

# The Key to Personalized Learning? Having Useful Information.

*Two exemplary school systems have taken very different paths towards a more personalized approach to instruction-but in both cases, officials have found that knowledge is power.*



# A Close Up Look at Two Districts That Have Taken Steps to Achieving Personalized Learning

The Lake Washington School District near Seattle has personalized learning for every student by adopting a standards-based grading system that tells teachers what each child knows at any given point in time—and what that child needs to learn in order to be proficient.

Halfway across the country, the Oconomowoc Area School District in Wisconsin is personalizing instruction by giving students more control of their own learning.

These two exemplary school systems have taken very different paths toward a more personalized approach to education that is tailored to the needs of each student. But in both cases, having useful information that educators can act on as they personalize instruction for each child has been critical.

Here's a closer look at how these two districts have achieved success.

## Measuring proficiency for each standard

"We're not teaching to a broad group of kids anymore; we're teaching to the specific needs of specific kids," said Linda Stevens, director of assessing and reporting for the Lake Washington School District.

To do this, the district has implemented a standards-based grading system that is consistent from school to school. Instead of averaging a student's performance to come up with a grade for that child, Lake Washington plots the growth of each student over time, as measured for every individual standard.

For each standard, a team of teachers and curriculum specialists has developed a proficiency scale from one to four. A one means the student is not at that standard, a two means the student is progressing toward the standard, a three indicates the student has met the standard, and a four means the student exceeds the standard.

Lake Washington's proficiency scales explain exactly what it means to receive a one, two, three, or four for each standard.

"These scales are a great tool for teachers," Stevens said, "but it takes an extreme amount of work to put these together for each standard."

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The proficiency scales are just one component of a five-part system of proficiency in the Lake Washington schools. The other four components are clearly defined standards for each subject and grade level; leveled assessments that give every student a chance to demonstrate his or her full breadth of knowledge; scoring guides for these assessments; and a robust reporting system.

"If you have the first four parts, but you don't have a system to capture the data in a way that shows trends over time, then all is for naught," Stevens said. Lake Washington uses the Skyward Student Management Suite as its reporting tool.

As teachers input the results from each assessment into the system, the program calculates a “trend line” showing the growth of each student over time for every standard, so teachers can see immediately which students aren’t progressing and what they can do to help those students.

“I think that’s about as personal as it gets in terms of driving instruction,” Stevens said.

### **Having students take charge of their learning**

In Oconomowoc, personalized learning is an extension of the district’s focus on Universal Design for Learning (UDL), a framework for developing flexible learning environments that can accommodate various learning styles.

Recognizing that every child learns differently, the UDL framework encourages the creation of multiple means of representation, to give students various ways of acquiring information; multiple means of expression, to give students choices for demonstrating what they know; and multiple means of engagement, to challenge them appropriately and motivate them to learn.

For instance, students taking Spanish classes at Oconomowoc High School this year can plan their own assessments, said Assistant Principal Melissa Anders. For each unit, students must complete one oral presentation and one written presentation—but they can choose what they’ll focus on by themselves.

“Their assessments will be driven more by what the students are interested in,” Anders said. “We want them to take charge of their own learning.”

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In its elementary schools, the district is using a co-teaching strategy in which every teacher is paired with a learning strategist to assess students’ individual learning styles and vary the instruction for each child to meet his or her needs, said Learning Strategist Lydia Sobol.

And as students enter high school, they use a college and career readiness program called Naviance to assess their personalities and create a customized, four-year plan of study based on their possible career interests, said guidance counselor Angela Fisher.

Tying all of this information together for teachers and administrators is the Skyward Student Management Suite, which enables educators to visualize students’ instructional needs and act accordingly.

### **Why a flexible data system is important**

Officials in both Lake Washington and Oconomowoc agree that the flexibility of the Skyward Student Management Suite is a key driver of their success.

The system “can handle any kind of standards-based approach,” Stevens said. Skyward loaded all of Lake Washington’s standards for each subject and grade level into the

software, so district teachers and administrators could use the system to track their students' standards-based growth over time.

For Oconomowoc, Skyward is creating the ability for teachers to leave notes about each student's learning style and preferences—such as “this student really learns well with a hands-on approach, or through visual presentations”—so this information will be available to the student's future teachers as well, said Information Systems Coordinator Mike Rauworth.

In essence, Skyward treats each customer like these districts approach their students: as unique individuals with their own needs. And this personalized approach to instruction is paying off in both school systems.

In Lake Washington, students improved their average scores on state standardized tests in many grades in reading, writing, math, and science last year. For instance, reading scores rose for students in grades 5-8. About 88 percent of last year's eighth graders met the state standards in reading, compared to 83 percent in 2012-13; by comparison, 72 percent of all eighth grade students in the state met the reading standards.

In Oconomowoc, students say they like having options for demonstrating what they know, Anders said. She quoted one student who told district officials, “I used to struggle in school. ... Now I feel so lucky to be at Oconomowoc High School.”

### **For More Information**

To learn more about how Skyward can help your district implement Personalized Learning Tactics, visit [www.skyward.com](http://www.skyward.com) or contact your Skyward Account Executive at 800-236-7274.

### **About Skyward**

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