



Personalized Learning  
Strategy Spotlight

# Using Flexible Learning Strategies to Foster Equitable and Inclusive Education Opportunities

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## Introduction

**School building closures due to COVID-19 challenged educators to rethink teaching and learning.** Although emergency remote teaching and learning is just a snapshot in time, the lessons learned will continue to echo throughout education beyond the COVID-19 crisis. The shift to remote learning exposed significant areas of need for students, teachers, and families. Further, the shift underscored gaps in equity of access to technology, broadband internet service, and learning resources and the importance of flexibility and adaptability in how we approach learning.

As students and teachers have shifted from setting to setting (e.g., remote, hybrid, in-person), educators have recognized the critical need to develop systems, teaching strategies, and content that is flexible and can shift easily across settings. The benefits associated with providing students with “voice and choice” in when, where, and how they learn are far-reaching, and can help prepare all learners with the skills they need to succeed in an increasingly complex world.

In this Personalized Learning Strategy Spotlight, we provide an overview of flexible learning strategies, suggestions for implementation, and examples of flexible learning in practice. As districts continue to explore approaches for responding to the COVID-19 crisis, AIR hopes that this Spotlight will provide district and school leaders with tools for building more flexible and personalized learning opportunities for all students in all settings.

### What Do We Mean by Flexible Learning?

Flexible learning environments fall under the umbrella of flexible learning methods and include the design of physical spaces, scheduling, and student groupings to (a) encourage active learning and personalized instruction and (b) provide space and opportunities for students to create, problem solve, and collaborate with peers. Flexible learning environments are often used as part of a strategy to support the implementation of other student-centered and personalized learning strategies.

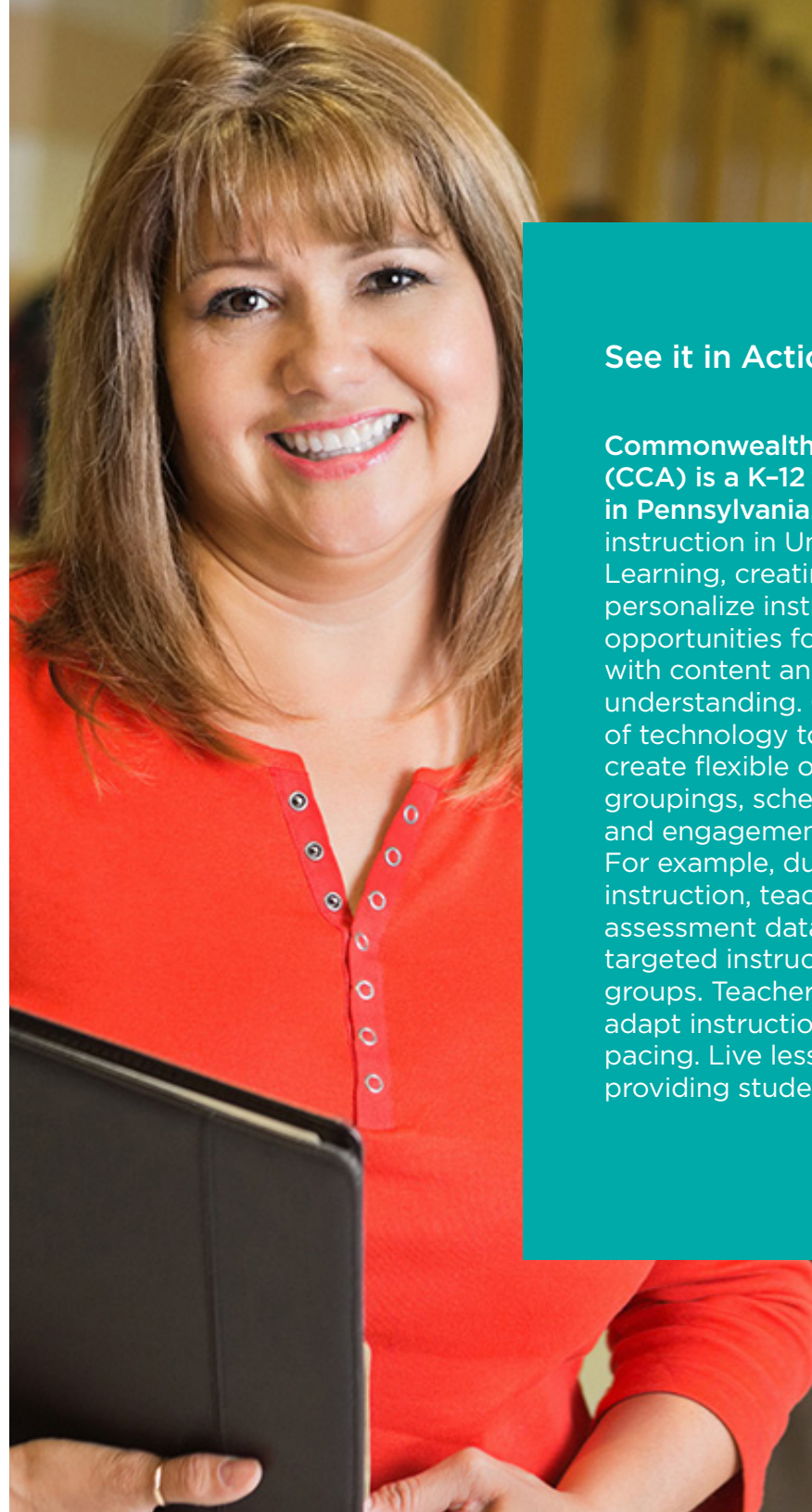




## Design Elements of Flexible Learning

**Flexible learning strategies often refer to the design of physical spaces as a mechanism for supporting student-centered learning and personalized instruction.** For example, specific classroom arrangements can encourage or discourage certain types of learning and engagement. A physical classroom with space for collaborative work creates an environment that supports sharing and peer-to-peer learning. An online learning environment might make use of breakout rooms, chat features, and collaborative workspaces to support peer-to-peer learning opportunities. Whether in-person, virtual, or hybrid, teachers use the design of learning spaces, schedules, and instruction to create opportunities for more personalized learning.

<sup>1</sup> This content was developed as a result of district interviews conducted under a grant from the U.S. Department of Education, #H327T180001. However, the contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the U.S. Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government. Project Officers: Tara Courchaine, Ed.D., and Anita Vermeer, M.Ed.



### See it in Action

**Commonwealth Charter Academy (CCA)** is a K-12 virtual charter school in Pennsylvania. CCA grounds its instruction in Universal Design for Learning, creating multiple ways to personalize instruction and multiple opportunities for students to engage with content and demonstrate understanding. CCA uses a variety of technology tools and supports to create flexible options for student groupings, schedules, student response and engagement, and learning settings. For example, during synchronous instruction, teachers use formative assessment data to group students for targeted instruction in small breakout groups. Teachers also use these data to adapt instruction, content, and lesson pacing. Live lessons are recorded, providing students with flexibility in

when and how they learn; students can elect to attend a synchronous lesson or watch the recorded session. This approach gives students (a) the flexibility they need to schedule instruction that aligns with their needs and (b) the ability to control pacing of instruction (e.g., slow down, speed up, or rewatch). Formative data are also used to create asynchronous instruction, which also offers flexible lesson options. With asynchronous instruction, lessons are created with built-in modifications, accommodations, and scaffolds according to student needs to ensure each student has the supports needed to access content and achieve mastery. These options may include additional audio or video support or additional context to help students build background knowledge.



## Why Flexible Learning?

**Flexible learning and the design of flexible learning environments are strategies that can help districts to support more personalized learning for students.**

These environments are also grounded in research in how people learn. Although the design of a flexible learning environments stretches beyond rearranging furniture and physical spaces, districts may find that starting with attention to the physical (or virtual) space that students learn results in ripple effects for how districts think about staffing, physical spaces, teacher collaboration, scheduling, allocation of resources and technology, and the design of professional development. Thinking about how to create the learning environments for students to be more engaged and collaborative learners requires a shift in teaching practices to create a learning environment that is based on inquiry and personalized to meet the needs of both teachers and students.

In flexible learning environments, pedagogies are driven by

- Fostering student independence and agency (the ability to make choices and take an active role in learning);
- Encouraging collaborative learning;
- Approaching teaching as a process of constructing knowledge, making meaning, and making connections across learning areas.

Why should districts focus on designing flexible learning environments? The use of flexible learning strategies have shown promise in improving academic and nonacademic outcomes for students, including

- Supporting active and collaborative learning;
- Addressing learner variability and students with a variety of learning needs and preferences;
- Preparing students with skills for work and education in the 21st century;
- Improving learner motivation and engagement;
- Increasing collaboration, cooperation, and communication; and
- Improving classroom culture, management and student behavior (Barrett et al., 2015; Crum, 2019; Daviesa et al., 2012; Kariippanon et al., 2019; Pane 2018; Pane et al., 2015).







## See it in Action

Like districts throughout the United States, Loudoun County Public Schools in Loudoun County, Virginia, had to make a rapid transition to remote learning in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The district had previously focused on implementing an approach to learning opportunities in physical classrooms—using adjustable seating and spaces to encourage more collaboration, flexible student groupings, and opportunities for hands-on project-based learning. Although this flexible approach did not make the transition to remote learning easy, the gradual shift in mindset toward flexible instruction in the years before the COVID-19 pandemic helped to support the transition to remote learning. The district noted that these initiatives had been in progress before the pandemic, but “the virus is an accelerator” that reinforced the critical need for collaboration, relationship building, accessible technology, and engagement with students and families.

The concepts of flexibility, agency, and student-centered learning are further supported by the science of learning and the variability among learners. Research on the science of learning supports (a) the use of teaching strategies that support deeper learning, encourage students to see themselves as active and reflective learners and (b) the creation of classroom cultures that support inquiry, exploration, and risk-taking (Osher et al., 2017).

Teachers are already using many of the teaching strategies employed in flexible learning models, including direct instruction, small and large group work, investigations, inquiries, self-and peer assessment, student reflection, and independent and collaborative work. The key to personalizing these strategies is the intentional design and interaction of physical and virtual spaces, curriculum, time, and staff to support a pedagogical shift from teacher-led to student-centered instruction. For example, to differentiate instruction, educators can implement “station rotation,” which provides students with opportunities to

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## Implementing Flexible Learning in Your District

**Flexible learning strategies can help support districts in their efforts to personalize learning and promote student agency and active learning, whether online or in the classroom.**

Flexible learning methods to personalize instruction can also help districts to address learner variability in a more inclusive learning environment, by building in student voice and choice in the ways in which students learn, engage with content, and demonstrate what they know.

Planning for flexible environments requires a shift in mindset and culture, as the roles of both teachers and students shift from teacher-led instruction to student-centered and student-led learning. Although implementing flexible learning methods (physical space design, furniture, and instructional settings) can drive changes to pedagogy, teachers need additional professional development and coaching support to make these transitions. Flexible learning

spaces and flexible groupings do not improve student outcomes because a district buys new furniture and rearranges seats. Instead, these flexible spaces encourage and require new ways of thinking about teaching and learning and changes in the teacher-student and student-student relationships. Here are some questions that your district team might consider as you plan for implementing more flexible learning strategies in your district include:

- What is the relationship between physical and/or virtual space and pedagogy? What teaching strategies might be needed to make flexible spaces successful?
- How can we implement more flexibility in our allocation of staff, resources, and time? What teaching strategies might be possible with more flexible scheduling?
- How can we extend flexible spaces, groups, and scheduling to the way we design learning pathways for students? How can we make content more flexible?
- How can we extend flexibility into online and hybrid learning environments in the event of future remote learning?





**As districts and families continue to face uncertainty in how, when, and where learning happens, flexible learning strategies are critical for creating more equitable, personalized, and inclusive experiences for all students in all settings.** The following resources from AIR can support your district in implementing flexible learning:



## References

Barrett, P., Davies, F., Zhang, Y., & Barrett, L. (2015). The impact of classroom design on pupils' learning: Final results of a holistic, multi-level analysis. *Building and Environment*, 89, 118-133.

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Davies, D., Jindal-Snape, D., Collier, C., Digby, R., Haya, P., & Howea, A. (2012). *Creative learning environments in education—A systematic literature review*. Centre for Research in Early Scientific Learning.



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