

DELLEMC



Empowering student voice and choice
to deliver personalized education



Executive summary

Many educators and school districts know that K–12 education has to consider the learning requirements, preferences and talents of individual students in order to be effective in preparing them for success in their college, careers and life. Listening to students' voices and giving them learning choices are critical in providing personalized learning. Incorporating student voice and choice results in better educational outcomes, and happier students and teachers. This whitepaper shares insights from Student Voice, an organization that helps educators and students incorporate student voice and choice in teaching and learning, and from Hall County School District in Georgia, where students' voices and choices already are critical elements of personalized education.



Transcending the limitations of traditional learning

Students, educators and administrators share the goal of achieving the best possible learning outcomes and readying students for successful, happy lives as they go on to college and start their professional careers. As societies and industries are undergoing change and young people are entering innovation-driven workplaces that require them to keep learning and evolving, K–12 education has a hard time keeping up.

Eddie Millwood, a principal in the Hall County School District in Georgia, says, “Several years ago, I walked around the school where I worked and realized that classrooms had not really changed since I went to school. At a teachers’ conference, when I asked the group if they felt we were doing a good job of preparing students for the real world, almost no hands went up. We had to make a change.”



The case for student voice and choice

Many educators, parents and students find it troubling that standardized learning, as it is still widely practiced, does not benefit all students. A few students excel in this educational structure while many others lag. This traditional learning model does not enable students to develop the skills and dispositions that make it possible for them to succeed as they go on to college and start their professional careers. Neither does it provide access to much of the helpful online information that can greatly enrich learning. For open-minded educators, personalized learning and a departure from the highly normative educational approach offer the promise of teaching that is more effective because it accommodates students' personalities, learning styles and preferences while delivering relevant education.

Having learned something new almost every day of their lives, young people naturally gather a wealth of expertise when it comes to learning. They may well be the ones who best understand their specific learning requirements. These reasons are part of why many educators and pedagogues believe that listening to students is critical in bringing about better educational outcomes. Student voice and choice first gained prominence in the context of student governments and learning projects, but they have grown beyond those confines. For years, some educators and their students have explored teaching that at least to a degree incorporates student voice and choice, for example, by personalizing learning based on student competency.

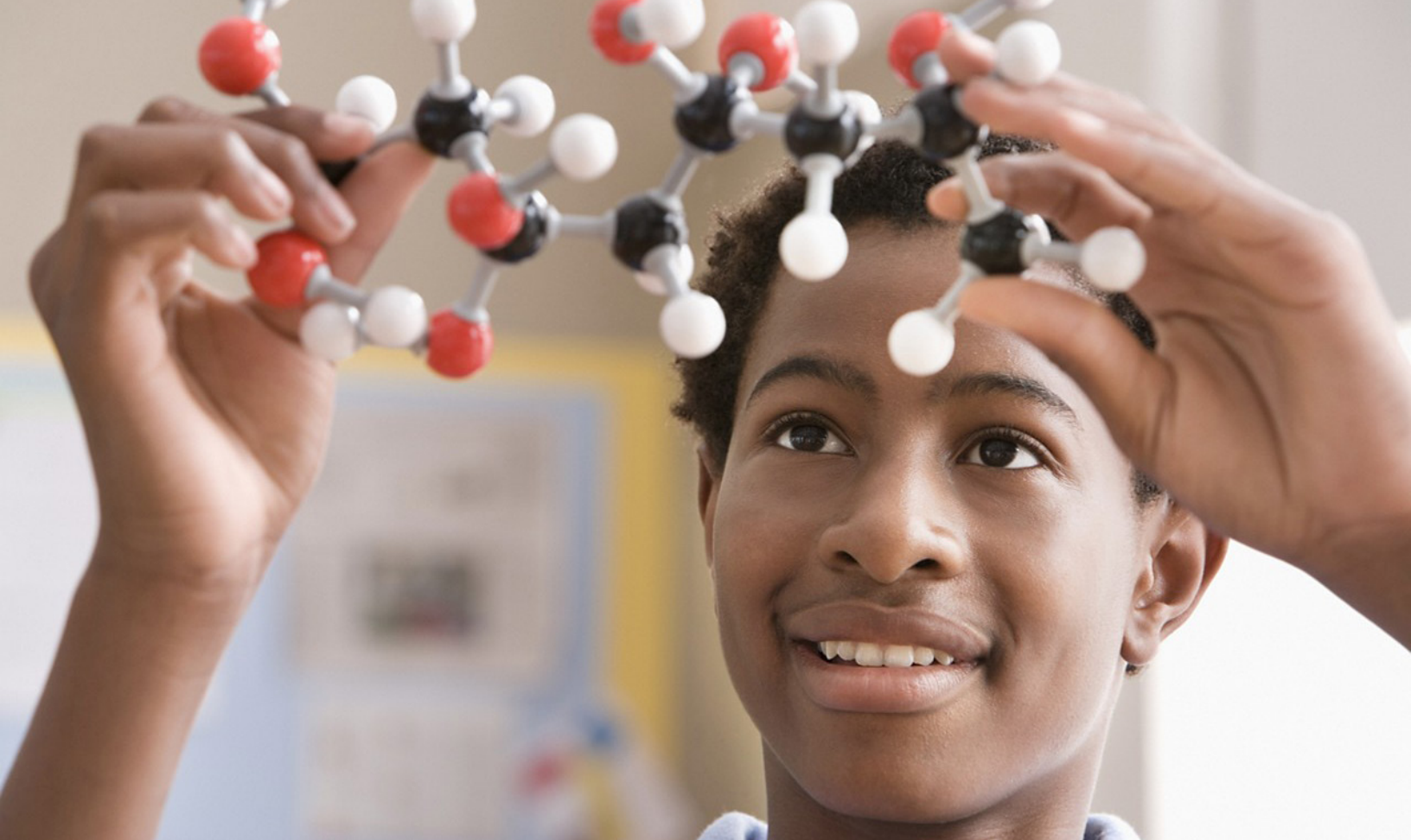
At Hall County, students' voices are critical in setting directions for learning. "When you remind students of what we need to accomplish together and ask for their ideas regarding how they can show that they achieved educational goals, they quickly come up with creative and different ways of doing that," says Millwood.

Once students' voices are heard and considered, school districts can offer them choices in their education. Explaining his own district's path to personalized learning, Millwood says, "Once teachers understand personalized learning and are comfortable with it, classrooms can give students more choice in how they get their information and how they display their mastery of the material."

Preparing a cultural transition

Giving students voice and choice in a meaningful manner necessitates a cultural shift in how school districts operate and in the way educators, administrators, parents and students think about learning. For many generations, it was the norm for learning to be applied to students, who were taught and shaped in a standardized manner. Students were not seen as having the maturity and judgment to have a voice in their education. Parents and educators thus may find themselves challenged by the idea of giving students a louder voice and broader choices in learning.

Tara Subramaniam, a co-founder of the advocacy organization Student Voice, says, "There's a prejudice that students don't care about these issues, that they don't have anything to say or that they won't get involved if given the choice. Those assumptions are counterproductive. You never know until you try to create a space where people feel comfortable sharing. You might be surprised what students have to say."



A framework for articulating and promoting student voice and choice

Founded in 2012, Student Voice is a student-run nonprofit that originated from a series of Twitter chats. The organization aims to empower students to hold educational institutions accountable for the quality of their learning experiences and address inequities in the educational system. To that end, Student Voice helps students and educators understand impediments to learning and the current state of schools by collating and broadcasting students' stories and facilitating conversations. Through an ambassador program, Student Voice helps students engage decision makers and drive policy changes. The organization participates in many educational conferences around the U.S.



Small steps lead to a wave of change

Student Voice took wing when myriad small conversations and incremental efforts gained momentum. In Subramaniam's high school, for instance, students interested in incorporating their smartphones in the learning experience agreed with their teachers to tweet at regular intervals about what they were learning. They way, they could receive valuable feedback and share the perspective of students who were not in the same class. In addition, freshmen could gain a sense of what sophomore classes were like and how they might best succeed in them. This initial, seemingly minor effort was highly consequential. Subramaniam says, "Our first Twitter experience created a culture of open-mindedness and the willingness to hear what students had to say."

Because of its wealth of experience, Student Voice is often consulted when students and educators are unsure about the best ways to encourage students to make their voices heard and exercise their right to choice in learning. The Student Voice team helps educators and administrators remove barriers to student involvement and use a variety of approaches to encourage students to make their voices heard. These include open lunches, surveys, school assemblies, open office hours and principals' visits to classrooms.

Often, student voices may not have much of an impact until a core group of educators, together with students, explore new ways of teaching and learning. Hall County School District, for example, recruited a small group of teacher volunteers to spearhead a personalized learning initiative and establish best practices for the new learning and teaching model before broadening it across its entire network of schools.

Technology to serve a personalized educational environment

The Student Bill of Rights created by Student Voice summarizes the organization's positions on student empowerment and educational issues in nine different themes, including civic participation, deeper learning, free expression, positive school climate and due process. Student Voice offers resources for students in each of these nine areas.

Regarding technology in schools, the Student Bill of Rights states, "All students have the right to modern technology actively incorporated into their education." Conditions in schools vary greatly when it comes to technology – some school districts implement 1:1 initiatives and offer coding courses while others make do with obsolete, shared computers and outdated software tools. Aging technology typically has to be updated before it can foster equitable, effective learning and support students' voice and choice.

While students can find a wealth of useful information on the internet and accomplish much by using digital tools, technology should play an enabling, not leading, role. "We believe that technology in the classroom can give students a voice in what they are learning," says Subramaniam. "It is really a tool that can help students achieve their full potential and pursue the topics that are important to them in their education."



Student voice and choice can drive the use of technology

Student Voice leaders and school principals like Millwood have a similar view of the many ways technology can enable personalized learning, and they also caution against simplistic, overly standardized approaches. Some school districts mistakenly equate the use of educational technology with personalized learning, thereby accidentally restricting any beneficial outcomes. Millwood says, “We have very intentionally over the course of many years backed away from even using the word ‘technology’ with our teams, because it’s too easy to fall into the trap of using technology for the sake of doing so and losing sight of the fact that it can sometimes be just a glorified textbook or worksheet.”

The most valuable aspect of attending school involves shared experiences and interactions that could not happen outside of the learning environment. Student Voice therefore emphasizes that technology needs to enable and enhance connections between learners and educators and allow students a greater level of agency in their learning. At Hall County Schools, even some online courses that students take on their own include regular feedback and guidance from teachers through onscreen, live interactions. A greater emphasis on interactive learning also helps soften the traditional teacher/student hierarchy, making it easier for students to speak up and contribute from their life experience.

Technology in the classroom needs to be supported by consensus and policy. “When teachers, administrators and students are on the same page regarding acceptable uses that are not overly limiting, technology can allow students to take charge of their education,” Subramaniam comments. She points out that technological tools can be extremely valuable when they support different learning styles and preferences in a way that more conventional learning cannot. Technology-supported group assignments, individual study and research projects, back-channel conversations and other educational activities can give both extroverted and introverted students the opportunity to acquire and demonstrate competency.

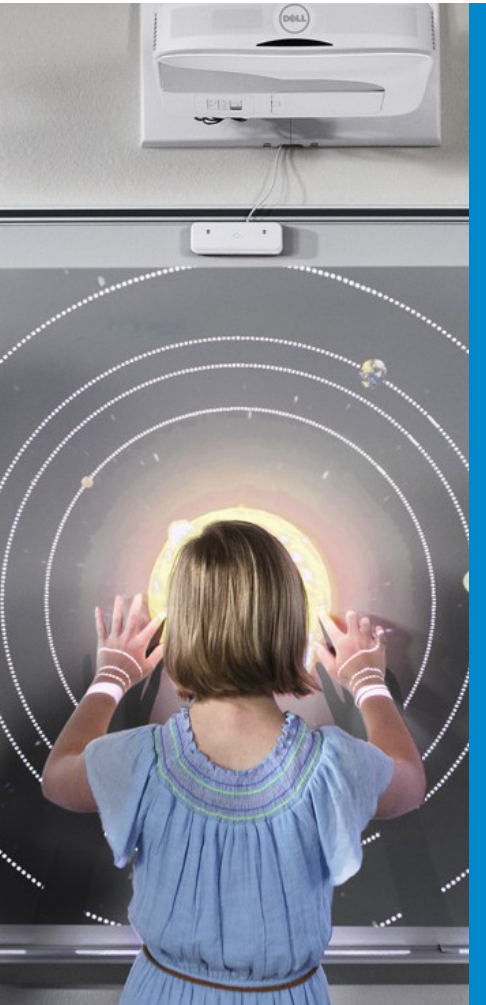


Transforming education across one school district

Hall County School District adopted an incremental, nondisruptive approach to explore blended learning, which typically combines a variety of learning methods, including the use of digital tools, and can feature varying degrees of personalization. District managers decided to begin with one middle school to pioneer new ways of learning.

Millwood recruited a small group of educators who were interested in changing their teaching style to achieve better outcomes. They gleaned students' ideas and began using a variety of different teaching and learning scenarios in their classrooms. They included voices from all segments of the student population, not just the most gifted, because they wanted to create an educational model that would work for everybody. That initiative bore positive results. "Instead of performance drops, the teachers who incorporated blended learning in these first classes showed gains across the board," says Millwood. "Even the kids who traditionally were struggling or had behavior issues did well with the new teaching practice and easily adopted the technology tools we offered."

After these early efforts proved to be successful, personalized learning was gradually brought to all classes in that first school and into the district's other schools. Today, Hall County School District is widely recognized as one of the leaders when it comes to implementing personalized learning successfully and receives visitors from around the country. By sharing their experiences, Millwood and his colleagues help other school districts give students voice and choice in personalized learning, avoiding needless misjudgments and delays.



Student-centered, diverse approaches to learning

Students at Hall County Schools personalize and intensify their learning in many ways, based on their needs and interests. A recent project about Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* typifies the diverse learning methods that students can take advantage of. A summary of the many activities students pursued as they learned and explored:

- Recorded sections of the play and received critiques from inside and outside of the classroom, adding valuable perspectives and insights
- Worked in groups, partnered with a peer or studied on their own to grapple with the play's themes
- Produced assignments in Canvas, the district's learning management system (LMS), often following links to websites with additional resources
- Reinforced their learning with reading questions, which they responded to individually or in pairs
- Made use of digital breakout rooms to apply and demonstrate their learning, following a method that one student compared to a scavenger hunt
- Created reports in groups and shared them with the class
- Found more and different ways for shy students to showcase their accomplishments

Similarly, students followed a great variety approaches to studying and learning in other subjects such as social studies and math. One eighth-grade student says, "The teachers always come up with new and creative ways to help us learn. They definitely want our opinions on things and want us to achieve the goals we set for ourselves."

Unleashing teachers' resourcefulness

When the early efforts to modernize learning showed high promise, Hall County created special support teams of teachers who would help their colleagues in the other schools invite students' voice and choice and gain confidence in adopting personalized learning approaches. Millwood says, "You must have a solid plan in place to provide professional support and learning to those teachers who may be new to blended learning."

In readying educators to transform their teaching practices, often after many years of classroom practice, Hall County Schools allowed them to find their voices and make their own choices, so they could experience for themselves how empowering and enriching the new approach could be. Hall County students take heart from the continuous and highly individualized learning they see their teachers undergo. One student says, "Teachers who have been teaching the same things for 10 or 20 years meet regularly to discuss how they can become better. We see how they make adjustments and try out new things in class. It's amazing how much they change their ways of teaching and how open-minded they are."



Involving the parent community

Subramaniam from Student Voice says, “I wish that more parents would get involved in the conversation about students’ voice and choice.” Parent participation at Hall County was a challenge that took time and effort to address. Early on, Millwood and his group of blended-learning pioneers expected that parents would be enthusiastic about the learning modernization they pursued. They were surprised when that was not the case.

Millwood explains, “Parents were trying to help their children at home and became flustered when they could not use the textbooks and worksheets they were used to from their own school days. We offered them informational meetings to help them understand what we were doing and let them see what blended learning can look like in the classroom. Then they began supporting the new direction.”

New roles to advance personalized learning

It takes an ongoing commitment with strong leadership to ensure that students’ voice and choice continue to translate into better teaching. To that effect, Hall County Schools created a new position, the digital convergence specialist. Millwood took this job in addition to continuing as a principal. In his new role, Millwood works with his peers across the district as they evaluate and refine their approaches to fostering student voice and choice and using technology to advance blended learning. In this team effort, Millwood collaborates every year with three different teachers who adopt the mission of developing the district’s digital resources and helping their colleagues in Hall County’s 38 schools use a variety of blended-learning techniques. Millwood cautions against becoming too attached to any technological tool or methodology. “You have to be careful not to get too set with any product or approach you use, because resources and learning environments will change and evolve,” he says. “What we thought of as blended learning years ago and implemented then is not how we practice it today.”



Anytime, anywhere learning rooted in students' lives

Hall County School District uses technology flexibly and only as it serves educational purposes. Students can use Chromebooks in class; the district is gradually moving toward providing each student with a dedicated device. Students save their files in the cloud on Google Drive. If they do not have access to technology at home, they can use the district's Chromebooks or computers in their school library. In many learning situations, students use cameras to document their presentations and dramatizations. "Behind the camera or in front of it, you can choose how you want to use it in learning," says one of the eighth-graders.

Anytime, anywhere learning is effective in Hall County Schools. The district has created a connected, efficient learning infrastructure in which a number of technology tools and approaches have become interoperable – they all serve the purpose of continuous, relevant education. For example, in addition to the Chromebooks, students can use smartphones to access Canvas. There, they can play review games to answer questions about what they learned, or they can provide feedback at the end of classes to help teachers understand how well they understood the subject matter and how it could be taught more effectively. With single sign-on, students can use their Hall County credentials to get to the LMS, cloud storage and all their resources from any device with a browser. When teachers advance their skills on professional learning days, pupils study at home, using digital resources.

At Hall County, modernizing learning based on students' voice and choice is a journey that results in ongoing improvements, and it does not terminate at a given point. Millwood says, "One thing we've learned is that there's no final 'there' to get to. We always have to keep changing and looking and learning. What we think of as the cutting edge today may be old and tired a few years from now. This is actually a cool place to be."



Building momentum for student voice and choice in modernized learning

Statistics regarding the adoption of personalized learning diverge widely because of varying definitions of personalized learning and inconsistent sampling. In the state of Vermont, personalized learning was mandated by the legislature's Flexible Pathways Initiative in 2013. In 2016, 22 percent of surveyed educators were using some form of personalized learning and 20 percent expected to adopt it over the next two years.

Assessing how many school districts understand the value of empowering student voice and choice in personalized learning is even more difficult. Across the U.S., some school districts are just beginning to solicit students' input and allow them to exercise a level of choice while others can already show years of experience. A few, like Hall County, are taking a leadership role in exploring the opportunities of blended and personalized learning across their K–12 student populations.

When you ask Hall County instructors and students what they see as the main advantages of personalized learning – where teachers' ongoing development and student participation make a difference – they consistently highlight several key benefits:

- Improved learning outcomes in terms of grades and student involvement
- More thorough preparation for college and professional careers
- Empowerment for individual learning styles, talents and interests
- Freedom from unproductive restrictions on when and where education can happen
- A powerful arsenal of practical tools to make learning relevant and impactful
- Better educational equity in delivering learning to students from all backgrounds
- Ongoing improvements in teaching and learning practices



It may never be possible to measure the costs in student performance and motivation when school districts continue to deliver education in a traditional manner that uses the same approach for every student. However, experience clearly shows that learners do better when teaching plays to their strengths and incorporates their individual needs and preferences. “Now I have much better access to resources and many more opportunities to learn in different ways,” says one Hall County student who transitioned from another school district. “I wish I would have had choice in my learning earlier. Where I was before, the teachers did not offer me the help I needed. They were too focused on getting through the lessons as fast as they could.”

Dell EMC is firmly committed to supporting education transformation that builds on student voice and choice. As Subramaniam and Millwood emphasize, educational technology is most effective when it serves a personalized learning environment. Modern technology offers students and teachers a greater variety of ways to deliver and receive education and demonstrate mastery, but it will be effective only when coupled with a learning model that puts students at the center of learning. Online resources and mobility can overcome some limitations of traditional learning and enable anytime, anywhere education with access to a world of information. What’s more, technology tools can help bring about an infrastructure that brings content and information to help students learn and teachers deliver relevant education.



About Dell EMC

Dell EMC is committed to helping educators transform the education system to help students develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions they need to succeed in an increasingly digital world and a globally competitive workforce. As a leading provider of technology and services to schools, Dell EMC listens to and works with students, educators, administrators, parents and community members around the world to bring an outcomes driven approach to transform learning.

Learn more about Dell EMC in K12 Education at www.DellEMC.com/K12.

Follow us on Twitter [@DellEMCedu](https://twitter.com/DellEMCedu).

¹ Hall County School District is at <https://www.hallco.org/boe/site/>

² See, for instance, <https://www.edelements.com/blog/guest-post-why-personalized-learning-is-imperative>

³ See, for example, https://www.bie.org/blog/student_voice_and_choice_its_not_just_for_projects_anymore

⁴ See <https://www.competencyworks.org/uncategorized/what-does-it-look-like-student-ownership-voice-and-choice-in-a-competency-based-school/>

⁵ Student Voice is at <https://www.stuvoice.org/>

⁶ See <https://www.stuvoice.org/accelerate>

⁷ See <https://www.forbes.com/sites/barbarakurshan/2016/12/22/developing-our-understanding-of-personalized-learning/#6c0263f329c5> and others

⁸ See <http://www.leg.state.vt.us/docs/2014/Acts/ACT077.pdf>

⁹ See <https://content.extremenetworks.com/extreme-networks-blog/the-state-of-personalized-learning-in-the-real-world-of-education-survey-results-and-infographic>