

Individualized Learning Plans: A Research & Demonstration Project

States continue to refine graduation requirements to meet the now widely accepted goal that *all* students be ready for college and the workplace when they graduate from high school. In almost half of the states, one strategy employed is the requirement that all students develop an individualized learning plan (ILP) prior to graduation. ILPs refer to both a document that is created and maintained as well as a process that helps students engage in the career development activities necessary for them to identify their own career goals. Individual planning is not a new idea. Since the 1970s, federal requirements for students with disabilities have included an individualized education program (IEP). The U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP), charged with the responsibility to find promising practices to improve the employment outcomes for people with disabilities, is supporting a multi-year study to assess whether quality ILPs improve the readiness of all students, including youth with disabilities, for post-school outcomes.

The ODEP study launched in the 2008-09 school year and targeted for completion in 2012-13, is the first longitudinal research and demonstration project designed to understand the effectiveness of ILPs. It looks at ILPs in 14 (rural, urban and suburban) schools in four states (LA, NM, SC, and WA). The research is built around core features included in the *Guideposts for Success* (<http://www.ncwd-youth.info/guideposts>). NCWD/Youth and its partners, the Center for Education and Work at the University of Wisconsin, Madison and the Institute for Community Integration at the University of Minnesota are conducting the research project. Answers are being sought to determine:

- To what extent is the quality of a student's ILP positively associated with post-secondary education and work transitions as indicated by a) 2-year and 4-year college engagement, b) Employment after high school: part-time, full time, and c) Quarterly earnings after high school.
- To what extent do career readiness indicators (e.g., career decision-making readiness, career search self-efficacy) and school-based workforce indicators (e.g., academic self-efficacy, motivation, goal setting) positively influence post-secondary and work transitions as indicated by a) 2-year and 4-year college engagement, b) Employment after high school: part-time, full time, c) Quarterly earnings after high school.
- Do ILPs with stronger (more intensive, more robust) workplace connections (e.g., job shadowing, summer internships, etc.) produce better intermediate (e.g., self-efficacy, outcome expectations, high school graduation, etc.) and longitudinal outcomes?
- Do ILPs with specific Guidepost characteristics produce better intermediate and longitudinal post-secondary/work transition outcomes?

These research questions will be examined according to a number of characteristics including:

- a) Comparing the results to determine if there are differences for students with significant disabilities in comparison with other students with disabilities, and other students who do not have a disability designation;

- b) Comparing the results to determine whether there are gender, ethnicity, or income level differences; and,
- c) Comparing results with other national longitudinal data collection efforts currently underway with comparable post-school and in-school measures, including three federally sponsored studies (NLTS2, ELS:2002-08, and HSLS:09).

Initial Significant Findings from Data and Implications

Some of the initial first year findings are:

1) Validation of the Guideposts for Success: The ILP project staff developed a *Guideposts for Success* scale to measure students' access to and use of information and services. Preliminary data show that the *Guideposts* are strongly correlated with student success. In particular, Family Involvement and Youth Development and Leadership were strong predictors of student well-being and achievement.

2) Increased student and family involvement in the postsecondary planning process: Classroom discussions and school assessments enabled students to develop long-term goals and implement plans (e.g., course selection and career preparation activities) to achieve them. Parents were more involved in their children's educational and career plan. The ILP facilitated their involvement by increasing their confidence discussing plans with their children. Some parents expressed a desire to see the plans implemented earlier in their children's education.

As ILPs are not mandated by federal law, parents, educators, and students with disabilities also commented that ILPs provided a good opportunity to discuss course and career planning in an informal and cooperative atmosphere. Some schools hold the ILP and IEP meetings consecutively in order to maximize the time spent with students and families. Note, however, that the IEP and ILP teams may include different members.

Next Steps

NCWD/Youth will continue to collect data and provide support to the schools participating in the research project. As data become available the findings will be shared with broader stakeholders' networks including state and local policy makers and practitioners concerned with secondary and postsecondary education. Visit <http://www.ncwd-youth.info>, www.cew.wisc.edu, or www.dol.gov/odep periodically to stay abreast of this groundbreaking research.