PERSONALIZED LEARNING POLICY PLAY #2:
ESTABLISH AN "APPROVED MODEL" DESIGNATION FOR PROVIDERS AND MODELS THAT MEET CERTAIN PARAMETERS REGARDING QUALITY AND INNOVATION

CONTEXT

As demand for personalized learning grows, a variety of providers and vendors will seek to market their tools, products, and models to schools as potential resources for implementation. But not all these tools and products are equally effective. Vendors may position specific products or tools—from tablets to software—as personalized learning solutions even though these offerings fall far short of providing comprehensive integration of human capital, technology, and content. Schools and districts will have to sift through a variety of tools, models, and vendors to identify those that will meet their needs and deliver effective results for students—and this can prove challenging. Without any guidance, schools and districts may choose not to utilize new models.

Many states that allow students to take online courses have criteria in place to approve online providers. Most states, however, have not created similar processes to approve personalized learning providers or models. Increased access to such guidance could encourage schools and districts to implement comprehensive personalized learning models. It might also encourage private-sector providers to invest in developing new models and rigorously evaluating their results. An "approved model" designation could provide a foundation for offering greater flexibility to schools and districts utilizing personalized learning.

PLAY IN ACTION

States and districts could support schools in selecting effective models by independently assessing the claims and track records of different options, identifying those with the strongest evidence and greatest potential, and designating them as approved providers or models. While states are the most likely entity to take on this responsibility, larger districts may find value in identifying a list of approved models, although districts and schools would still be free to use other models.

The approved-model designation could also support policies that provide increased autonomy to schools and districts implementing innovative practices (see Play No. 11) by allowing these entities implementing approved models to automatically qualify for increased flexibility.

After Arkansas passed the Digital Learning Act of 2013, the state Department of Education began to publish an annual list of approved digital learning providers that may partner with schools. Providers must have digital learning material that meets state curriculum standards, and they must demonstrate past success in improving student achievement. Approved providers in 2014 represented a diverse range of entities, including Edgenuity, Arkansas State University, the Crystal Bridges Museum, and Florida Virtual School Global.

IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS

To realize the benefits of an approved-model designation, policymakers must navigate some potential pitfalls. States generally have a poor track record of approving effective vendors, as demonstrated by experience with supplemental educational services, comprehensive school reform models, and textbooks. Clear criteria for the approved-model designation are crucial to ensure designations set a high bar for quality and are based on actual performance rather than political factors. Criteria should include the model's strengths and weaknesses, past performance, and provider commitment to certain performance measures, which the state or district will monitor.

States and districts should assess a model's past performance when deciding whether to award approved status. However, they should carefully balance the need for evidence of impact with the need to encourage innovation and development of new models. Placing too much value on past performance will exclude all but a handful of established providers—potentially shutting out smaller vendors and start-ups. To address this, states may wish to apply multiple levels of designations for models at different stages of development. States might designate models as "effective" if they have been implemented in multiple settings and have rigorous, independent evaluations of their results; or "promising" if they have been implemented in a few places and have produced strong results on state tests and formative assessments. States could

also choose to approve "early stage" models that are just beginning to be implemented in classroom settings. If a state chose to use the approved-model designation to award schools increased autonomy (see Play No. 11), the degree to autonomy may vary between early stage models and other approved models. Similarly, if the state produces report cards on approved models (see Play No. 5), the type of information included might vary based on type of approved model. States or districts could also establish a sliding-scale system in which programs with strong evidence of past success are approved for longer periods of time and after less scrutiny compared with newer models.

States should require all approved models and providers to commit to specific impact goals and performance measures for student performance. Continuation of an approved model's designation should be based on meeting these goals and performance measures—much like charter schools are required to meet specific performance goals before their charters are renewed. The annual report cards on provider effectiveness described in Play No. 5 could help states or districts assess the extent to which providers or models are meeting their goals.

States and districts seeking to establish approved-model designations must also establish processes for evaluating models and providers against the criteria they set, including time lines for application and review. States and districts may utilize their own employees to review models, or they

may outsource this work to independent reviewers with expertise in personalized learning. If a state or district chooses to utilize independent reviewers, it will need to establish clear standards to avoid conflicts of interest and allocate resources to compensate reviewers for their time.

LEGISLATION
Arkansas, Act 1280 (Digital Learning Act)

RESEARCH AND RESOURCES
According to Digital Learning Now, 24 states—including Minnesota, Maine, and Washington—have a clearly defined process for **vetting and approving online providers.** See more at: http://digitallearningnow.com/site/uploads/2014/02/DLN_ReportCard_FINAL_2.pdf

View **Arkansas's Approved Digital Provider List,** released in March 2014, at: http://www.arkansased.org/public/userfiles/Learning_Services/Digital_Learning/DLP_AR_Approved_List_041414.pdf

The **Northeast Comprehensive Center,** a consortium of education leaders from four states, is creating a **rubric to evaluate online and blended learning programs.** Learn more at: http://www.northeastcompcenter.org/regional-online-and-blended-learning-initiative/