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Why teachers can't deliver real personalized learning in today's schools

by Thomas Arnett

This week I watched a [speech](#) by long-time education leader Howard Fuller in which he describes the education reforms that low-income families most need. In that speech, he tells a story that is emblematic of the challenges that many students from such backgrounds face as they try to navigate their K–12 education.

I was at a school on a Monday, and a father I think had brought his little daughter in and ... her mother had been sent to Taycheedah over the weekend. Taycheedah is the women's prison in Wisconsin. And so they brought the little girl in. Can you imagine what she must have gone through that weekend?

They bring her in and everybody says, "that's nice, let's go to class."

No! There's got to be something that happens with that child, given everything that she's just gone through, before we say, "just go to class." When we talk about what we got to do with ed reform, we got to talk about all of these things that are happening to these kids before they ever get to us.

It is heart wrenching to imagine what it must be like for a small child to go through the experience of seeing her mother sent to prison. That tragedy is compounded when the school where that child should be able to find help and support is dismissive of her emotional needs. But from my experience as a teacher, I can understand why something like that would happen. Unfortunately, the real problem isn't just that a handful of teachers and school administrators at a particular school were insensitive to a child. The real issue is that the design of our traditional education system affords teachers and administrators few good options for handling such challenges without neglecting their primary responsibilities.

In a traditional classroom, students do not learn unless the teacher is in control by managing and guiding the learning experience, giving students directions, and making sure they all stay on task and on pace. Because of this reality, a decision to stop and address the emotional needs of one student inevitably means temporarily neglecting the academic needs of the class. Sometimes, sending a student to a school counselor or administrator is a way to minimize this tradeoff. But when the student is gone from class, she misses valuable instructional time and falls behind. And in an education system based on whole-group instruction, teachers' work grows exponentially when they have to catch individual students up. More generally, when many students are already behind academically and where such crises in their personal lives are far too common, focusing on social and emotional needs can quickly undermine teachers' and administrators' efforts to close achievement gaps and change the ultimate life trajectories of their students.

The reality is that our traditional education system was designed to utilize teachers as lesson planners, graders, and managers of whole-group instruction, but today we also expect them to be counselors, mentors, and individual learning specialists. It is unreasonable to give teachers these additional roles without changing the structure of their

work. But too often we just stack teachers up with additional responsibilities and then expect them to be able to juggle everything with superhuman deftness. To solve this problem of human capacity constraints, what we need are new models of schooling that use online learning to both personalize learning to each students' individual needs and also free up teachers from some aspects of their work so that they can focus more on the academic, social, and emotional needs of their individual students.

Fortunately, we already have some promising models for addressing these challenges. As Rick Ogston, the CEO of [Carpe Diem Learning Systems](#) said in Rick Hess and Bror Saxberg's book, *[Breakthrough Leadership in the Digital Age](#)*, "When you're leveraging technology like we are, people want to look at us in terms of technology. But the secret sauce is not the technology, it's the relationships." Similarly, Diane Tavenner, CEO of the [Summit Public Schools](#), has said in the same book of her school's blended-learning approach, "Our model has more of the stuff that teachers got into education for. There's more meaningful one-on-one work, more opportunities to get to know their kids very well."

When we talk about personalized learning, we often focus on using technology to tailor instruction to students' individual learning needs. Equally important, if not more so, is the way personalized learning can make education more humane. Personalized education is about not only personalizing the instruction students receive, but also the relationships between teachers and students.



Thomas Arnett

Thomas' research focuses on the changing roles of teachers in blended learning environments and other innovative educational models. He also examines how teacher education and professional development are shifting to support the evolving needs of teachers and school systems.