

Personalizing Learning in MBUSD

Mike Matthews, Superintendent

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Please take a few minutes to read about how MBUSD is working to increase and improve personalized learning in all classrooms and for all students, and how the Board adopted GATE plan fits into those efforts.

Over the last five years, we have been working in MBUSD to personalize learning for each student. We want *every* student's needs challenged and supported from kindergarten through graduation. That's no easy thing when California public schools are among the worst funded schools in the nation and when California's class sizes are higher than class size in most other states' schools in the nation. Personalizing learning is easier to accomplish when you have amazing teachers like ours who use effective, research-based strategies to overcome all obstacles and get to know how each student learns so they can meet all students where they are. But make no mistake, personalizing learning for each student is no easy task. It takes extraordinary teaching and incredible dedication.

The tendency with low funding and higher class size is to "teach to the middle" and hope for the best for all students. A few years ago, MBUSD elementary schools used Open Court for language arts and Saxon for math. At the time these programs were selected, districts' options for instructional materials were significantly limited by state laws and regulations, and both of these programs provided one-size-fits-all curricula that truly taught to the middle. Despite the limited curricula choices provided by the state, our elementary teachers did great work supplementing these curricula, but they were working to overcome a non-personalized curriculum.

Now, in every elementary classroom, we are working to know exactly where each student is academically and to meet them at their level and challenge them in a way that maximizes their learning and growth. We are doing this in reading, writing, and math. We are providing core

experiences for all students (shared novels, common writing genres, and standards-based math concepts), individualized instruction using books at each student's "just right" reading level, one-on-one writing conferences, and math problems designed to allow students to use a variety of strategies and numbers of varying complexity to develop a deep understanding of concepts rather than a rote ability to apply a formula. These strategies are the epitome of a personalized teaching and learning system.

I think all of us know that in almost all cases, the more you understand something, the more complex and nuanced it becomes. Students with deeper levels of understanding can find multiple ways of examining a task and use a variety of methods to approach each task. These strategies will challenge each student, or better yet, allow each student can challenge herself or himself in a way that maximizes learning and growth. This can set students on a path to success not only in the classroom, but after they leave school and become lifelong learners. We are well on our way in language arts, but in math, we are only beginning this transition. I commend our teachers for the work they have done so far, and I want all parents to know how much of a challenge it is to learn a new way of teaching.

All of these strategies are research-based. They are not new. They just have not been implemented well in many schools. We believe that the research of Jo Boaler and Carol Dweck from Stanford builds on these strategies. They both speak of a "growth mindset." Every bit of brain research out there tells us that brains are changeable. Students who are told they are not smart or that they cannot do something, can lose that growth mindset and the brain can stagnate. Similarly, students who believe that being "smart" is a fixed characteristic shortchange themselves and limit their potential. Dr. Boaler's and Dr. Dweck's research consistently shows that students who believe that hard work and perseverance can help them to learn more and "become smarter" actually achieve more. I believe this never stops. I am 54 years old, and I know that if I continue to work at it, I can become a better writer, thinker, swimmer, or biker, as well as a better dad, husband, son, and friend. And if I don't work at it, I will become worse.

One of the questions we have faced recently is what to do about Gifted and Talented Education (GATE). GATE funding used to be significant in the state of California, but that funding is now gone. Thirty years ago, there was a great deal more *tracking* than there is today. Students were

grouped in classes according to their ability levels. Over time, research has demonstrated that tracking was not entirely beneficial to any of the groups, particularly at younger ages. The focus has moved from separating students to finding ways to personalize learning and give each student the level of challenge that they need.

Our Board has recently been discussing the future of our GATE program in MBUSD. A committee comprised of parents of GATE students has been meeting for a year, trying to determine the future of MBUSD's GATE program. As it currently stands, we test students at the end of 3rd grade with a single multiple choice exam, and those who score above a certain threshold are identified as GATE. It is about 10% of MBUSD 3rd grade students. Those students are then assured a placement with a GATE-Certified teacher in 4th and 5th grade, and a GATE-Certified science teacher in middle school. (*GATE-Certification means that teachers have been trained to identify gifted students, understand their unique social and emotional needs, and respond to their individual differences.*) In middle school, GATE students also have access to an overnight field trip and after school classes for GATE students.

The recommendation from the Committee to the Board was to encourage even more of our teachers to use the personalized learning strategies that come along with GATE certification.

- The Committee recommended that the District fund and provide a stipend to Personalized Learning Lead teachers, who would help elementary teachers to design and implement personalized learning strategies.
- The Committee recommended that written goals for each GATE student be developed and placed in the hands of their teachers.
- The Committee recommended that more teachers be encouraged to become GATE-Certified, simply because this training is not just good for GATE students - it is good for *all* students.
- The Committee recommended that in addition to the GATE field trip in middle school, that GATE students have the opportunity to take high interest after school classes through MBX.
- The Committee recommended that the District collect data from parents and teachers on the extent to which personalized learning strategies are being successfully implemented for *all* students. And they recommended that after three years, if more teachers have

been trained, and if the data demonstrates that teachers are identifying students with different learning needs and personalizing learning for those students, GATE testing cease.

Based on Board feedback after a robust discussion at the May 4, 2016, Board meeting, we revised the Committee's recommendation and brought that revision to the May 18, 2016 meeting. The two primary changes were:

- The high interest after school classes will be offered to *all* students
- After *two* years, if more teachers have been trained, and if the data demonstrates that teachers are identifying students with different learning needs and personalizing learning for those students, that GATE testing cease. If the data does not demonstrate that, then the current GATE program will be extended.

These changes were approved by the Board by a 5-0 vote. Our goal is to help our teachers to learn strategies that effectively personalize learning. Our additional goal is that personalized learning is not just good for our GATE students, it is the best possible strategy for *all* students.

So we are doing our best to personalize learning for each of our students, and we have already started collecting data to see how we are doing. We will be measuring our progress with outstanding partners, including Dr. Jo Boaler from Stanford University, UCLA Center X, and two outstanding schools in our 21st Century Consortium, Westside Community Schools in Omaha, and Edina Public Schools in Minnesota. We have already begun collecting data. We posed four survey questions to all parents and two questions to teachers in a recent survey. We will be asking these questions for several years to see how we are doing.

- *To what extent are MBUSD teachers personalizing learning for your child, including knowing him/her well and supporting him/her as we prepare him/her for graduation.* 53% of parents who responded agreed with that statement.
- *To what extent are MBUSD teachers personalizing learning for your child, including appropriately challenging your child as we prepare him/her for graduation?* 54% of parents who responded agreed with that statement.

- *I feel that my child's teacher(s) know how he/she learns best.* 56% of parents who responded agreed with that statement. 86% of teachers who responded agreed with that statement.
- *If my child already knows something, his/her teachers let him/her learn more about the same topic in a different and/or deeper way.* 47% of parents who responded agreed with that statement. 97% of teachers who responded agreed with that statement.

That last question is one of the questions we are particularly interested in when it comes to our GATE students – and for any students who need or want that additional level of challenge. As you can see, while over half of our parents agree with the first three statements, less than half agree with this statement about appropriately challenging each student. Interestingly, 97% of our teachers agreed with that statement. There is clearly a discrepancy here. The GATE Committee has observed and discussed this discrepancy. Our commitment is to close this gap between teacher reporting and parent reporting, so that both parents and teachers agree that a very high amount of personalization is occurring in our classrooms.

Again, when a teacher can appropriately challenge of all 24, or 28, or 180 of their students, we are talking about a teacher who is remarkably skilled. I look at our track practices, or our football practices, and I see multiple coaches working with our students on mastering different skills. In the classroom, it's one teacher. Still, I have seen it done well and I have incredible admiration when it is.

All parents want the best for their children. All parents want teachers who can personalize learning for their child. In spite of the obstacles from the lack of funding funding and high class size, our teachers are thriving. They are learning and implementing the strategies that are emphasized in GATE Certification which we know can be effective in personalizing learning. We have adopted a philosophy and approach to teaching that promotes personalized learning. And we are collecting data to determine how well we are doing and to help us to grow and improve. Our goal is clear, and I have great faith in our teachers and our community. We are committed to improvement, and I look forward to building on the incredible successes of our MBUSD schools.