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Michael Martin, Director of Curriculum & Technology  
Montpelier Public Schools

Good morning! My name is Michael Martin. I am the Director of Curriculum & Technology for Montpelier Public Schools, a doctoral candidate here in UVM's Ed Leadership & Policy Studies program, and a VPR commentator on issues of culture and education. I was fortunate enough to receive a Rowland Fellowship in 2009 and now I work for the Foundation as a Senior Associate.

Today I'll be talking about personalized learning as a way to close the achievement gap. As you may know, closing the achievement gap was the main reason for the reforms brought about by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, which led to a nationwide focus on standardized testing and accountability. Over a decade later, the achievement gap has narrowed somewhat as measured by race, however, as measured by socioeconomic status, it has grown even wider. According to the latest available statistics from the National Center for Educational Research, students from the lowest income quartile are about five times less likely to graduate from high school than those from the highest quartile.

If you think about it, it's not that surprising. After all, for students who hate testing, we've given them more of the same: summer school, intense remediation, and far fewer electives in a narrow, test-driven curriculum. What's more, we tend to value certain kinds of knowledge over other kinds, and this has everything to do with socioeconomic class. Students may receive praise for doing wilderness programs, but probably not for deer hunting. We may celebrate a student working for a non-profit, but not one who rebuilt his uncle's barn. We may recognize members of Future Business Leaders of America, but not a student who runs a landscaping business.

That's why I'm so enthusiastic about Act 77 and the current work around the State on Personalized Learning Plans (or PLPs). Hopefully this work will finally connect learning that takes place in traditional classes with important learning that happens elsewhere. Our students are doing fantastic things in our physical and online communities, but too often they don't have the opportunity to connect this back to academic learning.

As our new Secretary of Education Rebecca Holcombe recently observed, we need to improve outcomes for all of our students, and to ensure that they are learning to do things that computers *can't* do. This type of creativity is exactly what personalized learning plans can cultivate, but standardized tests cannot. When Dennis Littky spoke in this room at the Rowland Conference this fall, he mentioned that the South Korean government had hired him to develop creativity in their national curriculum. Evidently, South Korea has some of the best test-takers in the world, but they're finding this doesn't always produce the best innovators.

For personalized learning plans to help improve outcomes for all students, they need to be more than a new accountability system, more than a new State requirement. Personalized learning needs to connect home to school, school to community, middle school to high school. These are examples of structures where this work can take place in our schools, and I'm pleased to say that many of our teachers and administrators are starting to develop an approach where school is less like a factory, and more like a hub for learning.

In Vermont, we don't have charter schools—we believe it's our responsibility to innovate and improve the schools we already have. We hope that Act 77 will be implemented in a way that's flexible enough for our schools to continue to innovate and be responsive to our individual students' needs.

Act 77 was written to "encourage and support the creativity of school districts" in order to promote opportunities for all students and recognize their "individual goals, learning styles, and abilities". Hopefully, Act 77 and PLPs will make a difference for the students who float through school without really seeing the point. If they help students connect and reflect, PLPs will provide planning, passion, and purpose for the students who need it most.