



# INDIVIDUALIZED LEARNING PLANS

## An Entry Point to Programs of Study and Career Pathways

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“Education that does not incorporate career planning is a hollow promise” (Morgan & Stone, 2002, p. 16).

### Emergence and Growth of Individualized Learning Plans

Individualized Learning Plans (ILPs) are sometimes described as individual graduation plans, next-step plans, or personalized learning plans. Building on the successes seen as a result of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in 1990 in the utilization of Individual Education Plans (IEPs) to support students with special needs, the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) recommended that every student have a “personal plan for progress” in their recommendations for educational reform in their *Breaking Ranks in the Middle: Strategies for Leading Middle Level Reform* report in 2006 (NASSP, 2006, p. 5). Concurrently, the American School Counselor Association (2006) also was advocating that “professional school counselors collaborate with administrators, teachers, staff, families and the community to ensure all students have the opportunity to design a rigorous and relevant academic and career program” (p. 1).

These recommendations spurred stakeholders both in and outside of school systems to advocate for the widespread adoption of ILPs through policy mandates (Solberg, Phelps, Haakenson, Durham, & Timmons, 2012b). By 2011, ILPs were mandated in 25 states and the District of Columbia (Bloom & Kissane, 2011). Of the remaining states, 22 provided either a framework or model for the implementation of ILPs by school districts (Bloom & Kissane, 2011). Additionally, sev-

eral states included the implementation or expansion of their ILP systems in their scope of work under their Race to the Top and other K-12 educational initiatives funded by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (Bloom & Kissane, 2011; Phelps, 2011). This rapid growth in mandates has created a situation in which school districts across the United States need information about the effective implementation and evaluation of ILP processes for their students (Bloom & Kissane, 2011; Phelps, Durham, & Wills, 2011).

### Key Concepts and Components in ILPs

A universal definition for ILPs does not exist; instead, the ILP products, processes, and mandates reflect the variation in educational systems from state to state and among local communities (Bloom & Kissane, 2011; Phelps, 2011). The Rhode Island and Providence Plantations Department of Education (RIDE) provides a definition that captures many of the core concepts that are nearly universal and as such can provide a framework for ILPs. RIDE (2010) defines ILPs as:

a student directed planning and monitoring tool that customizes learning opportunities throughout their secondary school experiences, broadens their perspectives and supports attainment of goals. The ILP documents students’ interests, needs, supports, course selections (including access to college level programming), transition placements and other learning experiences both in and out of school. This information produces a thoughtful program of study leading to proficiency for graduation and post-secondary experiences. (p. 1)

ILP processes are student-centered and result in a customized plan that recognizes the student's individual characteristics and is reflective of the student's learning environment. Students take an active role in assessing, reflecting on, and planning based on their academic, career, and personal goals (Phelps et al., 2011; RIDE, 2010). Although the process is student-centered, the ILP is shared among parents, counselors, and teachers, as a means of supporting the student's academic and career development (Bullock & Wikeley, 1999). Some districts utilize students' ILPs as a source of student-level data in their programmatic planning and evaluation processes (Bloom & Kissane, 2011). For these reasons districts and some states have adopted a standardized format for student ILPs (Bullock & Wikeley, 1999).

The ILP process starts at the middle level, with most states and districts electing to initiate the ILP process at some point between the sixth and eighth grades (Phelps et al., 2011; RIDE, 2010). The ILP process and resulting plan begin with a broad course framework and become increasingly specific as the student engages in and develops skills toward a specific program of study for her/his selected career (Bloom & Kissane, 2011; Phelps et al., 2011; RIDE, 2010). As such, the ILP provides an entry point for the student to engage with her/his selected career pathway. ILP processes and experiences provide guidance and record students' progress they move into and through specific programs of study leading to employment and/or postsecondary experiences (RIDE, 2010; Solberg et al., 2012b; Stipanovic, 2010). ILPs are updated annually as the student advances from one grade to the next; however, to be effective the plan created needs to be reviewed and referenced frequently, particularly should the student's career interests change (National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability [NCWD], 2013; Solberg et al., 2012b).

ILPs commonly involve a set of assessments, reflection and exploration activities, and development of a plan of action (Bloom & Kissane, 2011). The assessment process includes assessment of the student's academic strengths and weaknesses, personality, learning styles, and skills related to the student's career interests. Reflection and exploration focus on the student's self-as-

essment of her/his skills and interests as well as early career exploration, including community service opportunities, and often involves referrals for learning supports and further career exploration. Reflection also involves the student setting academic, career, and personal goals. Planning involves the development of an action plan based on identified academic, career, and personal goals, which include an academic course plan and resume development. Completion of the course plan ensures that the student enrolls in course offerings that adequately prepare her/him for college and career success. A well-developed ILP provides a relatively seamless transition from high school graduation to the next phase of the student's career plan—whether it be postsecondary education, the military, or immediate entry into the workforce.

### **Benefits Associated with ILPs**

Proponents cite educational research on the “over-riding influence of individual characteristics and differences in any learning endeavor” (Phelps et al., 2010, p. 7) to demonstrate the theoretical value of ILPs. Proponents of ILPs, including policymakers, practitioners, and researchers, argue that the ILP process has a wide range of benefits for students and districts. These benefits include the following: motivating students to complete their high school diploma and engage in post-secondary study; provide students with a skill set necessary for planning their academic, professional, and personal lives; helping students to recognize the relevance of their academic work; engaging parents in students' academic activities; and providing information to improve the rigor and overall quality of the programs provided for students (Bloom & Kissane, 2011; Bullock & Wikeley, 1999; Morgan & Stone, 2002; Phelps et al., 2011, RIDE, 2010; Wilkerson, 2010).

Phelps et al. (2010) found that policymakers are motivated by several goals to adopt and mandate ILP policies: (a) development of secondary and postsecondary academic plans, (b) development of students' planning skills, and (c) promoting student development of career and college planning knowledge. Research into the effectiveness of ILPs indicate that students engaged in the ILP process may benefit from the following:

- improved relationships with educational personnel (Bullock & Wikeley, 1999; Wilkerson, 2010),
- improved communication skills (Bullock & Wikeley, 1999),
- improved goal setting and planning skills (Bullock & Wikeley, 1999; NCWD, 2013),
- improved understanding of their own abilities (Bullock & Wikeley, 1999, Wilkerson, 2010),
- increased engagement and self-efficacy in their academic work (NCWD, 2013; Solberg et al., 2012b),
- increased engagement in more challenging coursework (NCWD, 2013; Solberg et al., 2012b), and
- increased understanding of their postsecondary and career options (NCWD, 2013; Solberg et al., 2012b).

However, it is important to note that the evidence available on the effectiveness of ILPs is limited and that other concurrent interventions and reforms may be responsible for some of the positive effects measured in these studies (Bullock & Wikeley, 1999; Phelps et al., 2011; Wilkerson, 2010).

In the ILP designing process and the evaluation of these processes, school districts and/or local educational agencies need to be aware that there is limited information on how participating in ILP processes affects different populations of students. Bullock and Wikeley (1999) found that there were differences based on the students' gender in what components of the ILPs had the most impact, how students experienced the process, and the benefits students gained from the ILP process. Additionally, Solberg, Howard, Gresham, and Carter (2012a) analyzed the impact of participating in the ILP process for students identified as having high-incidence disabilities. Students in this study reported greater confidence in career planning activities, higher self-efficacy in personal goal setting, higher engagement in academic activities, higher academic self-efficacy, and better academic outcomes. Because little is known as to how the ILP processes affect underrepresented groups of students, it is essential that the progress of these students and their responses to ILP processes are monitored by both researchers and practitioners.

## Recommendations for Implementing ILP Process

Researchers have advanced several recommendations for the implementation and management of the ILP process. Districts or Local Educational Agencies planning to implement ILPs should consider the following:

1. outline the roles and responsibilities of all stakeholders including: students, educators, the school, and the district (RIDE, 2010; Wilkerson, 2010);
2. establish a common understanding of the value of ILPs (RIDE, 2010; Solberg et al., 2012b);
3. create a protocol that outlines a timeline for the development and review of ILPs (RIDE, 2010);
4. address issues of confidentiality including issues of access to ILP data, and distribution in designing ILP process (RIDE, 2010);
5. create a protocol for formative evaluation of the ILP process (Wilkerson, 2010);
6. provide staff and faculty with professional development opportunities for designing and implementing ILPs (Solberg et al., 2012b; Wilkerson, 2010); and
7. allocate sufficient resources, including time, to fully implement the processes and protocols established (Solberg et al., 2012b; Wilkerson, 2010).

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