Personalized Learning: The Promise and the Reality

Key NEPC Brief Takeaway: Analysis reveals how the well-intentioned goals of personalized learning are being overtaken by corporate interests.

BOULDER, Colo. (PRWEB) April 30, 2019 -- Personalized learning programs are proliferating in schools across the United States, fueled by philanthropic dollars, tech industry lobbying, marketing by third-party vendors, and a policy environment that provides little guidance and few constraints.

In Personalized Learning and the Digital Privatization of Curriculum and Teaching, Faith Boninger, Alex Molnar, and Christopher M. Saldaña, of the University of Colorado Boulder, consider how we got to this point. Beginning with an examination of the history of personalized learning and the key assumptions made by its proponents, they review the research evidence and reflect on the roles and possible impacts of the digital technologies deployed by many programs.

As the authors explain, these personalized learning products will continue to be aggressively marketed, so policymakers and educators should be prepared to critically evaluate those products and that marketing. They need a clear understanding of the history and evidence if they are to craft appropriate guidelines for personalized learning initiatives.

The research brief’s specific findings are alarming. It reveals questionable educational assumptions embedded in influential programs, self-interested advocacy by the technology industry, serious threats to student privacy, and a general lack of research support for personalized learning programs. Despite the many red flags, however, the pressure persists for the adoption of personalized learning programs. States, for example, continue to embrace policies that promote implementation of digital instructional materials but that do little to provide for oversight or accountability.

Unless guided by informed policies, linking personalized learning with proprietary software and digital platforms can put important educational decisions in private hands and compromise the privacy of children and their teachers. It can also distort pedagogy in ways that stifle students’ ability to learn and grow as people and as participants in democratic civic life. By emphasizing data collection and analysis over other instructional considerations, digital personalized learning programs inevitably reflect a restricted, hyper-rational approach to curriculum and pedagogy that reduces students’ agency, narrows what they can learn in school, and limits schools’ ability to respond effectively to a diverse student body.

Given the current manifest lack of oversight and accountability, the authors recommend that schools and policymakers pause in their efforts to promote and implement personalized learning programs until rigorous review, oversight, and enforcement mechanisms are established. They also recommend that states establish an independent government entity responsible for evaluating the pedagogical approaches, assessment, and data collection embedded in digital personalized learning programs. This new entity should also be responsible for implementing and enforcing safeguards to ensure the security and privacy of student and teacher data.

Find Personalized Learning and the Digital Privatization of Curriculum and Teaching, by Faith Boninger, Alex Molnar and Christopher M. Saldaña, at: http://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/personalized-learning
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