

## **Millis Advances Blended and Personalized Learning Plan**

Parents who enter a school building these days may be surprised by a different look and feel. That is due in part to Blended and Personalized Learning. From classroom design, to homework and grading, to daily learning activities, school as adults have always known it is changing rapidly, and parents may not recognize or understand what they see. The Millis Public Schools aim is to increase personalized learning experiences for children over the next several years in order to increase their ability to communicate, collaborate, create and think critically. The goal is to accelerate learning by better addressing the unique needs, interests, and skill levels of students. Ultimately, we aim to help students develop an understanding of themselves as learners and to develop agency and ownership.

What does personalized learning look like? It may appear different in different classrooms and at different grade levels, but a fundamental component is building relationships and developing personal connections with students - something on which Millis teachers pride themselves. Teachers collect data in various ways that help them to plan meaningful learning experiences. They use surveys, conferencing, and daily interactions to discover the interests, passions, strengths and challenges of their students. There is an underlying belief that learning can vary in pace, time, path, and place, yet students still work towards mastery of objectives in the MA Curriculum Standards Framework.

Over the past several years in Millis, teachers have incorporated student voice and choice into instruction. Based on the principles of Universal Design for Learning, students choose from a options to access and engage with content and to express what they have learned. Teachers and learners, at times, co-design instruction. Student ownership of learning is an important philosophical shift as we continue to move toward more learner driven learning environments. Teachers place more responsibility on students by helping them begin to develop their own learner profiles, to set goals, to make choices, and to reflect regularly on their own progress. In Millis classrooms, students work collaboratively in small groups; they create videos in the hallways; and they use technology to connect with far away places. They research and analyze online text; they complete service learning projects; they write blog posts; and they keep digital portfolios. Sometimes personalized learning looks messy, especially to adults looking in from the outside!



Students at CFB Skype with a school in Nicaragua

Research on the brain and learning has led to changes in teaching strategies and flexible environments that better match the way children learn. Today's classrooms contain options of all sorts to ensure that all students can comfortably interact with the curriculum and collaborate with one another to learn. A peek into a classroom might reveal flexible seating, such as couches, stools, yoga balls, and floor mats, and

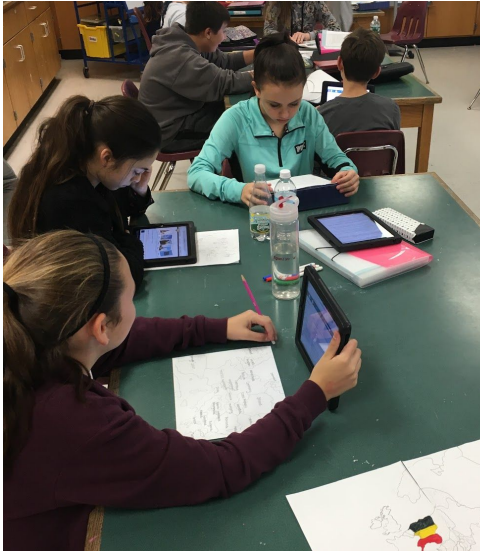
flexible work spaces, such as tables, standing desks, and lap desks. These allow students the freedom to move around and the ability to form working groups and use various technology tools. A plan is in the works to replace the critically aged Clyde F. Brown Elementary School with a new building designed for 21st Century learning and built to better support student-directed learning.



Collaborating with Chromebooks and standing desks

Research on homework and grading has led to changes that may be more challenging for parents to understand. Homework is no longer nightly drill and practice; it is designed to be more relevant and meaningful and it may be assigned less frequently than in past years. Traditional letter grading practices at the elementary and middle school are slowly being replaced by Standards-Based Reporting. This means that children are being assessed on specific learning skills and content knowledge according to a rating scale that describes what is needed for mastery. Instead of an average grade, Standards-Based Report cards give parents information on exactly what skills their child has mastered. The focus turns to “What did you learn?” rather than “What did you get?” *Habits of Mind* or *Learner Expectations* on the report cards focus on behavior, work habits, and effort - separate and distinct from academic achievement.

Students from Clyde Brown Elementary School through Millis High School regularly use technology for learning. Eight years ago, 8th graders at the Middle School began using 1:1 iPads as part of the district’s original Personalized Learning Initiative. Today, a 1:1 program exists in grades 5 through 12, with a combination of iPads and Chromebooks. This combination of traditional classroom instruction and technology integration is called Blended Learning. Technology allows learning to happen in ways it never could before. Devices like iPads, Chromebooks, and smart phones provide options for how students take in information and show what they know. Teachers create lessons and resources on a Learning Management System called itsLearning or in Google Classroom. This allows students to access information anywhere, at any time, and they are able to learn at their own pace. Students may listen to a podcast, watch a video, engage with an interactive application, or read digital text. One teacher has even implemented Walking Classroom lessons and some are experimenting with Virtual Reality. The focus is less on learning facts and more on learning experiences that require students to analyze information from a variety of sources and create something. Blended Learning is a key component of personalizing learning, and one that has become commonplace in Millis classrooms.



iPads in Geography



Using Chromebooks for research

Project-based learning is another alternative to traditional classroom instruction and a way that teachers have begun to personalize learning more. The project itself becomes the learning experience rather than something students do at the end of a unit. A real-life problem is identified and students research and develop solutions, while engaging in mini-lessons along the way. Generally, learning becomes relevant and authentic, rather than just reading information from a textbook, and students are more interested and engaged.

To support the continued advancement of personalized learning throughout the district, Millis administrators completed a year long course in 2017, entitled Leadership in Blended Learning, designed by the Friday Institute of North Carolina State University. Millis High School Principal, Bob Mullaney, was one of the facilitators of the course after completing training at the Friday Institute. Millis has also joined together with other school districts to form the Massachusetts Personalized Learning Edtech Consortium (MAPLE) to learn from one another. In addition, a new team of administrators and teachers is charting a course for the future as the Millis Blended and Personalized Learning Leadership team (BAPLL). The team is guiding the district in moving forward and in supporting teachers with professional learning experiences they need in order to personalize learning in innovative ways for their students. Finally, stakeholder support is being enlisted to design a new Digital Learning and Innovation Plan. As we attempt to prepare children for a rapidly changing world, we recognize that our schools need to change so students can learn skills critical for success in a future we can only imagine.

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