Rationale for mass customized learning

by Linda Laughlin, Assistant Superintendent of Schools

"Students learn in different ways and different time frames." This is the lens through which Messalonskee district stakeholders are viewing the current school structure.

Traditionally, age has determined a child's placement in a classroom and what classes she will attend. The system worked in 1892 when it was created for industrial age, assembly line needs but it does not meet the needs of students in 2011.

According to Chuck Schwahn and Bea McGarvey in their book, *Inevitable: Mass Customized Learning, Learning in the Age of Empowerment*, "the Industrial Age is about mass producing education: twenty-five students, one teacher, where time is the constant and learning is the variable. The Information Age and beyond to the Age of Empowerment are all about mass customization."

"Everyone is mass customizing," the authors point out. Pandora customizes our radio listening experience, Starbucks customizes our beverage. Technology allows us to go anywhere in the world and lets us search for a song and download it in seconds. Amazon.com not only allows us to search for a book and download it in minutes but it also predicts what we would enjoy reading next.

So this begs the question: If businesses can use technology to customize our shopping experience, why can't educators use technology to customize our learning experience?

Why must we restructure our school system? Where is the evidence that our current structure is not working? We have what many feel is a good district, however, our best multi-year average for reading hovers around 69%. That means on average, 69% of our students meet or exceed the standards in reading. That is our best average. In a district of approximately 3,100 students and assuming we are performing at this same level across our district, that means on any given day more than 950 students do not meet the standard in reading. This in a district that has tried multiple intervention programs and strategies, has highly qualified teachers, support staff and administrators, and is performing at or above the state average in many areas.

The concern is that the current structure of schools, where time is the constant and learning the variable, does not allow the specific learning needs of all students to be addressed.

Despite past interventions and the adoption of best practices, RSU 18 achievement scores have increased by only a few points. The efforts were implemented within a model that still groups students by age regardless of how they are doing in reading or math.

Students, staff, school board and community members have studied what is wrong with the current structure and what a customized, proficiency-based model could look like by reviewing education research and the visions of notable authors on education.

For the last two years, Messalonskee teachers have participated in a focused plan of professional development to build a culture of voice, choice and student ownership in the classroom. Using a variety of quality control tools and strategies, they are giving students more learning choices and the students are responding well.

All teachers have been asked to focus on two district goals this year: building the culture of the classroom and building better student understanding of their learning goals. We want all students to come to school ready and willing to learn but if they do not understand what they are expected to learn and demonstrate proficiency in, they seldom stay engaged and motivated to achieve at their highest levels.

The increased focus on professional development is to help teachers see the power of effective feedback in the classroom. When students clearly understand their learning goals and how to improve on those goals, and when teachers provide feedback on specific learning goals, achievement will increase.

The District's customized learning model will meet students at their learning level and move them forward along a defined continuum of learning. Students will be grouped and regrouped by proficiency level on specific learning goals, not tracked in groups by age.

Consider how we marvel at a student's 4H project, Eagle Scout badge, or accomplishments in extracurricular and co-curricular activities like robotics, music or art. What learning is taking place when highly motivated young people are engaged in these types of activities? A more customized school structure will recognize these learning experiences and let educators create an individual learning plan that would move a student along a learning continuum based on their level of proficiency.

With the new model, it will be clear to all what that continuum of learning is. Students, parents, teachers and administrators will be able to track progress against learning goals using technology similar to what Google uses to track search preferences. We believe this will open learning opportunities for students in and outside the classroom.

Technology has developed to a point where we can, and should, customize the learning experience for all students. Our teachers should be credited for doing the hard work of restructuring the learning experience for students. They are working together to recognize students' learning levels and personalize their education. Over time, they will work together, across grade spans, using their expertise to stretch every student's learning.