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THE JOURNEY TO TRANSFORMATIONAL LEARNING IN VIRGINIA BEACH CITY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Presented by: Amy E. Cashwell, Ed.D.
Chief Academic Officer

Lisa A. Banicky, Ph.D.
Director of Innovation and Strategic Planning

Janene K. Gorham
Director of Teacher Learning and Leadership



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The Journey to Transformational Learning in Virginia Beach City Public Schools

Virginia Beach City Public Schools has always been committed to ensuring that our students have the necessary skills and knowledge to be successful in school and beyond. This commitment was evident in our implementation of our last strategic plan *Compass to 2015*. At a time when most school divisions were solely focused on academic proficiency, our school division expanded its scope to include an equally important and complementary focus on 21st century skills. We worked to identify the skills that transcended content areas and would have relevance throughout a student's life. We sought to develop these skills within our students by engaging in innovative teaching practices including the integration of instructional technology into the classroom, developing an assessment system that went beyond multiple-choice measures of core content areas, and establishing systematic procedures for responding proactively to student needs.

Our current strategic framework, *Compass to 2020*, builds on this work and seeks to extend it by placing students at the center of the learning process and reimagining their role in it. *Compass to 2020* calls for developing a plan for **personalized learning** that provides **all** students with interest-based, flexible, student-directed learning opportunities supported through the purposeful use of technology.

In preparation for the rollout of *Compass to 2020*, we developed resources to guide the work and support schools in implementing it. One of these resources, the Teaching and Learning (T&L) Framework, was collaboratively developed by teachers, principals, and central office staff. It outlines the foundational pieces of effective instruction necessary for responding to student learning needs before, during, and after instruction and was specifically developed to ensure **equity** in the educational experiences of our students. The T&L Framework clearly articulates teacher practices that are expected to be evident in all of our classrooms and included personalized learning as part of these expectations. It also emphasizes technology as a means of fostering engagement and the development of critical thinking, communication, and creativity, as well as other globally competitive skills.

TEACHING AND LEARNING FRAMEWORK *Every Teacher, Every Day*



The second resource developed to support *Compass to 2020* was a definition of personalized learning that was collaboratively created by representatives from multiple central office departments based on a review of literature and feedback from a variety of stakeholders. The definition identified personalized learning as an approach to instructional design that involves tapping into what is most relevant to students and using this to partner with them in the learning process. The feedback received in response to the definition was positive and prompted deep interest in finding ways to show what personalized learning could look like in our classrooms.

Two Paths - A Single Destination

To deepen our understanding of personalized learning and the role of technology in supporting it, we initiated two paths for organizational learning. The first path involved inviting and selecting schools to serve as Digital Learning Anchor Schools where the specifics of device implementation and the utility of digital resources for supporting personalized learning could be studied in depth. The second path involved the creation of a new type of learning and leadership opportunity for teachers that invited them to use the definition of personalized learning as a launching point to make it visible in the classroom. The T&L Framework and the VBCPS definition of personalized learning were instrumental in guiding the work of the Digital Learning Anchor Schools and the Design Fellows.

Digital Learning Anchor Schools

Before the start of the 2015-2016 school year, schools were invited to apply to become a Digital Learning Anchor School. As a result of the application process, 11 schools were selected to form a cadre that would serve as model digital learning schools within the division to study the efficacy of a variety of digital devices and resources for positively impacting student learning. The intent was to use these schools to demonstrate how we might move the integration of instructional technology from substitution (i.e., doing what we've always done but with technology) to redefinition (i.e., doing what couldn't be done before without technology). It also provided an opportunity to focus on developing a strong infrastructure and mechanisms for providing technical

Defining Personalized Learning
in Virginia Beach City Public Schools

The "What"
Personalized learning is an approach to instructional design guided by a learner's personal goals, strengths, interests, and needs that is informed by ongoing assessment and self-reflection.

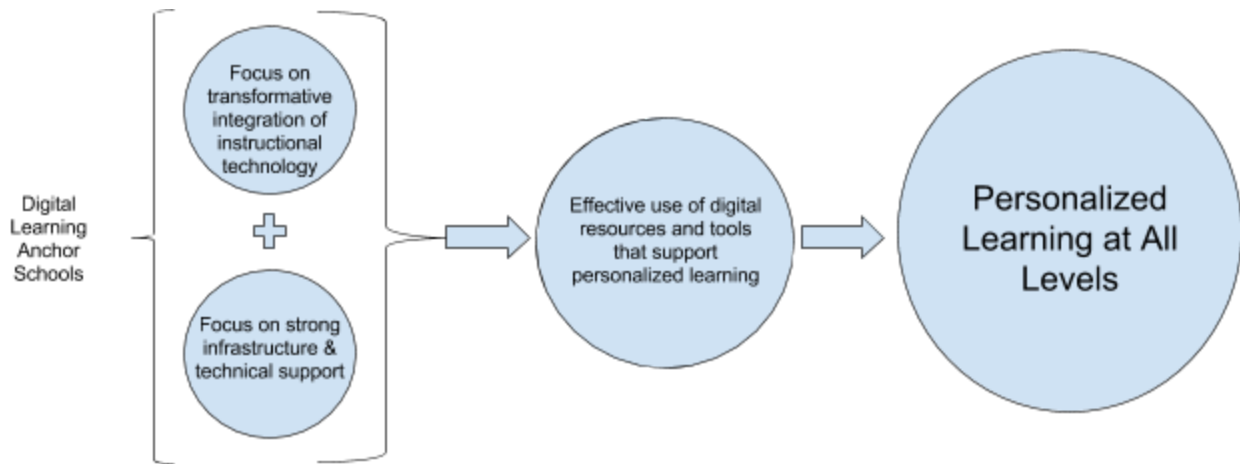
The "Why"

- Plan a pathway in support of achievement and future aspirations
- Empower the learner to become self-directed and self-reliant
- Develop inquisitive learners with a growth mindset to prepare for success in a rapidly changing world

The "How"

- Learners and teachers co-creating rigorous learning experiences derived from clearly defined and articulated learning goals based on standards
- A focus on inquiry in which the learner poses questions and proposes solutions
- Learner ownership over content, process, and product
- A flexible learning environment with respect to time, location, and grouping
- A purposeful and focused use of technology to support and demonstrate learning as well as organize learner data over time
- Data-driven, individualized progress monitoring

support. We believed that focusing on both the meaningful integration of instructional technology and the system needed to support this digital transformation would enable us to identify ways to effectively support personalized learning at all levels.



The Digital Learning Anchor Schools formed leadership teams that guided implementation at the school level and these teams met monthly with one another to learn from each other. Early in the process the school teams collaboratively developed teacher and student outcomes that they believed should emerge from their work. The table below includes the desired outcomes originally identified by the leadership teams of the Digital Learning Anchor Schools:

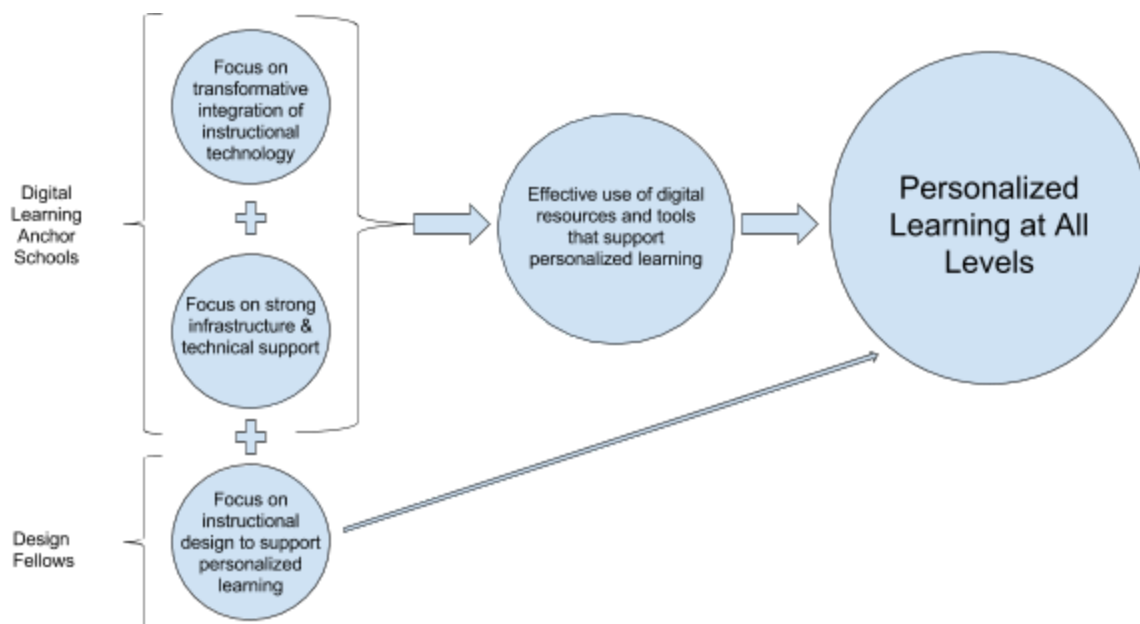
Teacher Outcomes	Student Outcomes
<p>Teachers will use digital technology to appropriately connect students to authentic learning experiences (outside the walls of the classroom).</p> <p>Teachers will empower students to choose their learning path through relevant and purposeful use of digital technology.</p> <p>Teachers will personalize learning through real-time data collection and analysis and individualized learning experiences.</p> <p>Teachers will use digital technology to collaborate, globally and locally, to foster professional growth.</p>	<p>Students will take ownership of their academic growth by being active partners in their unique learning pathway by having voice and choice.</p> <p>Students will gain a global perspective by leveraging digital tools.</p> <p>Students will collaborate using digital tools to support their learning and the learning of others.</p> <p>Students will demonstrate academic mastery and growth through creation and publication of digital work.</p> <p>Students will become responsible and ethical digital citizens.</p>

Several of the outcomes the teams identified addressed empowering students to take ownership of their learning, increasing choices available to students for how they learn and demonstrate what they have learned. The intended outcomes also included extending learning beyond the classroom as well as an emphasis on students and teachers partnering together in the learning process. As the Digital Learning Anchor Schools worked to achieve these outcomes, they helped to identify the role of building leaders, teachers, students, and the community in supporting their efforts.

Design Fellows

Concurrent to the work of the Digital Learning Anchor Schools, teachers and specialists across the division were invited to apply for the opportunity to serve as a Design Fellow focused on operationalizing personalized learning at the classroom level. Of the more than 100 teachers and specialists who applied, 57 were selected to serve in the 2015-2016 school year. The Design Fellows represented 42 of the schools in the division ranging from early elementary through high school and a wide variety of content areas.

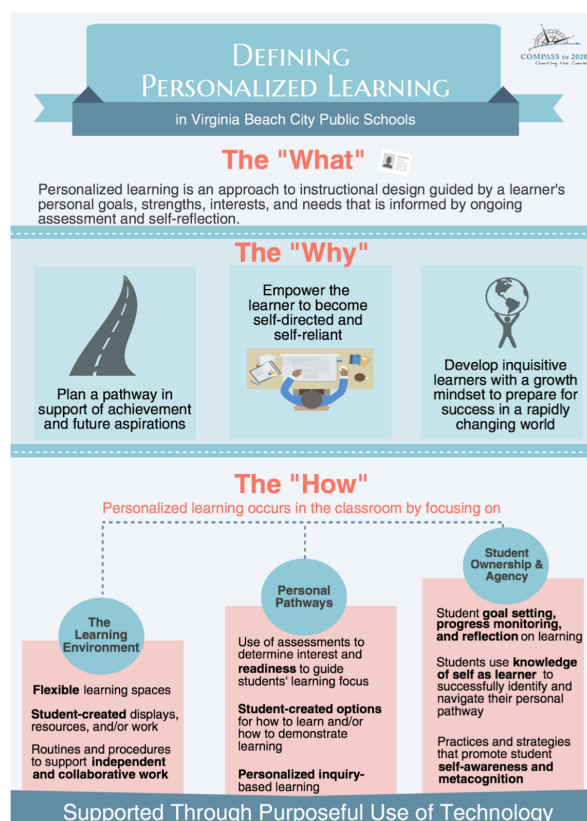
While the Digital Learning Anchor Schools were primarily focused on the integration of instructional technology and the infrastructure to support it, the Design Fellows were focused on instructional design to support personalized learning with the expectation that they would develop artifacts and models that would be shared divisionwide. The role of technology was not a direct focus of their exploration of personalized learning but they were encouraged to consider what role technology should serve in their work.



Over the course of the summer of 2015, Design Fellows learned to use the problem-solving approach of design thinking, influenced by models and principles used by Stanford's famous d.School, the Institute of Design, and IDEO's Design Thinking for Educators. Three overarching questions guided the work of the Design Fellows:

- What does personalized learning look like in the classroom?
- How can I show others what personalized learning is?
- What do other teachers need to know and do to successfully implement personalized learning?

Based on site visits and quarterly meetings to share ideas and observations, synthesize findings, and work toward producing artifacts to help others "see" personalized learning, three essential components of personalized learning at the classroom level emerged: learning environments with flexible learning spaces, student-created displays, and routines/procedures to support independent yet collaborative work; personal pathways that provide student-created options, or choices, for how to learn while keeping them accountable for their learning; and student ownership and agency as evidenced by students engaging in goal setting, progress monitoring, and reflection. These learnings were used to revise the initial definition of personalized learning to include the essential components.

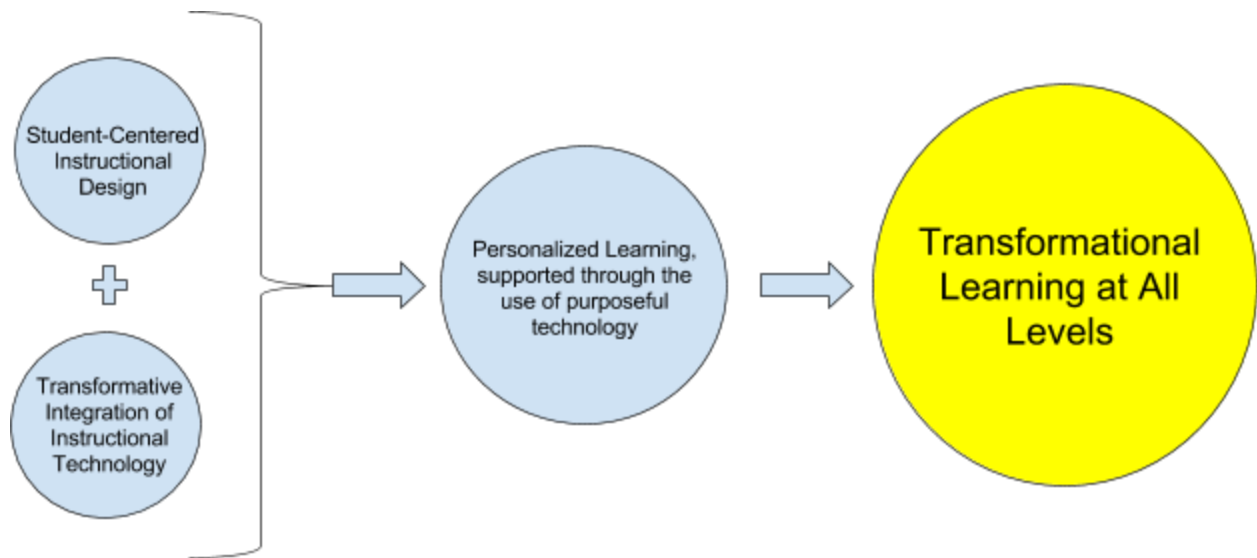


Converging Paths to Transformational Learning

By the end of the 2015-2016 school year, several points of convergence had emerged from the work of the Digital Learning Anchor Schools and the Design Fellows. First was the growing understanding that the power of personalized learning lies in its ability to foster **student agency**; that is, its power lies in the ability to equip and empower students to **make meaningful choices and take purposeful actions in support of their learning**. A second point of convergence was the understanding that personalized learning requires transforming the learning process from a primarily teacher-driven endeavor to a student-centered enterprise. It requires teachers to partner with students and provide them with opportunities to direct their own learning and set their own goals.

Although the Design Fellows were not explicitly directed to integrate technology into their instructional design, most all of them did in meaningful ways to support personalized learning. The implication of their work and the work of the Digital Learning Anchor Schools was that transforming the learning process also requires efficient and effective uses of technology to meet students' individual needs and provide them with the tools necessary for accessing, creating, and sharing knowledge.

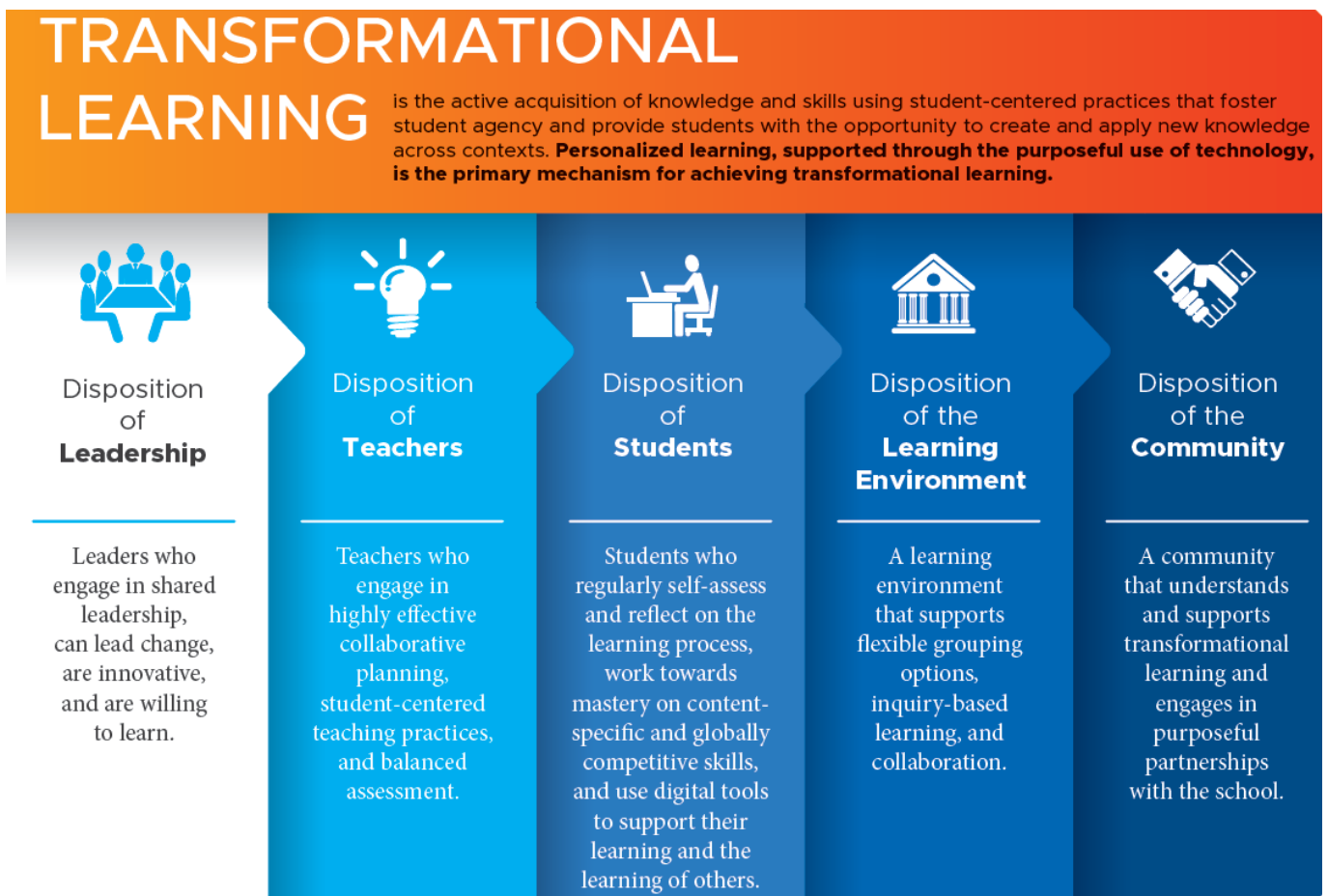
Ultimately the largest contribution of the work of the Digital Learning Anchor Schools and the Design Fellows was the growing realization that the ultimate goal of the work was not personalized learning as the final outcome but **personalized learning** as a **primary mechanism for truly transformational learning**. It helped shape our understanding of **transformational learning as learning that uses student-centered practices to foster student agency and provide students with the opportunity to create and apply new knowledge across contexts**.



What Transformational Learning Requires

By definition, transformational learning is student-centered with a premium placed on student agency and it requires a fundamental shift in the relationship and roles of the student and teacher. However, the work of both Digital Learning Anchor Schools and Design Fellows made clear that there are additional interdependent elements essential for transformational learning. More specifically, their work highlighted the critical role that the school's learning environment, leadership, and community play in supporting transformational learning.

During the 2016-2017 school year, the Digital Learning Anchor Schools took the lead in defining these essential elements which were then translated into specific dispositions of leaders, teachers, students, the learning environment, and the community that support transformational learning. Woven throughout the dispositions were the foundations of the Digital Learning Anchor Schools' and Design Fellows' work: student-centered learning, student agency, and the purposeful use of digital tools and resources to maximize opportunities for students to engage in learning aligned to their unique needs and interests. The following sections describe each of the dispositions that support transformational learning.



Disposition of Leadership

Transformational learning requires leaders to engage in four different types of leadership: shared leadership, change leadership, innovative leadership, and learning leadership. In **shared leadership**, the leader engages the school community in a strategic manner to share in learning, thinking, and decision making. The leader enables and empowers others to act and creates a culture of shared ownership between

students, teachers, and the school community. **Change leadership** is demonstrated by a leader who is able to successfully lead change within the school and focus teacher practices on creating a personalized learning environment for students. A critical part of being a change leader is encouraging and motivating individuals to contribute to change in meaningful ways and creating an environment in which failing-forward is embraced. Transformational learning also requires **innovative leadership**. The innovative leader understands and promotes the idea that iteration is the key to innovation. Further, the leader encourages risk-taking and innovation by providing staff with frequent recognition and support for good ideas. The final aspect of leadership necessary for transformational learning is **learning leadership**. Learning leadership is demonstrated by a leader who is willing to be a learning partner with staff, frequently modeling and learning alongside faculty. This type of leadership involves modeling a daily commitment to learning and setting an example that creates progress and momentum.

Disposition of Teachers

Transformational learning requires teachers who engage in highly effective collaborative planning, student-centered teaching practices, and balanced assessment. It has implications for each of the three areas outlined in the T&L Framework.

Transformational learning requires that when teachers **plan**, they collaboratively work in a professional learning community (PLC) structure with a shared vision and prioritization of analyzing student work, reflecting on data, and responding with plans that meet student needs. It also means that teachers' instructional plans provide for personalized learning opportunities that authentically engage students in critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity. Digital tools are used in the planning process for communication and collaboration among teachers and are also incorporated within the planned learning opportunities for students.

Transformational learning requires that when teachers **teach**, they use personalized, student-centered strategies that include opportunities for students to engage in reflection, goal setting, and action planning as ways to support the development of student agency. It also requires teachers to facilitate learning through opportunities for students to collaborate and make relevant connections to content. Differentiated instruction continues to play an important role in meeting student needs with deliberate gradual release promoting independent mastery of skills and concepts. Transformational learning is further supported through the use of digital tools that are purposefully leveraged to support individual students' needs and support collaboration.

Transformational learning requires that when teachers **assess**, they use a strong balanced assessment system with a clear rationale for the types and formats of assessments used to demonstrate students' growth, as well as their acquisition, application, and transfer of skills and content. It also requires that formative assessment strategies with descriptive feedback be used to guide instruction and respond to student needs. In this context, digital tools are used to support assessment and feedback practices.

Disposition of Students

Transformational learning requires students who effectively engage in goal setting, regularly self-assess, and reflect on their learning. It also requires students who know how to engage in progress monitoring to support learning decisions, including both how to acquire information and how to demonstrate knowledge and understanding in pursuit of mastering content-specific and globally competitive skills. Transformational learning requires student engagement with learning that is inquiry-based, involves multiple perspectives, and is supported through meaningful collaboration and purposeful use of digital tools. It also requires that students demonstrate learning through creation and publication within their classroom and to external audiences.

Disposition of the Learning Environment

Transformational learning requires a learning environment that supports flexible grouping options, inquiry-based learning, and collaboration. This means attending to both the physical learning spaces and the routines and procedures that contribute to a positive learning culture. A positive learning culture is cultivated through the deliberate use of routines and procedures that support positive rapport and mutual respect between all in the school. In physical learning environments that support transformational learning, instructional spaces, including classrooms and the media center, are designed for collaboration with space for flexible grouping options. In these settings, physical spaces throughout the school are arranged to allow for inquiry-based learning and exploration, creation, and development of student ideas. Learning environments that lend themselves to transformational learning also have designated spaces in classrooms and the school that are used to display and showcase student work.

Disposition of the Community

Transformational learning requires purposeful, reciprocal partnerships between the school and the broader community, which includes parents, local businesses, and organizations. An important component of this relationship involves the community's support and understanding of the instructional shift to a student-centered learning environment that includes digital learning. It is also critical to address equity with regards to access and support for student use of digital resources at home.

Preparing for Transformational Learning and Ensuring Readiness for All

Although transformational learning is a relatively new concept for our school division, the work to support it is not. Beyond the work of the Digital Learning Anchor Schools and the Design Fellows, several *Compass to 2020* strategic actions, as articulated in the Quickstart Guide distributed at the 2015 Administrators' Conference, also supported our journey to transformational learning: the T&L Framework was introduced to guide instruction; the Instructional Technology Specialist position was created; and the professional learning requirement for all teachers for the year was focused on creating student-centered learning environments.

The work on transformational learning continued to unfold in the 2016-2017 school year as reflected in the strategic actions identified for the year (**See Appendix A**). During the summer and early fall of 2016, the Digital Learning Anchor Schools helped to develop a reflective guide for determining readiness for transformational learning. The reflective guide articulated expected behaviors and characteristics for each of the five dispositions described previously. The Digital Learning Anchor Schools piloted the process related to both reflecting on readiness by engaging stakeholders in a series of probing questions as well as leveraging the support guides associated with each disposition area. In addition, a second cohort of Design Fellows was selected to continue the work of creating artifacts to support the essential components of personalized learning.

Assessing readiness for transformation across all of our schools was specifically identified as a *Compass to 2020* strategic action for 2016-2017. This was accomplished by initiating a concentrated focus on transformational learning for all schools in the division at the first Citywide Principals' meeting of the 2016-17 school year. Following the lead of the Digital Learning Anchor Schools, building administrators were introduced to the reflective guide for transformational learning and given guidance for engaging their stakeholders in a collaborative process to determine their school's

level of readiness in each of the five disposition areas. Completing the reflective activity served several purposes including casting a clear vision of what transformational learning requires, assessing the division's level of readiness for transformation by gathering information from the school level, and informing the development of targeted, differentiated professional learning to support transformation. Moving forward, we will use the results from the readiness activity to identify strategic actions for the 2017-2018 school year that support our journey to transformational learning because we believe this is the path forward for accomplishing the goals set out in *Compass to 2020*.

Appendix A: Strategic Actions Supporting Transformational Learning

