



The Proven Benefits of a Student-Centered Classroom

4 Research-Backed Reasons to Make the Shift



Student-centered classrooms are gaining in popularity. The traditional model of teachers as sole holders of knowledge and students as recipients of knowledge is being challenged by different approaches to teaching and learning. This makes sense, because we know that by comparison, traditional instructional strategies, such as lectures, are [largely ineffective](#)¹.

In student-centered classrooms, teachers act more like facilitators, creating conditions and opportunities for students to engage in learning either independently or in collaboration with their peers. While there are many approaches and frameworks for student-centered learning, there are some generally agreed-upon guiding principles and values:

What Student-Centered Classrooms Have in Common:

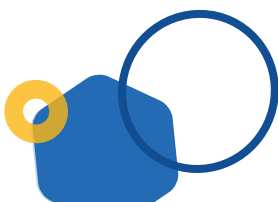
- **Critical / Higher-Ordered Thinking:** encouraging students to ask analytical and creative questions and creating space and support to find nuanced answers to those questions.
- **Personalization:** creating flexible and supportive learning environments that allow students to engage in academic content in ways that align with their particular needs, abilities, and interests.
- **Collaboration:** facilitating collaborative learning with their peers.

- **Student-Led Inquiry:** allowing students' curiosities and questions to guide learning experiences.

When students are offered support to engage in learning at their own pace, in cooperation with peers, and through their own lines of inquiry, they are required to engage more deeply and authentically with their learning than if information is simply shared unilaterally. *In this way, students are being taught to think and learn, rather than just memorize.*

But do we know that student-centered classrooms actually work? How do we know that students benefit academically and socially from such an approach?

The answer is a definitive YES, with a large body of research affirming and detailing the transformative impacts of student-centered classrooms.



REASON #1

Higher Graduation Rates

Research has demonstrated strong connections between student-centered teaching and an increase in graduation rates, particularly for marginalized groups.

What does the research say?

[This report by Education Evolving²](#) details the results from a variety of studies that found positive outcomes from student-centered learning schools. One 2014 study conducted by the Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education examined the impacts of student-centered strategies at four urban high schools in California.



The results strongly suggested that students in student-centered learning environments have significantly increased rates of graduation:

- “At three of the four study schools, graduation rates for Latino, ELL, and low-income students ranged from **10 to 24 percentage points higher** than the state averages.”
- “At two of the four study schools, graduation rates for African-American students were almost **30 percentage points higher** than the district and state averages.”

These results are incredibly affirming.

Not only does research suggest that students in student-centered classrooms are more likely to stay in school, but it also reveals that students in those classrooms demonstrate higher levels of academic achievement.

REASON #2

Student Academic Growth

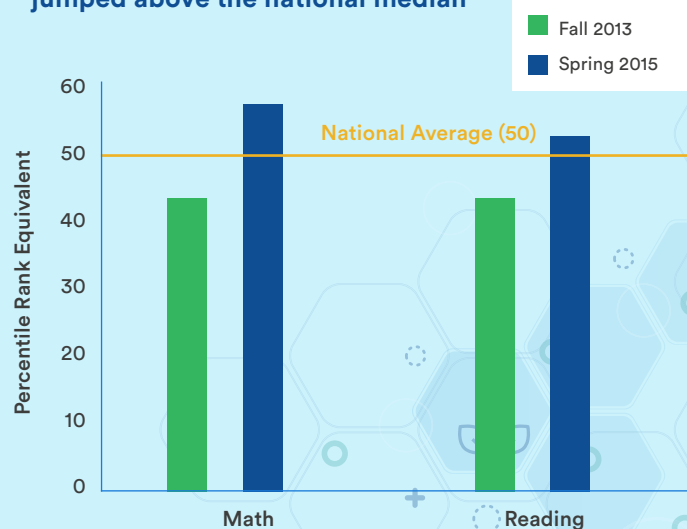
There is strong evidence that student-centered classrooms elicit significant gains in academic achievement and confidence.

In [this study by the Rand Corporation³](#), researchers looked at over 60 different public district and charter schools that were implementing student-centered instructional strategies (referred to as “personalized learning” in the report).

Collecting a robust set of data (site visits, interviews with school administrators, teacher and student surveys, and academic data), researchers sought to understand outcomes associated with student-centered teaching. The results of this study are compelling:

Over the course of two years, students in participating schools demonstrated sizable gains in mathematics and reading scores. In particular, students who started with lower academic achievement levels demonstrated the highest levels of growth, especially in mathematics.

After two years of personalized learning, student achievement on MAP math and reading assessments jumped above the national median³



This rigorous study strongly suggests that personalized learning, or student-centered instructional strategies, can significantly impact students’ educational outcomes. This type of data is critical in advocating for and supporting the implementation of student-centered learning.

REASON #3

Increased Engagement

Since the pandemic, [survey data from EdWeek Research Center](#)⁴ shows that students have been self-reporting and teachers have been observing significantly lower levels of student engagement and motivation. Research tells us, however, that student-centered instructional strategies can lead to stronger and more authentic student engagement.

[The same report by Education Evolving](#)⁵ also details results from a study on student-centered learning. The report explains that,

“ Teachers from the participating schools largely responded that student-centered learning promoted higher student engagement and facilitated learning that was more relevant to students.”

This is particularly important because we know that [educational outcomes are directly tied to student engagement](#)⁶.

Another recent [study by the International Journal of Educational Research](#)⁷ compared levels of student enjoyment and self-motivation in teacher-directed vs. student-centered learning environments. The study found that, “enjoyment is not only concurrently but also longitudinally associated with self-determined motivation in the student-centered learning environment.” Self-motivation is incredibly difficult to teach, so any pedagogy that inadvertently increases that internal drive is one worth investing in.



REASON #4

More Equitable Classrooms

Student-centered instruction is also an incredibly **powerful tool for creating equitable access to high-quality instructional materials.** [The American Institutes of Research \(AIR\)](#)⁸ studied the connection between student collaboration, personalization, and equity, and the results were illuminating.

Researchers explained that “for all students, reports of high-quality collaboration were strongly associated with positive classroom experiences and mind-set/dispositional outcomes such as motivation, engagement, and self-efficacy.”

The report went on to explain that “high-quality collaboration was strongly associated with students’ perceptions of personalization—and personalization, in turn, was strongly associated with outcomes.” In other words, utilizing collaboration as an instruction strategy, which is a core element of student-centered teaching, creates the conditions for effectively personalizing learning. **When teachers are able to effectively personalize their instruction, they are making academic content more accessible to students.**

This AIR study also found that “**for Black students, collaboration was also associated with higher grades, even after accounting for their prior academic performance.**” In this way, student-centered approaches such as authentic collaboration can not only promote accessibility, but equity, as well.

Finally, [The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development](#)⁹ posits that, **“Differentiated instruction /S student -centered.”**

We know that differentiated instruction is essential for creating equitable learning opportunities. Students have varying learning needs, preferences, and interests. While differentiated instruction explains *what* to do about this (tailor academic instruction to students’ individual needs), student-centered instruction provides teachers with tools for *how* to do this. Understanding student-centered teaching as a practice of differentiating instruction illustrates how equity is central to this approach.

CONCLUSION

The Modern Classroom is Student-Centered

As it turns out, student-centered classrooms are gaining traction for good reasons. A host of research continually demonstrates that this approach to teaching and learning can have profound impacts on students' academic and social-emotional success.

The research is also clear that there is no one singular way to approach student-centered learning. This is, in part, because all students and each school context is unique. **Student-centered learning must take into account students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds, community contexts, students' interests and learning needs, and so much more.**

Taking all of these factors into account allows school leaders to develop a set of student-centered instructional

strategies and principles that are responsive to their student population.

BetterLesson is here as a partner to districts to help create a personalized student-centered learning plan. Through a combination of one-on-one coaching of [teachers](#) and [leaders](#), virtual and in-person [workshops](#), [learning walks](#), and [on-demand courses and instructional resources](#), we support districts in not only creating but effectively implementing student-centered learning.

Ultimately, student-centered classrooms create the type of learning environment that students deserve, ones that ignite their curiosity, promote their collaboration, value their autonomy, and encourage their exploration.



To learn more about how we can offer personalized support, resources, and capacity to implement or improve student-centered learning at your school, [contact us today!](#)

RESOURCES / FURTHER READING

1. [Edutopia article](#), "Students Think Lecture Are Best, But Research Suggests They're Wrong."
2. [Education Evolving study](#), Evidence for Student-Centered Learning.
- 3 & 5. [Rand Corporation Study](#), Continued Progress, Promising Evidence on Personalized Learning.
4. [Learning Sciences International Article](#), "Why Student Engagement is Important in a Post-COVID World - and 5 Strategies to Improve It."
6. [Article published by the National Library of Medicine](#), "Staying Engaged: Knowledge and Research Needs in Student Engagement."
7. [Study published by the International Journal of Educational Research](#), Enjoyment benefits adolescents' self-determined motivation in student-centered learning.
8. [Study published by Air.org](#), "Learning with others: a Study Exploring the Relationship Between Collaboration, Personalization, and Equity."
9. [Article published by the ASCD Blog](#), "7 Reasons Why Differentiated Instruction Works."



BetterLesson connects K-12 educators with comprehensive professional learning solutions that help them thrive in an increasingly complex world. We have partnered with more than 30,000 educators across 47 states, plus D.C., Puerto Rico, and five countries internationally. Through research-based professional development centered on student outcomes, educators gain the necessary skills to create meaningful student-centered learning experiences that meet all students' needs.

Our comprehensive learning plans incorporate in-person, virtual, group, and self-directed learning experiences throughout the full school year, creating scaffolds of support aligned with how adult learners actually learn. By intentionally aligning professional learning to strategic goals, we enable districts to unlock the full potential of every educator, and thus, every student.

