



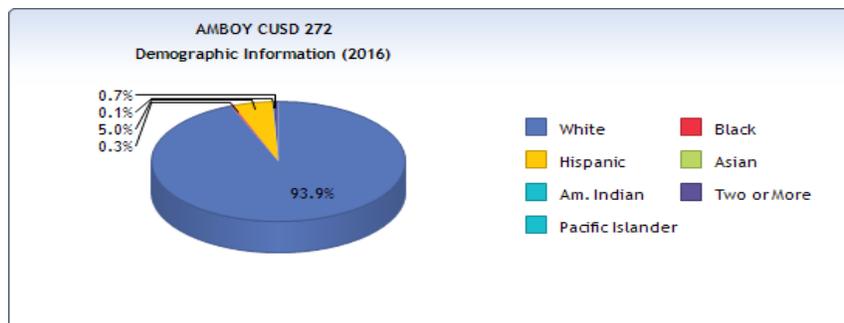
CASE STUDY IN PERSONALIZED LEARNING

AMBOY COMMUNITY UNIT SCHOOL DISTRICT #272



Dr. Jeff Thake was appointed superintendent of Amboy Community Schools (IL) in June 2011 after serving as the district's high school principal since 2006. His background includes extensive experience in fiscal management, grant writing, contract negotiations, instructional leadership, human resources and evaluation of staff. Dr. Thake was a member of the 2013 inaugural AASA National Superintendent Certification Program® cohort and the Personalized Learning Cohort.
<https://www.linkedin.com/in/dr-jeff-thake-165b6575>

DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF AMBOY COMMUNITY SCHOOL DISTRICT #272



District Summary

District Enrollment: 706

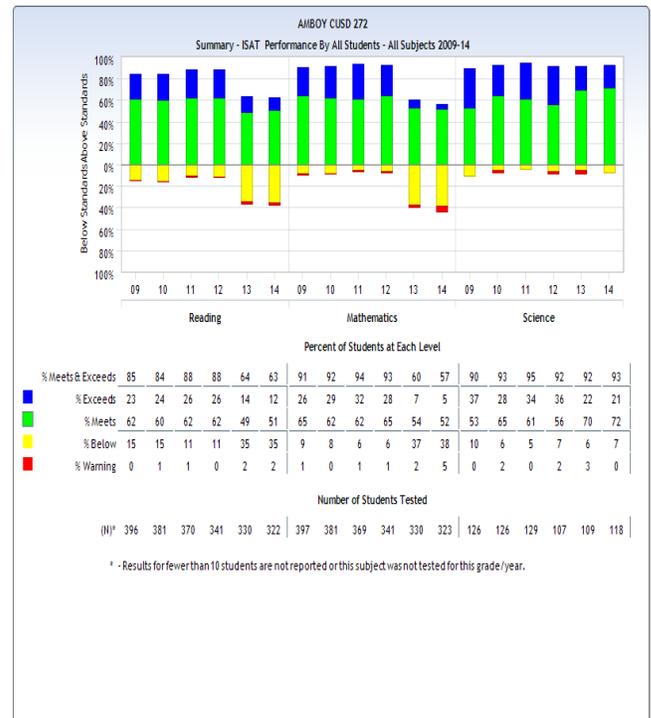
Number of Schools in District: 3

Avg. Teacher Salary: \$46,476

Instructional Expenditure/Pupil:
\$6,431

Operational Expenditure/Pupil:
\$11,676

Low Income:
32.6%



<https://iirc.niu.edu/classic/District.aspx?source=ISAT&source2=ISATResults&districtID=47052272026&level=D>

PERSONALIZED LEARNING IN AMBOY COMMUNITY SCHOOL DISTRICT #272

I have always been data-driven. I entered leadership in education during the birth of No Child Left Behind, Adequate Yearly Progress and summative assessments. The traditional model of public education to improve test scores to make AYP was our focus, and we were good at it. However, there was still a percentage of students who were not 'meeting' or 'exceeding' standards on the test, which always bothered me.

In 2013, Dr. Thake applied for and was accepted into the inaugural National Superintendent Certification Program®. He began networking with superintendents from across the United States. He quickly realized that regardless of the state or the size of the district, the challenges facing superintendents have more similarities than differences. Additionally, some of the best practices and leadership structures he learned from his cohort colleagues, amazing facilitators and speakers actually work! The first thing he did in Amboy CUSD #272 was establish shared belief statements that fueled

every decision they made. After completing the AASA National Superintendent Certification Program®, Dr. Thake joined the AASA Personalized Learning Cohort.

Belief Statements

Amboy CUSD #272



Belief about children and their capacity to achieve:
All children have the ability to learn and achieve with a learning roadmap that is engaging.

Belief about the role of teachers:
Teachers engage, guide, support, influence, and encourage all students to achieve.

Belief about the role of parents:
The role of parents is to support and engage in their child's learning.

Belief about the role of principals:
The role of the principal is to LEAD and continuously MEASURE a learning environment that maximizes student achievement and teacher growth.

Belief about the role of the community supporting its children:
The role of the community is to support all children in a safe learning environment.

Belief about school governance:
To govern in a positive, ethical, financially responsible manner to support student learning.

After the initial Personalized Learning meeting in Salt Lake City, Utah, I haven't been able to stop thinking about how personalized learning is critical to 21st-century learners.

When asked to reflect on the experience in the Personalized Learning Cohort, Dr. Thake is quick to respond.

I am mostly influenced by the great work of Roger Cook from the Taylor County Schools in Campbellsville, Ky. The elements of self-paced classrooms where students can advance grade levels at free will as opposed to waiting until the following fall is being piloted and finalized in our ELA and math classrooms, grades 2-12. We have highlighted project-based learning in our classrooms. Allowing students to work at their own pace in a technology-rich learning environment has been our top focus. Thanks to community donations, we also became a 1:1 district in August 2016 with Dell Chromebooks.

When I returned from Salt Lake City in October 2015 from the inaugural Personalized Learning meeting, I was so inspired. I couldn't stop thinking about what I observed. I introduced my observations to small groups throughout the district and the community. I started with specific groups of teachers who I felt would embrace these concepts. We generated enough curiosity throughout the district and community to bring a team to Taylor County Schools. We visited Roger Cook's district on February 1, 2016. I was even more inspired after this visit, as was my team!

On February 4, 2016, after an initial screening of the documentary 'Beyond Measure,' (<http://beyondmeasurefilm.com/>) we elicited feedback from students, parents and staff. We surveyed our students, where we discovered a disconnect between what our students needed, and what we, the adults who serve them THOUGHT they needed. The emergence of 'Student Choice/Student Voice' was born, and we haven't looked back.

We recently purchased the animation software 'StoryMaker.' We have implemented classroom projects such as the 20% Project, Biomes, math classes designing T-shirts and estimating costs, foods classes creating restaurant menus and preparing food based on their menus, and many more examples.

- *Classrooms are moving away from rows of desks.*
- *The word 'traditional' no longer belongs in public education. We have either self-paced, blended, or project based.*
- *I can't remember the last time we purchased textbooks.*

What emerged was a simply-stated and widely-understood definition of Personalized Learning in which *students are learning and creating at their own pace where they learn best.*

Dr. Thake reports evidence of their efforts in practical terms that further define the implementation of Personalized Learning in Amboy.

- *We empowered teachers to empower students. We truly listened to our students' voices. Students liked working on projects in a digital learning environment. When teachers began 'piloting' self-paced classrooms, we realized our students liked it even more.*
- *Student engagement is at an all-time high. Student learning is taking place on students' terms. Students are taking ownership of their learning.*

- *Seeing the excitement in the eyes of our students who can't wait to come to school every day is truly inspiring. Students enjoy sharing their learning with others.*
- *Our students have also become very reflective about their own learning. Student voice and student choice has led us to a wonderful place.*
- *On February 4, 2016, our survey results from parents, staff and community members indicated: "We love these ideas, but let's take our time with implementation."*
- *Before we implemented, we asked our students nine open-ended questions (grades 5-12). This survey question hit the hardest: "Have you ever been asked what you thought about school and education? Forty-two percent of our students said "Yes," while 58 percent of our students said "No." Most student responses to the other questions called for more technology, more projects, a strong desire to work at their own pace and an even stronger desire to feel supported, valued and listened to.*
- *After meeting with many community leaders and introducing the concept of Personalized Learning, they asked me: "Don't you need to be 1:1 for self-paced to work?" That question was the catalyst that brought Amboy CUSD #272 to 1:1. Community organizations donated funds to the district to get us there. By August 2016, every student (K-12) had a Chromebook.*
- *Teachers had been previously trained with Google Classroom, Google Sites and Screencastify. Teachers built their classrooms in Google Classroom and, when applicable, used Screencastify to introduce the lesson, give examples and show students how to complete the work. These are OUR key elements to setting up self-paced or blended classrooms.*
- *Teachers were given permission to pilot self-paced classrooms for ELA and math. Before I knew it, we had classrooms already self-pacing one to two units at a time. One of our first teachers to launch self-paced told students to read the first chapter of a book over the weekend and complete the first assignment based on the first chapter. Little did she know, three students who came to class on Monday had read the entire book and completed all of the weekly assignments. This continues to evolve.*
- *In February 2017, we brought community leaders in for classroom tours so they could see our transformation in action. In one of our self-paced pilot math classes, the teacher was asked: Last year, you were in a traditional math classroom. In your self-paced class, where are students now in the scope and sequence of the curriculum as opposed to last year?" The teacher replied:*

"Today, we are currently where last year's students left off on the last day of school." This was profound.

- WE TRANSFORMED IN MANY AREAS MUCH FASTER THAN I EVER IMAGINED!

When asked about the unanticipated challenges encountered and the techniques employed to address those challenges, Dr. Thake responded without hesitation.

- *We certainly had our challenges. When I initially introduced Personalized Learning to our district, I started with small groups. I was deliberate and intentional with whom I spoke and with whom I did NOT speak about this. We had some resentment and fear as a result of this. My intent was to secure the individuals who could help make this happen before I introduced to the entire district and community. Eventually, my early adopters were able to inspire others to embrace these changes.*
- *Upon introduction of Personalized Learning to our entire district and community, I communicated (or at least thought I did) that this was merely an INTRODUCTION of something new, where their feedback would help shape what works best for us. On February 4, 2016, we screened 'Beyond Measure' and elicited feedback from our community. On February 5, 2016, our community wanted to see our complete plan. We overcame this through our classroom pilots, parents hearing from their kids about how much they loved the changes and building tours. Additionally, I started and continue to administer our Amboy Community Unit School District #272 Facebook Page. Hundreds of pictures of 1:1 and Personalized Learning are on this page. Videos of students reflecting on their own learning are accessible.*
- *Not all of our initial self-paced pilots were successful. We embraced the concept of 'Failing Forward.' Teachers began visiting other classrooms, and student feedback is conducted regularly.*
- *The amount of time it takes to organize every lesson, every assessment, every assignment and use Screencastify to put self-paced lessons online is astronomical. As of July 2017, we now have contractual language that supports personalized learning and self-paced classrooms.*
- *In the fall of 2018, students will have the ability to advance grade levels at free will in ELA and math grades 2-12. In 2016, we identified curricular gaps. We have appointed two teacher leaders with a stipend who are content-area experts in ELA and math to identify gaps, evaluate and solidify common assessments, and complete this air-tight alignment by June 1, 2018.*

Regarding the topics of sustainability and scalability, Dr. Thake was equally candid.

- *I learned that transformation requires risk taking. Expect to fail, and fail often. Be transparent concerning this transformation, and allow others to take risks and continue failing forward. Sooner, rather than later, on the other side of fear, you will be celebrating your journey.*
- *Our next steps are to answer the questions of sustainability and scalability:*
 - *If students are advancing grade levels in the middle of a semester or quarter, who is responsible for grading?*
 - *What is the criteria for a student to be in a self-paced classroom? We're discovering that not all students learn best in a self-paced classroom. We are establishing criteria for selection of self-paced students versus blended classroom students.*
 - *Can our student database be adjusted to meet our needs? We report Average Daily Attendance that is tied into General State Aid. With students advancing grade levels, we want to be sure that we are able to monitor this.*
 - *The ULTIMATE goal is not to try to fit a student into the curriculum, but to design the curriculum to fit the student. Self-paced ELA and math classrooms grades 2-12 are our first priority. Before we expand, we need to ensure our ELA and math curriculums are air-tight.*

Dr. Thake offered the following reflection on what advice he would offer to those contemplating bringing Personalized Learning to their districts:

- *Start small and do not be afraid to take risks.*
 - *Be humble, but passionate.*
 - *Stay on course no matter what.*
 - *Don't get hung up on planning before you pilot. Your plan will be based on the feedback of the people who are implementing the pilots.*
 - *Support the change agents. Put them in the spotlight as often as possible.*
 - *Embrace your culture. There is always a way to get from point A to point B. You have to embrace your culture before you can transform it.*
 - *Do your homework, research or visit districts that are already doing this.*
 - *Use surveys often.*
-

For more information related to AASA's Personalized Learning Cohort, visit <http://www.aasa.org/personalized-learning.aspx>.

Mort Sherman, Ed.D.
Associate Executive Director for Leadership Services
AASA, The School Superintendents Association
Office 703-875-0726
msherman@aasa.org
Twitter @64msherman

About AASA

[AASA, The School Superintendents Association](http://www.aasa.org), founded in 1865, is the professional organization for more than 13,000 educational leaders in the United States and throughout the world. AASA's mission is to support and develop effective school system leaders who are dedicated to the highest quality public education for all children. For more information, visit www.aasa.org.