

## COMMENTARY

# Planning for Life After High School

By **V. Scott Solberg & Curtis Richards**

Every so often in education, new ideas are introduced and spread across states and districts as if they had a life of their own.

The rise of individualized learning plans, or ILPs, may represent just such an idea. These personalized learning strategies strive to strengthen the transition between school and college or work while bolstering student engagement and family involvement in learning.

In 2005, 21 states encouraged the use of ILPs. Our research with the National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth (NCWD/Youth) indicates that today at least 37 states and the District of Columbia view ILPs as an anchor for their college- and career-readiness efforts. These plans, known by different names in each state, are typically required of all students, including students with disabilities and other special populations.

ILPs are different from, but closely related and complementary to, the transition plans that students receiving special education services are federally required to incorporate into their individualized education programs (IEPs) once they reach age 16.

When implemented as a whole-school program, ILPs are designed to engage all students in becoming career-ready by helping them define the secondary and postsecondary plans that will help them achieve their self-defined career goals.

In NCWD/Youth's research, families reported that the process results in students' taking ownership and becoming more engaged in their courses.

For students with disabilities, ILPs enable them to become more assertive in guiding their IEP meetings and ensuring that their transition activities help them develop the college-readiness and employability skills that are aligned to their career and life goals.

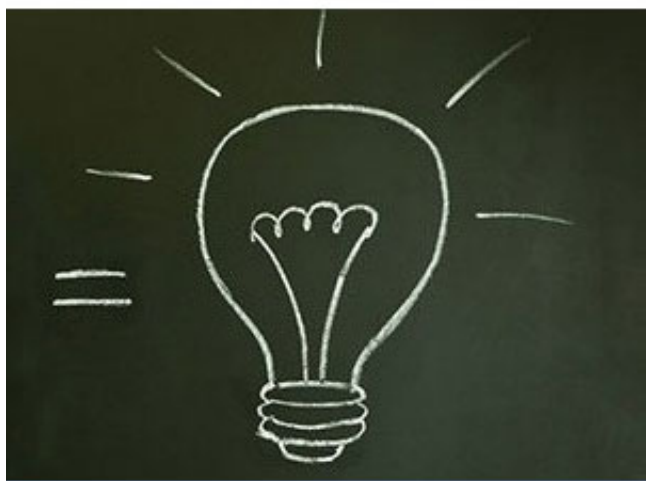
Based upon our several years of research in numerous states and schools, we define a high-quality ILP as:

- A document consisting of (a) coursetaking and postsecondary plans aligned to career goals, and (b) documentation of the range of college- and career-readiness skills that the student has developed.
- A process that enhances the relevance of school and out-of-school learning opportunities, and provides students access to career-development opportunities that incorporate self-exploration, career exploration, and career-planning and -management skill-building activities.

Students typically develop the plans beginning in 8th grade and regularly revise them with adult mentors (teachers, counselors, parents, and other family members)

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Advanced  
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throughout high school to reflect their shifting interests, needs, and learning experiences inside and outside of school.

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In interviews with NCWD/Youth, district officials have reported that ILPs show promise in increasing enrollments in Advanced Placement courses and applications to college, and in encouraging students with disabilities to obtain a standard high school diploma and consider college as an option.

ILPs work effectively, in part, because students, not adults, take charge of the process. One promising activity we found involved using ILPs to generate annual student-led parent-teacher conferences.

During the conference, students discuss their career and life goals in relation to the evidence they have generated from self-study and career-exploration activities. They also talk about the in- and out-of-school experiences that will keep them on pace to achieve those goals.

The process also inspires students to seek out relevant community service and work-based learning experiences; helps them learn about job qualifications, industry standards, and postsecondary pathways; and enables them to describe how to gain access to resources to help with college planning, tuition assistance, and applications.

In focus-group interviews, families reported that the ILPs, especially when presented in the context of student-led parent-teacher conferences, increased positive regard for their schools and teachers. One family member said the schools "seem focused on launching adults" rather than only on increasing test scores.

While we have not yet released our final report, which was commissioned by the U.S. Department of Labor, we can share our findings on a number of exemplary ILP implementation strategies. These include:

- **Providing support and professional development for teachers, school counselors, and administrators on the implementation and long-term use of the plans.** This is critical to ensure that plans are implemented with fidelity and that everyone involved understands the process.

Additionally, implementation should provide teachers with advisory time during the school day to meet with students, and with curricula that includes grade-level expectations with career-planning elements. This promotes schoolwide buy-in that allows for a more effective and sustainable rollout of ILPs. Wisconsin, for example, is developing and implementing an intensive professional-development system that includes training modules and allows staff members in each school to build the competencies they need to implement ILPs effectively.

- **Establishing a cross-sector task force to guide ILP implementation.** In addition to state departments of education and labor, the state agencies involved can include those working in vocational rehabilitation, health and human services, and higher education. Education department representation should include school counseling, special education, and career and technical education. This allows groups to share expertise and leverage resources to support ILP implementation. It also increases access to work-based learning opportunities and preparation for postsecondary education.

Connecticut, for example, has established a statewide collaboration that oversees professional development and supports in-school ILP-implementation teams.

- **Placing the responsibility for implementation not just on school counselors, but also on special education and general education teachers and administrators.** Because all students can use these plans, all teachers, administrators, and members of the school support staff should be trained in how to prepare to implement them. Rhode Island, for example, has established clear roles and responsibilities for students, educators, families, and district administrators in its ILP framework to ensure all departments collaborate throughout the process.

- **Ensuring long-term funding for online career-information systems that offer "ePortfolios."** Many districts struggle to pay for access to online career-information systems. Some states, such as Kentucky and South Carolina, have provided funds for a single state system that allows for electronic portfolios that

transfer with students who move between districts, data for the state to use when evaluating outcomes, and the ability to offer streamlined professional development. At a minimum, states need to strongly encourage that any system meet industry standards.

• **Establishing accountability systems to track program effectiveness.** Accountability systems provide data to verify the effectiveness of ILPs by tracking student outcomes, graduation rates, and postsecondary pursuits. They also provide data on implementation fidelity by showing how many schools are implementing the plans, how many students are participating in them, whether schools have schoolwide buy-in, and how well the plans are being implemented.

Kentucky, for example, uses an accountability system that combines student data, program reviews, and educator data to determine the effectiveness of ILPs in schools, districts, and across the state.

We also have learned that the best implementation comes when states have a comprehensive strategy and a multi-organization and multiyear master implementation plan. States also need to connect their online career-information systems and ePortfolio data into their own longitudinal-data systems, and pay special attention to strategies to communicate to a broad range of stakeholders what ILPs are and how they benefit students, schools, communities, and the workforce.

If we are serious about ensuring college- and career-readiness opportunities for all students, we need to focus more effort on enabling students and their families to become more engaged in transition-readiness efforts well before they graduate. Properly designed and implemented, ILPs help students and their families strive to get the most out of their educational opportunities and successfully launch into a postsecondary training and education program and the world of work.

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