



# *CONNECT:* *Making Learning Personal*

Reports from the Field by the League of Innovators

## **Personalized Learning in Wisconsin: FLIGHT Academy**

by

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The FLIGHT Academy in Waukesha, Wisconsin, is a “school-within-a-school.” It is not a charter school; rather, it’s a personalized learning program that functions within a traditional school model. FLIGHT stands for “Facilitating Learning through Integration, Guidance, High expectations, and Technology.” During its first year in 2013–2014, the academy enrolled 60 students in Grades 6 and 7. Currently, in Year 2, approximately 90 students in Grades 6, 7, and 8 are enrolled.<sup>1</sup>

The diversity of students in our program is representative of the school district in which we teach. We have students with learning and emotional disabilities, students who are English language learners, and students who are gifted and talented. There is no grade or ability requirement to enroll in FLIGHT; students and their parents only have to fill out an application showing interest. It is important to us that the student and parents complete the application together because we will all be working together as a team when completing learner profiles and providing feedback. After completing the application, students must get at least one recommendation from a current teacher who believes the program would benefit the student. All students who complete the application process are eligible to join our program. If we have more applicants than openings (which has been the case), we hold a lottery.

Two of us, Jeffrey Taege and Krista Krauter, spent a year creating the FLIGHT Academy. We researched current innovative learning programs in the United States, Europe, Australia, and

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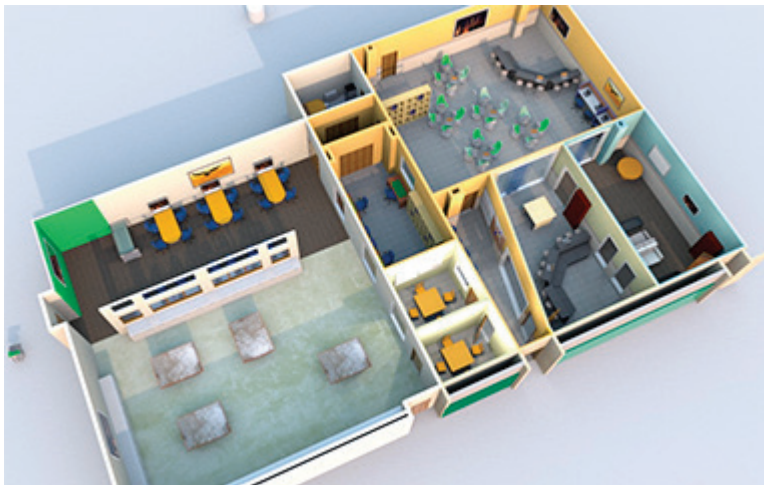
<sup>1</sup> Editor’s note: The FLIGHT Academy website, [www.flightacademysdw.org](http://www.flightacademysdw.org), contains up-to-date information about the academy and profiles of the authors.

This field report is the third in a series produced by the Center on Innovations in Learning’s League of Innovators. The series describes, discusses, and analyzes policies and practices that enable personalization in education. Issues of the series will present either issue briefs or, like this one, field reports on lessons learned by practitioners recounting the successes and obstacles to success encountered in implementing personalized learning.

Neither the issue briefs nor the field reports attempt to present in-depth reviews of the research; for those resources readers are encouraged to access the Center on Innovations in Learning’s resource database. Topics should be of particular interest to state education agencies and district and school personnel.



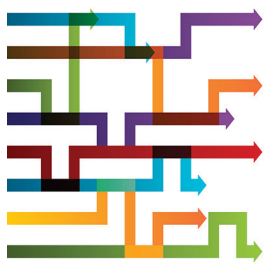
New Zealand. Our goal was to create a student-centered program that focused on the learner's interests and goals. We felt that using a personalized learning format would best accomplish our mission and vision. Planning a new and innovative program that would function within a very traditional school model would be daunting. As part of our teaching duties, we would be responsible for ensuring that students met all of the district standards within each content area, but we would also be responsible for ensuring that each student was learning and progressing at his/her own pace while incorporating 21st-century skills. We would no longer be a "sage on the stage," but would now be advisors, coaching our students according to their individual and personalized learning plans.



After making a plan for the academy that coincided with our vision of learner-focused education, we realized that an innovative learning space would be needed. The physical layout of the FLIGHT Academy is made up of seven different but interconnected learning spaces, spaces that enable students and advisors to freely rotate to an appropriate space throughout the day. Each area can be configured to support any learning model or strategy. As shown in the model, there are three large learning spaces, called the "Commons," the "Lab," and the "Cafe." At the beginning and end of each day, one advisor meets with their advisory students in these spaces. For the rest of the day, the Commons is set aside as a place where students can go to work independently. It contains node desks, which allow students to have movement while they work. The Lab consists of large tables with stools where students can work on science labs or other projects. If students want to work with small groups, they can work in the Cafe. It now consists of seven rectangular work stations anchored with flatscreen TVs. Students can collaborate with each other by displaying their iPad screens, via AirPlay, on the large TVs; students can see what each member of the group is working on.

There are also four other smaller learning spaces in our academy. The Lounge offers a quiet place for students to relax on couches and recliners while reading or studying. The Studio provides space for face-to-face seminars. The small Chat Room enables a group of students to collaborate for a short period of time. And in the Study, cubicles allow students to work with minimal distractions. Students learn the functionality of each room and move in, out, and among these spaces as they need to.

A typical day in the life of a FLIGHT Academy student is quite different than the life of a student in the traditional model operating in the rest of Horning Middle School. In that model, students take an average of seven 50-minute classes per day, each addressing a different subject. Students have a different teacher for each class, and each class operates independently from the other classes. In comparison, at the start of the day in the FLIGHT Academy, students meet in a community circle with their advisor and fellow "advisory" students. During this advisory period, each student makes a plan for the day,



filling in a personal calendar, first scheduling “nonnegotiables”— seminars, lunch, and electives—and then planning the remaining time, which we refer to as “flex time” and which is unique for every student and depends on individual priorities for work completion.

After advisory, some students go to a seminar and other students start their flex time. During a seminar, students receive face-to-face instruction for about an hour from a content area teacher. As noted above, students in the legacy model in our middle school have about seven classes per day, but in the FLIGHT Academy, students usually have only one or two seminars per day. Most of a student’s day is spent in flex time. All students have their own learning plan which includes daily, weekly, and monthly goals in each content area. Students use flex time to work on the assignments or projects that will meet those goals. Students are also responsible for attending a weekly conference with their advisor. During this time, the student and advisor discuss progress as well as problems and accomplishments. Toward the end of the day, students work in groups on an assigned project during “team time.” All students are required to complete projects which integrate subject areas, standards, and community learning. Finally, students end the day as they began it, in their advisory. Advisors again check in with students, make daily announcements, and preview what is ahead for the next day.



Personalized learning has significantly impacted our students. In the past year and a half, no incidences of misbehavior have resulted in disciplinary referrals. Our students also have a better attendance record than students in our legacy model classrooms, and we correlate that to their enthusiasm to come to school and meet with their peers to complete engaging assignments. Many have said that they were bored in the past but that they aren’t bored in FLIGHT because they always have something to do. They are learning at their own pace, completing projects at their own pace, and they have voice and choice in what they are learning. Students working at their own pace means we have students at many different stages of accomplishing their core curriculum standards on any given day. Individuals don’t have to wait for classmates who need extra time to learn a concept; they can simply take up the next challenge. Students can often choose how they show proficiency in a standard and are then encouraged to move on to the next standard. Because of these reduced barriers to advancement, some students are progressing through the curriculum quickly, and we have many students in advanced classes. The achievement data from standardized tests are still in the preliminary stages and we will continue to monitor and track this data so that we can substantiate claims in the future.

We believe these aspects of choice, voice, and pace for FLIGHT increase students’ motivation and ownership of their learning. Our students are both excited to learn and remember what they learn because of the experience. Also, our students know them-



selves as learners. Each student is responsible for keeping a portfolio of his or her best work. This portfolio is included in their learner profiles, and students are required to “defend” their portfolio before a panel of teachers, parents, and students at the end of their eighth-grade year. Our students can talk about their strengths and weaknesses as learners; they can talk about the 21st-century skills they excel at and the ones they need to practice more.

Our program, first implemented about 18 months ago, has undergone many adjustments. After the first year of implementation with sixth and seventh graders, we noticed



many students were advancing quickly in mathematics. If the program were to expand to eighth grade, as we had planned, a new teacher—one capable of teaching high school-level mathematics—would have to be added. As a result, Jonathan Lees was hired as a third advisor in the program; he teaches 22 students high school algebra, geometry, and algebra 2. Several of our eighth graders are working with high school content. So, we are currently having discussions about what their learning plans will look like once they get to high school because they will have advanced beyond the traditional freshman math curriculum.

Also, during our first year, Jeffrey and Krista had no common prep time. We were with students all day and often spent our evenings recounting what went well that day and planning for the next. We realized that we missed the common planning time that we had become accustomed to in the legacy model. In order to get some shared prep time, we worked with Horning’s elective teachers to develop a plan that allowed all of our students to take one of their electives at the same time, freeing up time for us.

Students’ work in FLIGHT Academy, combined with that for their electives in the middle school, made for some complicated schedules. Their electives operate on an A/B day schedule, while our FLIGHT Academy content seminars are given on alternating days, resulting in four different daily schedules for students. To keep track of our students and to keep them accountable, we adopted an iPad timekeeping app with which students clock in, much like they would at a job.

We have also faced the challenge of maintaining a school-within-a-school program. We have to balance the amount of time that we want the students to be in the academy with the amount of time students are with their peers in nonacademy electives. Some students in FLIGHT want to be with their academy peers for most of the day, while other FLIGHT students want equal time with their nonFLIGHT peers. We are striving to find the perfect balance and are continuously receiving feedback from students and staff alike.

FLIGHT is in an excellent position right now with strong student and parent involvement and support. We are working now to streamline the education our students are



getting by perfecting our learner profiles and the personalized learning plan for each student. We further want to establish strong relationships with community business partners so our students understand how their current learning relates to their future careers. We are frequently asked if we are going to expand and allow more students into the program each year. While this is a possibility, FLIGHT functions as a personalized learning program for which the advisors pride themselves on the connections they make with each student. Increasing our student population would decrease our daily interactions with each student and would diminish the closeness that our students feel. We hope that, in the future, additional programs that share some features of FLIGHT Academy can be established in our district.



[www.centeril.org](http://www.centeril.org)



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