

# PERSONALIZED LEARNING AS TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

*Alternative Education Lessons from Big Picture Learning*



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*Big Picture Learning's Upstream Collaborative is a professional learning community of continuation high schools, community day schools, and other alternative schools throughout California and Washington State. School leaders in the collaborative receive coaching, professional development, and practical support to develop learner-centered, culturally responsive approaches to teaching and learning at their sites. In this case profile, Big Picture Learning's Regional Director Javier Guzman poses the question: What will it take to reimagine great alternative schools that help youth develop their full academic and social potential? He addresses this provocative question through the lens of one young man and his experience at a California continuation high school.*

INSIGHTS FROM  
SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA



CALIFORNIA LEARNING  
COLLABORATIVE ON  
ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION

Students learn, grow, and develop everywhere they go—including, but not limited to, schools—and yet our K-12 education system’s approach is to define learning as that which happens and is measured solely in schools. In a way, schools create an artificial container for learning and development. Successful students manage to navigate all that is expected of them within this container even when it requires fragmenting some of their own learning, growth, and development. In other words, success is often achieved at a cost.

For some, the burden of social, cultural, and identity fragmentation simply becomes too much, and they begin to resist or separate themselves from what school has to offer. Many students who are served in alternative education settings are there because they could no longer endure that fragmentation. Their files likely note “attendance” or “behavior” or “credit deficiencies” or other explanations that locate the challenges in the student. What if, instead, their files noted, “the system required them to do things that were not in the service of their holistic growth and development?”

Creating the conditions for students to thrive in alternative education settings is an equity and human imperative. According to The National Equity Project (NEP), educational equity means that *each child receives what they need to develop to their full academic and social potential.*

If we borrow this definition, we are confronted with a glaring moral dilemma: our current K-12 educational system is not designed to do this.

Instead, the K-12 accountability system is set up to ensure students meet a minimum set of common standards (rather than those based on a student’s individual potential) that are narrowly defined in terms of how they are taught and measured in the context of school. This design does not take into account that a young person learns and demonstrates mastery of knowledge, skills, and capacities throughout their day and across multiple contexts.

To provide the level of personalization NEP suggests, we would be well-served to attend to the student as the center and starting point, and then from there, work to create the conditions that will best support them.

[The Report and Recommendations of the California Advisory Task Force on Alternative Schools](#) encourages alternative schools to develop a learner-centered approach to teaching and learning that includes out-of-school learning opportunities (John W. Gardner Center, 2020). Big Picture Learning builds on this, noting the importance of integrating out-of-school experiences with a student’s core academic program. In contrast to the fragmentation noted earlier, such integration allows students to connect multiple aspects of their lives—school, family, work, and key relationships—into one coherent experience (Arnold, et al., 2015).

What might this look like? This profile highlights a story from one of many schools participating in an effort to redesign alternative education in California through a partnership between the Stuart Foundation and Big Picture Learning. It provides one example of what it looks like when a school takes seriously the call to transform in ways that support personalized teaching, learning, and assessment inclusive of in and out of school experiences, and it offers five core elements central to this kind of transformation effort that can be adapted in any school context.

### A STORY TO LEARN FROM

To better understand what it means to center the learner and personalize learning, this profile focuses on one student in an alternative California high school. Marcos' story illustrates what is possible when we honor the learning students do in- and out-of-school and allow a more complex and rich understanding of a student's knowledge, skills, and disposition to be reflected in our evaluation of their growth and development.

Marcos arrived at his southern California continuation high school with an academic record that described him in terms of his gaps and deficiencies: truant, credit deficient, defiant, abrasive, rude, and egotistical. He had been tagged by the education apparatus as unfit. When COVID struck, he didn't log into any classes via Zoom, nor did he respond to the school's emails, calls, or text messages.

Then, during the last week of school in June 2020, he went to campus and met with the principal. He began by apologizing for not being in contact with the school: *Miss, sorry, I was depressed...mentally I was not all there but let me tell you what I did.*

Marcos recounted for the principal, Ms. Muñoz, all the things he had done while absent from school. He had designed and built a skate ramp of varying degrees of difficulty, which in its design, also took into account the seismic activity of the region. He learned about the ecosystems turtles need to survive and then he created a turtle sanctuary in his backyard. He built garden beds, grew fruit and vegetables, and engaged in an exchange of harvested goods with a neighbor. His father, who helped on a few of the projects with tools and woodworking, had become one of his mentors and teachers. Marcos also found his own internship with a farmer and later began to share his knowledge by creating and distributing farming tutorial videos to others.

Because Ms. Muñoz had been partnering with Big Picture Learning, she recognized that Marcos was engaged in activities consistent with our framework for fostering deep learning: they were relevant, rigorous, personally meaningful to him and connected to the community, which included other adults who have valuable insight into Marcos' growth and development (Bradley, K. & Hernández, L., 2019). But what about academic competencies?

At first glance, the skills and knowledge Marcos had developed seemed disconnected from what school was asking of him. Yet upon closer analysis, Ms. Muñoz realized that he was demonstrating mastery of many of the expected learning standards in communication, problem solving, critical thinking, analytical thinking, and a range of executive functioning skills. In addition, he demonstrated fluency with subject-specific knowledge in science, math, language arts, social studies, and personal development or “life skills.” He may have been absent from school, but he had been deeply engaged in learning outside of school.

For Marcos, neither his comprehensive high school nor his alternative setting fully honored his holistic development. This was exacerbated by the shift to remote learning in response to the SARS-CoV2 pandemic. One could argue that his retreat from school was, in part, a pilgrimage back to his own center. Marcos became the budding carpenter, the engineer, the marine biologist, the farmer, the community creator, the community member, the skateboarder, and the self-advocate.

He developed all of these identities in self-directed out-of-school learning experiences, and yet the school’s formal documentation of Marcos’ growth and development did not reflect any of this. In fact, it painted a picture of a student who was absent, disengaged, and disconnected.

Imagine how a truer, more holistic story could be told if his academic record reflected the additional perspectives of those who mentored and worked alongside him in his out-of-school experiences—those who could provide additional insight into his skills, habits, knowledge and overall development.

Marcos is not unique in expressing and demonstrating learning outside of school (Washor & Mojkowski, 2013). What is true for him is true for many more. To see the full picture, it is essential to look at both his in- and out-of-school learning; to understand his strengths, it is essential to include the insights of not only his teachers but also those who worked alongside him outside of school. That is part of the task of schools: to see students fully and as the best versions of themselves even when—or perhaps especially when—students are on the verge of writing off school completely.

To weave Marcos’ self-directed out-of-school experiences into his formal schooling, Ms. Muñoz set out to position his experiences as pillars of his education rather than something additional or “extracurricular.” In doing so, she invites us to reimagine our educational system. Ms. Muñoz and her colleagues at the Southern California continuation high school remind us that such a transformational approach is well within reach.

## KEY ELEMENTS OF AN EFFORT TO ADVANCE PERSONALIZED TEACHING, LEARNING, & ASSESSMENT

Where are we to begin? Based upon our work with a number of alternative education programs who have embraced personalized learning as a cornerstone of their approach, we at Big Picture Learning identified five distinguishing elements of a personalized learning model that are highlighted in Marcos' story (Arnold & Mihut, 2020).

**1 Attending to one student at a time.**

**2 Fostering compassionate & community-centered thinking.**

**3 Adopting a strengths- & asset-based lens.**

**4 Learning through interests.**

**5 Personalizing authentic assessment.**

**For more information** on Big Picture Learning's personalized learning model see: <https://www.bigpicture.org/apps/pages/10Distinguishers>

## Attending to One Student at a Time

Marcos figuratively and literally brought Ms. Muñoz to his spring orchard, where he was growing fruit and vegetables and tending to his roots. This is an inflection point for schools—what to do when a student shows us their genius. This happens every day and decisions are made to honor that genius or to ignore it. If we do honor it, the next step is a critical one.

The poet Mary Oliver wrote that “attention is the beginning of devotion” and so expressed the precise mindset that is the foundation of a personalized experience. When we pay attention to our students, then we have the ability to be in awe of them, to have reverence for them, and to be devoted to them. Paying attention involves seeking to discover and understand the knowledge, skills, and habits students are developing both in and out of school. Some of the schools we partner with create conditions for paying attention by creating advisory periods where small groups of students connect with a teacher or staff member every day, sometimes spanning multiple years. Other schools implement practices such as having every teacher stand at their classroom door to offer each student a warm greeting at the start of each day, thus ensuring that teachers have the opportunity to notice a student's affect. These learner-centered schools, like Marcos', honor that students learn through interests, topics, and questions that they themselves define.

Such learner-centered practices provide the foundation for a teacher to foster a student's curiosity, inquiry, and deep learning. Some of the structures and behaviors that supported the school in fully seeing Marcos have been part of Big Picture Learning's work for over twenty-five years: learning through interests, topics, and questions that matter to students; robust and clearly defined advisory periods; student-determined rather than adult assigned internships; and public presentations of learning that include families, mentors, peers, and school staff.

### **Fostering Compassionate and Community-Centered Thinking**

It is essential that our school system supports students to develop the ability to engage not only in critical thinking, but also in compassionate thinking. This is rooted in a recognition that the world students inhabit requires stewardship by all of us, and that this begins with care and compassion for ourselves, for one another, and for our communities.

Marcos' story is filled with examples of how his learning promoted health and wellbeing: exploring science supported the health and wellbeing of turtles; gaining knowledge of math and carpentry deepened his relationship with his father; and cultivating his garden promoted care for the earth and provided healthy food for his family and neighbors.

Ms. Muñoz showed compassion as well by honoring Marcos' efforts, seeking deeper understanding of his off-campus learning, talking with some of his informal mentors regarding Marcos' learning and achievement in various areas, and engaging a collaborative conversation and analysis of Marcos' skills in relationship to academic standards. Marcos was eventually granted credits for career exploration and college and career readiness: a necessary step toward validating his learning and enabling him to make progress toward graduation.



### **Adopting a Strengths- & Asset-Based Lens**

Identifying students' strengths is often a nuanced endeavor. At the core is a belief that each student truly has something to offer and a recognition that our own journeys and experiences might create unconscious biases in what we think students are capable of achieving based on their histories. For Marcos, his strengths became obvious once different questions were asked and learning was de-compartmentalized. That required trust, and one of the ways trust develops is through curiosity, listening and patience.

That runs counter to the urgency that comes with an exclusive focus on ensuring students meet narrow graduation requirements. Of course, we want to help them graduate, but schools must care more about nurturing and developing students' strengths such that they serve them through and beyond graduation. To address gaps, schools need students to help identify their strengths and the capacities they seek to improve upon. In Marcos, we see the opportunity to identify various strengths across several disciplines: agriculture, video and editing, carpentry, ecology, and so on. One way his school operationalizes a strengths-based lens is through project-based learning that taps into students' assets, strengths, and interests, thus providing a foundation for learning and inquiry.

### **Learning Through Interests**

What matters to students needs to matter to schools. To do this well, leaders and teachers must be persistent and insist that what they're seeking isn't about tokenizing or co-opting students' interests, and they must create or modify structures (e.g., daily, weekly, yearly schedules) to accommodate those interests. Schools committed to personalizing learning and assessment actively challenge their hierarchical design that centers the interests of adults rather than students. For example, many schools have begun implementing learning plans that document what matters to a student and their community over time and offer deep analysis of the student's sense of positive self-concept and realistic self-appraisals.

It is worth noting that there is a difference between how a learning plan appears in many school systems and how it plays out in schools that are leading transformative work. A traditional school, for example, tends to create learning plans that describe the adults' plan for a student in the school setting.

In contrast, a school engaged in transformational work will seek to engage the student as the primary author of their learning plan which goes beyond the school setting to include learning that is integrated within the broader community and collective consciousness.

Internships and interdisciplinary projects focused on an essential question are just two examples of strategies schools use to ensure students are supported to learn through their areas of interest while also nurturing relationships with mentors, experts, and their community.

### **Personalizing Authentic Assessment**

Personalizing learning invites us to personalize assessment or to seek a more nuanced and holistic understanding of a students' growth over time. Marcos' story reminds us that the adults who mentor and work alongside students in out-of-school settings have important insight. Thus, another core element is including those who we refer to as "MAPS"—Mentors, Advisors/Teachers, Parents/Families, and Self/Other—in the process of assessing student learning.

The key here is to ensure that the adults in the student’s community have the opportunity to speak to their growth and development and help paint a broader and richer picture of their learning. Ms. Muñoz collected data from Marcos’s father, who became one of his mentors and, through this experience, strengthened his relationship with his son. She gathered data from another mentor whom Marcos sought, a student he mentored, and his neighbor with whom he bartered vegetables. She then mapped this authentic assessment data to the district’s learning standards to demonstrate mastery in areas linked to academic credits needed to earn a high school diploma.

### **PERSONALIZED LEARNING: THE INVITATION AND THE IMPERATIVE**

Marcos reminds us that a young person’s growth and development unfolds over time, across multiple dimensions, and through their interactions and experiences in a variety of contexts. In turn, a student has “individual needs and trajectories that require differentiated instruction and supports to enable optimal growth” across a range of developmental domains (Darling-Hammond et. al., 2020, p. 98). Schools have the opportunity—and the responsibility—to provide such differentiated instruction and supports in order to foster students’ pursuit of their full potential. And yet the prompting for this did not originate with the district or even the school, but from Marcos himself when he returned to campus after an extended absence and made an effort to reconnect with his school community.

While this story is an example of the power and possibility of personalized learning inclusive of student-directed out-of-school learning experiences, it also reminds us that our systems are not yet set up in ways that systematically provide this for every student.

It may sound counterintuitive to suggest that we need better systems for supporting personalized learning. After all, “personalized learning” is, by definition, highly individualized and, in turn, unique to each student. Another truth is that there are conditions—policies, practices, and norms—that influence a school’s ability to provide its students with a personalized learning experience. For example, district-level policies and practices that allow students and teachers to develop meaningful relationships over time (e.g., through advisories or block schedules) make it easier for teachers to attend to each individual student.

Likewise, policies and practices that include out-of-school mentors, colleagues, and family members as contributors to student assessment and evaluation, facilitate a more holistic and personalized approach. In other words—personalized learning is individualized, but for it to be provided to every student, it must be supported by the conditions created at a system (district) level.

System-level change is a long process and requires long-term commitment. And, yet, in our experience, it is also well within our reach.



Interestingly, the schools we have found to be successful in personalizing learning tend to embrace a personalized approach to the change process itself. For example, when a school centers the strengths and interests of the adults who shape and implement various practices, they build trust among those who are involved in system-level change, and demonstrate their learning in public ways.

How then, are we to begin? Often school leaders will say, “we’ll start next semester or next year,” but the truth is that conditions are hardly ever ideal. Immediate and easy wins must occur in order to build momentum and to nurture the commitment of the team.

To move towards devotion means that we’re regarding students differently and that we’re letting them lead and dictate how the educational system needs to change. There are many things we—regardless of our role or our context—can do tomorrow to foster personalized learning for our students and a transformative trajectory for our schools and our K-12 system overall.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Javier Guzman has served youth for the last 27 years in multiple capacities, including afterschool director, middle and high school teacher, literacy coordinator, assistant principal, founding principal of Big Picture Learning schools in New York City and Los Angeles, and now as regional director for Big Picture Learning (BPL) and director of program strategy and convenings for the Deeper Learning Equity Fellowship. He can be found across the southwest supporting school systems to transform learning for students furthest from opportunity and disengaged from school.

## PROFILES IN CALIFORNIA ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION

*Kristin Geiser & Jorge Ruiz de Velasco, Series Editors*

This profile is part of a series created to highlight challenges, creative policy responses, and exemplary practices in California’s legislatively created public alternative high schools. The series is a project of the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities at Stanford University in support of the California Learning Collaborative on Alternative Education. It is intended to invite a new conversation among educators and policymakers about innovations to better support the success of youth enrolled in public alternative secondary schools across the nation. The series is funded by generous grants from the William & Flora Hewlett Foundation and the Stuart Foundation.

**john w. gardner**  
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