

The Use of Individualized Learning Plans to Help Students to be College and Career Ready

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Preparing for college and careers requires far more than rigorous academic content. College and career exploration and planning activities can play a beneficial role in personalizing learning, engaging students, and preparing them for life beyond school. The American Youth Policy Forum and the Institute for Educational Leadership, Center for Workforce Development partnered to present the findings of the Center's research on the use of Individualized Learning Plans (ILPs), which provide middle and high school students with a tool to define their personal interests, goals, and course choices to prepare for postsecondary education and careers. Many states have adopted policies requiring the use of ILPs, and research is starting to show their benefits. The Center for Workforce Development has conducted longitudinal research, funded by the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy, to assess the effectiveness of ILPs, and it implemented a demonstration project to better understand their impact on post-school outcomes. Presenters summarized the research findings and discussed practitioners' and policymakers' experiences implementing and scaling up the use of ILPs.

Dr. Scott Solberg, Associate Dean for Research, School of Education, Boston University, introduced the National Collaborative on Workforce & Disability for Youth. The Collaborative is a national technical assistance center focused on the needs of all youth, including youth with disabilities and other disconnected youth to improve state and local policy, strengthen workforce development service delivery, improve competencies of youth service professionals, and engage youth and families. The Collaborative is supported by the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy.

For the ILP research, the Collaborative was guided by three questions: 1) should ILPs be considered a promising strategy for developing college and career readiness; 2) are students with disabilities participating in ILPs; and 3) should ILPs be considered a promising practice for college and career readiness for all students? Using correlational and mixed-methods strategies to identify college and career readiness pathways, the Collaborative conducted interviews with students to identify their career readiness processes. The research team established a study group of schools in four states, engaging educators, families, and students in focus groups and surveys. In addition, they conducted a 50-state web review of ILP purposes and implementation strategies and in-depth conversations with select state, district, and school officials.

Solberg described a quality ILP as a document consisting of: a) a student's course taking and postsecondary plans aligned to career goals and b) documentation of the range of college and career readiness skills he/she has developed. A quality ILP is also a process that relies on a student's understanding of the relevance of her/his school courses as well as out-of-school learning opportunities, providing a student access to career development opportunities that incorporate self-exploration, career exploration, and career planning and management activities.

The ILP study found access to a quality learning environment was related to students becoming college and career ready as indicated by recording higher grades, reporting better stress/health management, and more readiness to engage in career decision-making. Students who identified career plans that were clearly the results of active self-exploration activities were also found to report higher social emotional learning and college and career readiness skills.

Looking specifically at ILP engagement, results indicate that ILPs are associated with college and career readiness through their impact on self-regulation, motivation, and self-efficacy. The study results indicated that nondisabled student fared better than their peers with disabilities on these indicators.

While the study found that in most states mandating ILPs, students with disabilities were participating in ILP activities, the research indicated that educators were less certain about how to support these students in career exploration and planning. There is a need, argued Solberg, to design processes to get students with disabilities prepared for these transitions.

Solberg discussed promising practices for offering ILP resources to students with disabilities, including general and special education staff working together to ensure accessibility of ILP resources and activities, initiating ILP activities in middle school and engaging families in the process, states providing guidance and examples of integrating ILPs into IEP plans, and states developing professional development materials and opportunities to prepare personnel to integrate ILPs and IEPs. Solberg reviewed state level ILP challenges (e.g., lack of accountability systems for measuring ILP impact and return on investment), district and school capacity challenges (e.g., lack of leadership support for establishing whole-school buy-in), web-based challenges (e.g., inaccessibility of assessment tools and career information for students with significant disabilities), and challenges to engaging families in ILPs (e.g., lack of family-related ILP activities and materials). Overall, the implementation of ILPs has not effectively considered the needs of students with significant disabilities and there is a lack of evidence for adapting ILP strategies for this population of students.

Dr. Terry Holliday, Kentucky Commissioner of Education, discussed how his state has developed strategies for districts to use in preparing students for college and career. In 2009, reform legislation put a focus on the economic issues of college and career readiness in Kentucky. The state has taken that legislation (for all children) and defined "college ready" as the level of preparation a first-time students needs in order to succeed in a credit-bearing and "career ready" as the level of preparation (core academic skills, employment skills and technical, job-specific skills) a high school graduate needs in order to proceed to the next step in a chosen career, whether that is postsecondary coursework, industry certification, or entry into the military or workforce. Kentucky's college and career-readiness goals are 1) to increase the percentage of students who are college-and career-ready from 34 percent (16,320 students) to 67 percent (32,160 students) by 2015 and 2) increase the average freshman graduation rate from 76 percent (36,480 students) to 90 percent (43,200 students) by 2015. Kentucky has developed statewide college and career-readiness measures, incentives for districts to prepare students for both college and career, and a system for public display of data. College and career readiness are now built into the statewide accountability system.

One of the strategies for ensuring students are college and career ready is the use of ILPs. Beginning in 8th grade, all Kentucky students and their parents have access to information on the child's ILP. In 2011-12, 88 percent of the state's students had ILPs, and the state is working hard to make sure all students are using an ILP. In 2013 the state instituted "Operation Preparation" in which every 8th and 10th grader meets with an adult to make sure they are doing the college and career preparation work they should. Holliday noted that Kentucky is learning that if students use the ILP five or more times, they are more likely to gain college and career readiness at a faster rate than those who only use it two times or fewer.

For students with disabilities, argued Holliday, the ILP is critical; yet these students might not be able to access the traditional ILP assessments.

Joan Wills, Senior Policy Fellow, Center for Workforce Development, Institute for Educational Leadership noted that ILPs are not new, but that what is new is seeing them used as part of state-driven efforts in support of broader goals. Moving forward, asserted Wills, states need to consider providing sustainable leadership, setting voluntary standards of practice and metrics to measure results, and building local capacity for using ILPs effectively. In addition, web-based career information systems should be accessible to all individuals statewide to address overall cost containment, quality control, transferability, and student ownership of a portable document. In order to provide evidence-based resources to help districts, states should develop a repository of continuously-updated classroom activities and grade by grade benchmarks that can be used as part of a tracking system. In addition, they should consult with partnering departments to collect evidence-based materials and spread the use of ILPs by infusing the strategy into state-managed grant programs.

Wills indicated use of ILPs could play a critical role in supporting youth with disabilities. There is growing evidence that ILPs strengthen IEPs due to starting planning earlier, explicitly focusing on attention to postsecondary outcomes, and significantly increasing time spent during the week focused on the future planning. A growing number of states are promoting the use of ILP content as an integrated component in the IEP. National collaborations can help move this effort forward.

In addition, the Federal government could support capacity building at the local and state levels and promote alignment by strengthening its focus on career development. She pointed out that no state or local official indicated the need for a Federal ILP mandate, and yet no Federal program authorizing legislation even mentions “career development” as an allowable activity. State leaders suggested that the Federal government could spark innovations through additional research, technical assistance and demonstration projects. And, she concluded, that a multitude of national organizations can play a significant role in helping states and their constituencies address issues around accessible information technology systems, standards of accountability, professional development guidelines, and, improving transition planning processes.

For further information:

NCWD/Youth www.ncwd-youth.info
NCWD/Youth ILP Materials www.ncwd-youth.info/ilp
ILP How-to-Guide www.ncwd-youth.info/ilp/how-to-guide

Question and Answer Period

What is the connection between ILPs and IEPs, and how do the two fit together?

Solberg explained that an IEP occurs annually and focuses on the accommodations necessary for a student's success in school. A quality ILP happens throughout the academic year. Holliday pointed out that students and parents need access to an ILP at least five times a year to reap the full benefit of this type of planning. Wills argued that a lot of students with IEPs end up not participating in ILPs because of the assessment instruments used or because they spend the bulk of their time in resource rooms. It is very obvious many are not being exposed to ILP opportunities. One recommendation is that states should develop some demonstration projects that pick up on the content of what career-readiness means and change or modify assessments so

all students are at least exposed to the ILP process. Several states have resolved this by developing guidance and technical support to the IEP teams and staff, and that seems to be making a big difference toward embedding the ILP in the IEP.

Have you seen results using ILPs for students involved in the juvenile justice system or pregnant and parenting students?

Holliday said there are some high schools in urban settings where a student entering in 9th grade has a 1 in 17 chance of graduating college and career ready, but a 1 in 4 chance of being incarcerated by age 24, a circumstance he referred to as "academic genocide." This is a critical issue to ensure equity of outcomes, not just equity of opportunity. Holliday said, we are seeing our lowest performing high schools where we have implemented support and expectations for ILP move to much higher performance in a very short time. He continued, "It is all about leadership at the building and district level."

Wills agreed that we do not need to limit the utility of the tool. She stated that the ILP is a useful tool in schools and can be in other institutional settings as well.

Solberg added that for incarcerated youth and adults, the ILP portfolio can be used and then can be shared with others as a support for the individual in their transition out of incarceration. The ILP can be a place to take a look at the whole child and see what the challenges are.

How does the ILP fit into the increasing number of states experimenting with alternatives to the Carnegie unit and blended learning?

Solberg pointed out that districts are realizing that when you use an ILP, you can talk about competencies, rather than what courses have been taken. ILPs can easily house non-traditional experiences leading to competence.

There is tremendous change happening in America's schools. What happens to develop the skills of teachers and administrators to do this new work?

Holliday stressed the need for clinical, high-quality professional development for teachers and administrators. Wills noted that there are not a lot of people working in high schools who have competencies and skills focused on career preparation. She said we must increase the competencies of staff in schools and rethink how we organize how these competencies are taught.