported teachers to be cannon-ballers for competency-based innovations, especially around grading. Jeremy Walden, the principal at MVHS, describes
by a culture of innovation and risk-taking. Continuing the swimming pool analogy, Nicole refers to the innovation mindset as “permission to belly-flop. Every educator is in a different space. This is hard, messy, crazy work and we have to have permission to fail.”

Regardless of the speed or depth of engagement with all five elements of the PL Star, principals, school leaders, and classroom educators are supported by the new approaches to assessment that are emerging throughout the school’s program. Standards-based grading, he says, focuses on “how students can receive constant feedback in the moment, have opportunities to show their learning in iterations, and have the final iteration, the last demonstration, be the one that gets the mark.”

Even before COVID, both Stacy and Michelle Daum, the chair of the English department at MVHS, were early innovators who are piloting assessment practices that focus on feedback and revision toward mastery rather than on scores. Michelle describes the PL Challenge experience at MVHS as “powerful,” because it “invited teachers to be part of the design process. It built trust and gave us permission to start the work under a shared vision—personalizing the work to match your site, the same way we provide personal learning for students.”