

Learning to Work: States Using Individualized Learning Plans As Anchor Strategy to Promote College and Career Readiness

With the advent of the Common Core State Standards and other college and career readiness initiatives in recent years, states have been working to determine how to best support all students as they complete high school, plan for their futures, and develop the core academic and employability skills needed to be prepared for future work and learning.

In recent years, Individualized Learning Plans (ILPs) have gained significant traction in states as an anchor strategy for state college and career readiness efforts. In 2005, 21 states encouraged the use of ILPs; today, 37 states and the District of Columbia are using ILPs and are broadly implementing them for all students, including college-bound and disengaged youth and students with disabilities.

State officials say that ILPs help middle and high school students focus on long-term career goals and understand the relevance of what they are learning and where it could lead them while breaking down barriers between schools, families, and the post-high school world.

ILPs are different from, but closely related and complementary to, the transition plan that students receiving special education services are federally required to incorporate into their Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). While historically many school reform efforts have not effectively included youth with disabilities, the personalized and student-centered nature of ILPs offers a promising method for helping all students identify their developmental needs, engage more directly in their education planning, and own and advocate for their academic and career goals.

When implemented effectively, ILPs strengthen the transition between school and college or work by encouraging students to become more engaged and motivated in their learning, to explore and determine their career and life goals, and by providing them with the skills to identify and navigate postsecondary education, training, and work opportunities. Many state officials have reported that educators, families, and young people believe that ILPs result in positive school outcomes, more rigorous course-taking patterns, and stronger intentions to pursue postsecondary education.

Students typically develop ILPs beginning around eighth grade and regularly revise them with adult mentors (teachers, counselors, parents, and other family members) throughout high school to reflect their shifting interests, needs, and learning experiences inside and outside of school. And because students—not adults—take charge of the ILP process, young people are given the opportunity to own their career exploration and preparation path, are more likely to seek out learning experiences that align with their self-defined interests and goals, are able to determine how to gain access to available resources to help with college planning, and can identify postsecondary pathways that will lead them to success.

Exemplary Implementation Strategies

Studies have indicated that state officials have a clear understanding of the value and potential for ILPs in supporting college and career readiness initiatives and many states are leading the way in ensuring the plans are implemented effectively. In our review of state policies and interviews with state officials, we have identified a number of exemplary ILP implementation strategies. These include:

- **Provide 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 ILPs are implemented with fidelity and that everyone involved understands the process. Additionally, encouraging schools and districts to promote school-wide buy-in allows for a more effective and sustainable rollout of ILPs. Wisconsin, for example, is currently in the process of developing and implementing an intensive professional development system that allows staff members in each school to build the competencies they need to effectively implement ILPs.
- **Establish a cross-sector and cross-departmental task force to guide ILP implementation. In addition to Education and Labor, state agencies can include Vocational Rehabilitation, Health and Human Services, and Higher Education. Within Education, department representation should include school counseling, special education, and career and technical education.** This not only breaks down silos but also allows groups to share expertise and leverage resources to support ILP implementation and increases access of youth to work-based learning opportunities and preparation for postsecondary education. For example, Connecticut has established a statewide collaboration that oversees professional development and supports in-school ILP implementation teams to provide advisory support throughout the ILP process.
- **Place the responsibility for ILP implementation not just on school counselors, who have big caseloads, but also on special education and general education teachers and administrators.** Because ILPs can be used by all students, all teachers, administrators, and support staff should be educated on and prepared to implement ILPs throughout the school year. 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.
- **Ensure 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 South Carolina and Kentucky, have provided funds for a single state system with ePortfolios, which house student documents and data and can help with evaluating ILP outcomes and streamlining professional development. At minimum, states need to strongly encourage that any system purchased meet industry standards set by the Alliance for Career Resource Professionals.
- **Establish 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 critical data on

implementation fidelity by showing how many schools are implementing ILPs, how many students are participating in ILPs, if schools have school-wide buy-in, and how well they are implementing ILPs. This data also provides the empirical evidence to support the strong anecdotal evidence that ILPs have a range of positive effects in schools and districts throughout their state. 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.

Implementation Steps

We have learned that the best implementation comes when states have a comprehensive strategy and a multi-organization and multi-year 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.

The following chart (discussed below) identifies several key steps for states to implement quality ILPs statewide.

Action Step	Audience	Outcomes
Establish a cross-sector task force	Include key departments of education, workforce development, and disability	Advocacy efforts to establish ILPs and ILP funding, and coordinate ILP policies and practices
Develop a state-level ILP how-to guide	General and special educators, administrators, state officials, and community stakeholders	Understanding of ILPs and action planning among districts/schools
Develop communication materials	General and special educators, cross-sector collaborators, families, community organizations, and businesses	Understanding and awareness of ILP goals and outcomes
Professional development	Administrators, professional learning communities of district and school educators	Fidelity of quality ILP implementation to all students

State leaders who have introduced ILPs note that the cross-sector task force plays a crucial role in establishing a shared sense of ownership and understanding of the value of ILPs among key stakeholders who must implement the strategy. It also forms a coalition of key groups and leaders that will be needed to advocate for funds and other resources to support effective, long-term ILP implementation across the state.

Developing and broadly disseminating implementation guides can help officials from state-level agencies (such as those participating in the cross-sector task force), school district administrators, general education and special education teachers, and community stakeholders better understand how ILPs work and their value. They also identify how different sectors can benefit by engaging in ILPs, and strategies to ensure that all educators and students—including those with disabilities, English language learners, and other special populations—can fully participate in ILP activities.

In addition to implementation guides, states need to develop communication materials for a wide range of audiences to explain the purpose of and activities associated with ILPs and whole-school implementation. This includes explaining how ILPs and IEPs complement each other in student transition planning. These materials can be distributed through state and district central offices, schools, community organizations, and businesses in an effort to build a common vision for ILPs and understanding of how they will support the state’s college and career readiness goals.

Statewide professional development efforts can be efficient models of ongoing and sustainable support by offering regional orientation activities and materials to a small team of district administrators who would then be responsible for conducting professional development with other district administrators and principals. In addition, more in-depth regional efforts can be facilitated by asking each district and school, respectively, to establish an ILP professional learning community that consists of a school counselor, special education administrator, career and technical education administrator, teachers, and a school administrator. The learning community could also include community-based organizations and families.

By following these steps and borrowing lessons from promising practices, states can help students and their families get the most out of their educational opportunities and make seamless transitions into postsecondary training and education programs and the world of work.

For more information and resources on ILP policies and implementation strategies, visit www.ncwd-youth.info/ilp.

