Policy Brief

National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability
NCWD For Youth

Navigating the Road to Work
Making the Connection between Youth with Disabilities & Employment

NATIONAL COLLABORATIVE ON WORKFORCE AND DISABILITY FOR YOUTH

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Using Individualized Learning Plans to Produce College and Career Ready High School Graduates

Background Context

To generate the competitive workforce needed to improve and maintain strong economies, state elected and appointed officials have embraced college and career readiness as a major outcome of secondary education. Recently, states have begun partnering with post-secondary institutions to develop common definitions of what college ready means and are working across state lines to strengthen the content of curricula for core courses.[i] Increasingly state officials recognize that college ready and career ready are complementary but separate goals and are beginning to identify the career development opportunities that will help students become career ready.[ii] Individualized learning plans (ILPs) are becoming an important tool used by states to support youth in becoming college ready and career ready.[iii] The contents and names of ILPs vary from state to state.

Individualized learning plans (ILPs) are becoming an important tool used by states to support youth in becoming college ready and career ready.

Based upon several years of research investigating the nature and use of ILPs in states across the United States, the National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth (NCWD/Youth) has merged the commonalities to provide a working definition of a quality ILP. The contents of this policy brief are intended to address a litany of issues relevant to moving forward a quality ILP initiative.

A QUALITY INDIVIDUALIZED LEARNING PLAN IS:

- **A document consisting of a student's: (a) course taking and post-secondary plans aligned to career goals; and, (b) documentation of the range of college and career readiness skills he/she has developed.**
- **A process that enhances a student's understanding of the relevance of school courses as well as out-of-school learning opportunities, and provides the student access to career development opportunities, that incorporate self-exploration, career exploration, and career planning and management activities.[iv]**

The purpose of this policy brief is to share recommendations generated as a result of ILP research studies by NCWD/Youth, housed at the Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL), and its partners.[v] This policy brief includes separate but complementary recommendations for state officials, district/school officials, educators, organizations interested in supporting family engagement in schools, special education administrators and support organizations, national organizations, disability organizations, and Federal officials.

The ILP research studies described in this policy brief were funded by the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP).[vi] ODEP officials became interested in whether and how ILPs could be considered as a promising strategy for developing college and career readiness in response to a 2005 report by the Education Commission of the States (ECS).[vii] The report indicated that 21 states were mandating or in the process of mandating ILPs. ODEP was especially

interested in whether and how students with disabilities were participating in ILPs.

The ILP research began in 2007 with a review of the 21 states identified by ECS as mandating ILPs for all students. This review was conducted to inform the selection of several states for a study group. Fourteen high schools in four states (Louisiana, New Mexico, South Carolina, and Washington) were then identified to become part of a longitudinal study of ILP implementation which involved over 1,600 students.[viii] The study schools participated in annual institutes and on-site focus group discussions, interviews, and surveys. Because the ECS report had been conducted early in the states' efforts to implement ILPs, in 2011-12 NCWD/Youth and partners completed an updated scan of ILP policies and practices in all 50 states. This web-based review revealed that 35 states were actively engaged in ILPs, though not all of them mandated that all students develop an ILP.[ix] A number of states were beginning to create extensive ILP policies and resources.

As a final step in 2012, to gain more in-depth understanding of how ILPs were being put into practice at the state, district, and school levels, interviews were conducted with officials from the original four study states, as well as a range of state officials and local educators in states identified through the 2011-2012 web-based scan as offering promising ILP policies and resources (Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Kansas, Kentucky, Michigan, Rhode Island, and West Virginia).[x] These interviews included questions about governance and administrative issues and recommended strategies and solutions.

The findings and recommendations that follow were derived from these research activities.

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Key Research Findings

The questions guiding the ILP research were: (a) whether and how ILPs should be considered a promising strategy for developing college and career readiness; and, b) whether and how students with disabilities were participating in ILPs. The ILP research studies' primary findings related to these two guiding questions follow:

Should ILPs Be Considered a Promising Strategy for Developing College and Career Readiness?

Yes. ILPs should be considered a promising strategy when the ILPs:

- Are implemented beginning in middle school and continue through and beyond high school graduation.
- Include using web-based career information systems that incorporate ILPs as an ePortfolio. An ePortfolio is a feature often found in online career information systems that allows the student to catalogue, store, and share various ILP and career development activities.
- Include family engagement activities.
- Incorporate quality career development opportunities that include: (a) self-exploration of interests, values, and skills; (b) career exploration of various career options and the post-secondary pathways needed to reach those careers; (c) developing career planning and management skills; and, (d) engaging in work-based learning and developing career readiness skills (e.g., social-emotional learning, soft skills, leadership skills, etc).
- Promote personalized learning by: (a) including advisory periods in the weekly class schedule to allow time for ILP activities; and (b) ensuring that students have at least one adult advisor they stay with throughout the high school years.

To determine whether and how students with disabilities are engaging in ILPs, substantial efforts focused on learning how states are linking the state initiated ILP with the federally mandated Individualized Education Program (IEP) that is at the core of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).[xi] The research specifically focused on whether and how ILPs are supporting career readiness and transition to work within the IEP transition plans that are mandated to start no later than age 16.

Are Students with Disabilities Participating in ILPs?

Yes and No.

- In most, but not all, states that mandate ILPs, ILPs apply to all students.
- Some states, however, excuse students with significant disabilities from engaging in ILP activities because assessment tools and ILP activities are perceived as inaccessible to these students.

Should ILPs Be Considered a Promising College and Career Readiness Strategy for Students with Disabilities?

Yes. ILPs should be considered a promising strategy for students with disabilities when:

- General and special education officials and educators work together to ensure accessibility of ILP resources and activities.
- ILP implementation begins in middle school and engages families in the process so that students and families can be stronger advocates in designing the transition plan section of their IEP and in having the accommodations they view as necessary to achieving future career goals put in place.
- Staff responsible for ILPs and IEPs collaborate and are equipped with knowledge and skills to assist students in developing goals and identifying skills, interests, and accommodation-related needs in both plans.

States Leading the Way

States recognize that current employment opportunities demand higher skills.[xii] In order to address these demands, states are expanding course requirements needed to acquire a standard high school diploma. From this perspective, ILPs offer an opportunity to engage both the student and their family in understanding why these additional courses are necessary and help them plan on how they will successfully complete these courses.

In addition, a range of state leaders, including Governors, State Board of Education members, Chief State School Officers, Higher Education Commissioners and workforce development agency heads, have championed the ILP as a useful tool. The state level recommendations that follow are based on the trends, challenges, and solutions identified by state officials as well as input from families, students, and educators in the NCWD/Youth study group of high schools.[xiii] The recommendations are organized around three main themes: (a) providing leadership; (b) setting standards and measuring results; and, (c) building capacity within multiple institutions.

> **"It gave [my daughters] a sense that they had chosen [these courses], that they had decided this, that they had set goals around this…**
> **—Parent**

Providing Leadership

State officials report that ILP implementation facilitates cross-sector and cross-department collaborations among and within state agencies because of their shared interests associated with college and career readiness.[xiv] These collaborations have provided opportunities to leverage resources to fund implementation because ILPs serve the varied needs within and between a wide range of education, workforce development, and higher education sectors and departments. Indeed, there is some evidence to show that in states where cross-departmental collaboration is lacking, ILPs appear to be more vulnerable. Funding for ILP activities has been cut in some states in which the school counseling office was given sole responsibility for ILP implementation. More concrete information regarding the financing of ILP initiatives would be useful but it is clear few states have been able to provide direct funding for new staff within the schools from state general revenue sources. Most of these initiatives currently are supported by repurposing and blending funds from an array of federal and state sources.

State officials report that "old silos" are breaking down. As a result of engaging in ILPs, a number of units within departments of education (e.g., school counseling, special education, career and technical education, college and career readiness, and school reform) are able to recognize their mutual interests with departments of workforce development that manage apprenticeships, labor market information services, youth and adult training programs, and higher education (e.g., community colleges, various units such as occupational education and non-credit certificate programs).

Three recommendations for state leaders are:

- *Establish a statewide interagency task force to: (a) oversee and support the continuous improvement of the ILP content and processes; (b) generate the design specifications for using universally accessible*

web-based career information systems; (c) identify cross-sector and cross-departmental opportunities to coordinate ILP implementation; (d) promote collaborative professional development initiatives; and, (e) develop guidelines for establishing professional learning community strategies at the district/school level.

- *Develop a multi-agency multi-year plan that identifies potential sources of funding as well as common priorities and specific departmental priorities.*
- *Develop communication and marketing materials that provide local education agencies and other relevant organizations with the tools needed to effectively inform students, teachers, business leaders, and community based organizations about the value and nature of ILPs and ways they can be engaged in ILP processes.*

Setting Standards and Measuring Results

States requiring that all students be provided the opportunity to learn how to make choices for themselves during the preparatory period starting in the middle school years and moving forward are finding positive results for a relatively low cost mandate. Many state officials, district and school educators, families, and students report that when implemented effectively, they *believe* ILPs result in positive school outcomes, more rigorous course taking patterns, and stronger intentions to pursue post-secondary education.[xv] Yet to date states have had only modest success in identifying state accountability measures to document the value added of ILPs. In addition to meeting the needs of state and local policy makers, such measures would help school personnel in targeting the support they provide to students.

> **"I love it. I absolutely love it. I think it's a success in that it's made everyone a stakeholder in where this child is going … the ILP makes the courses and the curriculum the child chooses more relevant. They understand now why they have to take algebra I. They understand now why they have to take biology."**
>
> **—Teacher**

Five recommendations for state leaders are:

- *Create a logic model for ILP implementation that identifies grade-specific ILP activities and suggested measurable outcomes to demonstrate whether students are becoming college and career ready.*
- *Establish an accountability system that measures whether and how engaging in ILP activities supports college and career readiness goals as well as measures the educational, post-secondary matriculation, and employment outcomes identified in the ILP implementation model.*
- *Using web-based career information systems, transfer ILP ePortfolio data into states' longitudinal data systems in order to generate return on investment impact analyses data on post-secondary matriculation/success and employment/wage earnings.*
- *Establish a monitoring process to track the fidelity of ILP implementation as well as provide disaggregated data in order to assess the impact on the sub-groups of students using the categories used in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Include in the monitoring process the methods to assess the potential influence of ILPs on federally mandated performance indicators of major programs such as ESEA including the Race to the Top system change demonstrations, IDEA, the Career and Technical Education Act (CTE), and the Workforce Investment Act (WIA).*
- *Consider creating a multi-state ILP task force that can share in the design specifications and metrics for an accountability system.*

Capacity-Building within Multiple Institutions

Individualized plans are not new; the tool forms the core strategy of federal special education legislation and has been a part of various career education initiatives, such as the Clinton Era School-to-Work initiative and workforce development programs, for some time. The advances in technology that have occurred since these earlier efforts make it feasible for universal implementation of individualized planning for the first time.

Many states initially linked ILP requirements explicitly to strengthening high school graduation requirements with a focus on course selection issues. As states have increasingly focused on college and career readiness goals, the tool has acquired more significance, requiring deeper capacity within districts, schools, and other education and workforce development institutions.

Three capacity development areas were identified in the ILP research studies: (a) using web-based career information systems; (b) developing staff competencies; and, (c) providing evidence-based resources.

Developing and Improving the Use of Web-based Career Information Systems

State level cross-sector and cross-department collaborations appear to be most effective when entities work together to provide access to web-based career information system platforms because these platforms have utility in supporting students, families, and adults across a broad array of complementary interests.[xvi] For example, schools that previously used paper ILPs reported that moving to web-based career information systems with a personalized ePortfolio was a tremendous asset in helping them implement ILPs and helping all staff understand the value of ILPs.

While web-based career information systems that use an ePortfolio as the ILP document are the norm, cross-sector and cross-department collaborations can help to identify the specifications needed to ensure that these systems are being used to their full potential and address the complementary needs of various sectors and departments in the state.

Four recommendations for state leaders are:

- *Consider supporting a state-wide web-based career information system that offers an ePortfolio for all residents of all ages in order to provide lifelong access to career development resources (e.g., self-exploration, career exploration, job search, resumes, career goals, etc.).*
- *Involve multiple state agencies in developing and implementing design specifications of the web-based online career information system in order to ensure that a state contract meets the multiple interests of different sectors and departments and, if individual districts must pay for the system, to provide them with a set of functional requirements they can use in bidding contracts.*
- *Establish quality expectations for these systems by ensuring that web-based vendors: (a) provide a range of valid and accessible interests, skills, and values assessments; (b) focus on helping students develop self-exploration, career exploration, and career planning and management skills rather than on making career choices; and (c) make student ePortfolios accessible to students when they change schools or after they graduate.*
- *Develop methods to allow vendors to link to student information systems for select purposes. By linking to student information systems, vendors will be able to more effectively manage student accounts, create dashboards that track ILP engagement among individual students, and generate reports showing how ILP engagement is related to various student outcomes.*

Developing Staff Competencies

While state officials reported that ILP professional development opportunities were available, all recognized the need for more resources. Identifying the most effective approaches for staffing the overall effort is a challenge requiring new ways of doing business. As might be expected, the success of ILP implementation is dependent on whether the educator leading the activities has "bought-in" to ILPs.[xvii] In the focus groups, more than one family and student lamented when they knew that their educator had not bought into ILPs because other families and students were having positive experiences and they were not. By spreading implementation among a group of educators or among all educators rather than solely relying on school counselors, schools are able to establish buy-in as well as the adult-to-student ratios needed to design and implement quality ILPs.

A second staff capacity issue emerged during the conversations with state and local staff.[xviii] In order to ensure youth are exposed to quality career development opportunities focused on developing self-exploration, career exploration, and career planning and management skills, there is a need to have staff within the schools who are knowledgeable of the evidence-based research related to providing these opportunities.

Three recommendations for state leaders are:

- *Develop in-service training modules for use by districts, schools, and professional associations (e.g. general education, career and technical education, special education teachers, counselors) focused on: (a) using ILP activities in advisory periods; (b) strategies to be a successful advisor/advocate across multiple years; (c) engaging family members; and, (d) strategies to incorporate ILP materials into course work.*
- *Collaborate with workforce development agencies and their professional organizations, state employer associations, and post-secondary workforce development specialists to: (a) identify competencies needed by some staff members in each school to support ILP work; and, (b) develop training modules and professional development opportunities for such staff.*
- *Ensure districts and schools can access ILP materials through cost effective dissemination strategies such as webinars, teleconferences, and online resource directories.*

Providing Evidence-based Resources

Increasingly, states are using evidenced-based research throughout their efforts to improve education; however, ILP related research has not received substantial attention, certainly nothing comparable to state efforts to adopt common core standards. When this ILP study was first launched, the members of the study group identified the lack of materials for use in advisory periods and the classroom as a major challenge. They also expressed frustration about the need for materials that are applicable for each grade level. They did not have the time, resources, or expertise to absorb such a task. In response to this request, NCWD/Youth collected materials for use in the schools and, subsequently, developed a How-to Guide (www.ncwd-youth.info/ilp/how-to-guide) that includes an array of classroom activities and school-wide ILP implementation strategies. The guide is organized by criteria reflecting effective strategies and structured according to the three career development areas identified as essential to college and career readiness. Additional strategies for developing this knowledge base emerged from the 50-state scan of ILP policies and interviews with state officials, several of which focus on including ILP development as a grant requirement for grants issued by various state agencies.

The following recommendations are intended to facilitate the development and dissemination of evidenced-based research to share with the field.

Four recommendations for state leaders are:

- *Establish an online repository of classroom activity materials that incorporate web-based career information systems, and generate documentation of self-exploration, career exploration, and career planning and management skills that can be stored in the ILP ePortfolio.*

- *Develop grade by grade benchmarks to document competencies that students should acquire, including grade-level learning goals and objectives with a built in accountability system that can track and demonstrate the impact of ILPs on academic and post-high school indicators.*
- *Consult with education and workforce development associations and various professional networks to identify evidence-based strategies they are using to promote self-exploration, career exploration, and learning career planning and management skills that could be incorporated into the ILP resources materials.*
- *Collaborate and develop RFPs for local communities applying for state and federal competitive grants, such as Gear Up, service learning, and reentry programs targeted to incarcerated youth, to infuse ILP practices into their work with schools.*

Districts and High Schools Moving Forward

State and district officials and school educators indicate ILPs are being coordinated among a wide range of offices within districts and schools. In addition, districts and high schools are starting to make connections between ILPs and various school improvement initiatives and learning to navigate challenges to implementation.[xix] One such challenge is the competition for precious time and creative energy given that multiple reform activities are taking place concurrently.

Notwithstanding this challenge, educators in districts and schools increasingly perceive the ILP as helping them tie together these varied yet complementary school and student improvement strategies.

The following district and school level recommendations are organized around three main themes: (a) providing leadership; (b) setting standards and measuring results; and, (c) capacity development within districts and schools.

Providing Leadership

Although gaining buy-in for engaging students, families and school staff in ILPs remains a significant challenge, school educators reported that resistant colleagues generally found ILPs to be a valuable experience once they finally engaged in ILP activities.[xx] While the state level recommendations discussed previously (related to communication materials, professional development opportunities, and accountability systems) can provide a framework to facilitate buy-in, it is also important that leaders within districts and high schools clearly communicate that engaging in ILPs is a high priority.

Leadership activities and communication at the district and school level should center around three main themes: (a) establishing whole-school buy-in; (b) including various community stakeholders; and, (c) ensuring that educators are able to effectively implement ILP activities with fidelity and quality.

Five recommendations for districts and schools include:

- *District officials designing ILP policies should create communication materials (drawing on materials prepared by the state where possible) that offer a clear rationale for ILP implementation and how it supports and connects the varied school-level innovation and improvement efforts.*
- *District ILP policies should be built to promote whole-school ILP implementation and a no excuses*

approach to ensure all students, regardless of ability or language status, engage in ILPs.

- *Districts should facilitate community-wide conversations on ILPs that focus on workforce development and college and career readiness to help schools more clearly understand the skills students need to become competitive in the world of work and to encourage businesses to offer work-based learning opportunities.*

"It really is selling public education...the parent leaves feeling really good about what we're doing, good about what their kid's doing, they're more likely to be engaged and involved in the school… and lets them see what we do in our school."

—Teacher

- *District and school teams/task forces responsible for development of ILP implementation plans (including grade level goals and objectives), should include representatives from school counseling, career and technical education, and special education as well as who have responsibility for a range of related issues such as college and career readiness, dropout prevention, reducing the achievement gap, truancy reduction, English Language Learners, literacy and math curriculum innovation, and service-learning/civic engagement.*
- *Districts and schools should establish respective ILP professional learning communities of educators and administrators who are responsible for: (a) articulating a school work-plan for implementing ILPs; (b) identifying the grade level ILP curriculum and activities to be implemented; (c) ensuring that communication materials are provided to families, teachers, and the community; and, (d) ensuring that teachers have access to ILP professional development opportunities.*

Setting Standards and Measuring Results

District and high school officials consistently reported that while they believed that ILPs were having a significant impact on college and career readiness, they lacked efficient and effective ways to collect and use information to document their beliefs.[xxi] As indicated in the recommendations for states, few states have established an accountability system for demonstrating the impact of ILPs on key academic and post-high school indicators. One way that districts and schools can begin to address this issue is by directly engaging web-based career information system vendors to provide data that they can use to evaluate ILP implementation.

Two recommendations for districts and schools include:

- *Consistent with applicable law, districts and schools should allow online career information system ePortfolio vendors to link their system to the district or school student information system and require that they: (a) ensure students maintain only one account; (b) establish a dashboard for school and districts to identify which students have completed district prescribed ILP activities; (c) provide school and district personnel with access to personalized and aggregate reports that compare ILP engagement and performance with concurrent and future academic outcomes; and, (d) provide reports that are disaggregated in ways to ensure that students from diverse racial/ethnic groups, those with lower income levels, students with disabilities, English-language learners, and other at-risk groups are being provided equal opportunities and access.*
- *Districts should participate in community-wide efforts to encourage higher education and workforce development organizations to use similar or complementary web-based career development resources in their service delivery efforts in ways that also provide students with lifetime access to the ePortfolio and career development services.*

Supporting Capacity Development within Districts and Schools

Districts and schools that participated in this research identified three primary challenges to achieving whole-school buy-in for ILPs: lack of access to ongoing professional development, insufficient quality of ILP activities, and lack of designated time to plan ILP activities.[xxii] Teachers and educators want to be effectively prepared to implement new curriculum before delivering classroom lessons.

Three recommendations for districts and schools include:

- *Districts should support school counselors, career and technical education staff, and special education coordinators in obtaining the requisite career development training and skills to effectively support schools in their ILP implementation.*
- *District officials and school leaders should facilitate and promote collaborations with local career development professionals housed in an array of local organizations that can help improve the quality of ILPs by: (a) participating in career development activities in the schools; (b) providing work-based learning experiences, such as job shadowing and industry tours; and, (c) identifying credit worthy community learning opportunities such as internships and service learning.*
- *District officials and school leaders should ensure that staff have adequate planning time for ILP activities.*

Looking Forward: Building Family Capacity to Support Post High School Transitions

Family engagement in career development has been identified as a key driver for optimizing youth development. Interviews with state and local officials indicate that ILPs provide an important opportunity for school staff to engage families but all noted improvements are needed to involve families in the ILP process. This need for greater family engagement in ILPs has been a consistent theme over the course of this research. Focus group participants indicated that families found the ILP experience to be valuable.[xxiii] In fact, families reported feeling a stronger positive regard for the school and developing stronger relationships with their children as a result of the ILP process. Some families even requested guidance on more ILP related activities they could do with their children. They also reported that when their schools shifted from a paper ILP to using web-based career information systems, family engagement became easier as a result of being able to view their students' ePorfolios and access the system at home.

These research findings suggest ILPs may play a pivotal role in engaging families in supporting students'

> **"Yeah, for the student-led conferences. And I mean there's just parents that say, '…I'm proud of my son now', or 'I didn't know that he was capable of this', or 'gosh, that's the first time that my daughter told me that she wanted to do this.'"**
>
> **—Teacher**

"When I signed up, they [school staff] asked us, 'What are you going to do to help us raise your child?' And that's one thing that I think is really positive about this school is I feel like I have a second parent helping me out here. It's like we're on the same track, doing the same thing."

—Parent

achievement of college and career readiness goals. Improving family engagement in the ILP process may enable families to more effectively support their children's career and life goals as they become aware of how these goals are formed from a range of self-exploration and career exploration activities. By learning more about the nature of their children's career goals, families may be able to more effectively evaluate post-high school training and education options and identify the other career planning and management skills their children need to successfully prepare for the world of work. With increased awareness of how grades, course taking patterns, and achievement test scores are connected to successful achievement of career and life goals, families may be able to play a stronger role in supporting their children's college and career readiness development.

Five recommendations for states, districts, and schools include:

- *States, in consultation with parent advocacy groups, should develop family friendly and culturally relevant information about the purpose and processes of ILPs for use by local schools.*
- *District ILP policies should include communication materials that describe how schools can more effectively engage families in ILP activities, including using the ILP to coordinate annual student-led parent-teacher conferences and exit interviews as students graduate from middle and high schools.*
- *Districts should direct web-based career information system vendors to create ways for families to review and comment on their children's ILP activities, even to the point of providing families with their own account in order to engage in parallel ILP experiences.*
- *Districts and schools should work together to supplement ILP activities in ways that engage families directly in completing parallel activities and having conversations with their children about their emerging career and life goals.*
- *Schools should use the ILP to facilitate annual student-led parent-teacher conferences that share the student's career goals, course-taking plans, and post-secondary training/education goals, and explain how they plan to continue developing the student's college and career readiness skills.*

Looking Forward: Improving ILP Implementation for Students with Disabilities

In addition to investigating whether and how ILPs could be considered a promising strategy, throughout the ILP research there was a specific focus on whether and how ILPs were being implemented for students with disabilities. While the state and district/high school recommendations generalize to all students, the following additional recommendations should be considered when designing ILP implementation strategies for students with disabilities.

Recent national data shows positive progress for youth with disabilities; more of them are graduating from high school with standard diplomas and participating in post-secondary education.[xxiv] This data also points out that these positive indicators are strongly related to participation in the general education track.[xxv] It is unclear how much if any of these results can be partly attributed to participation in ILPs without additional study. Some state and district officials report that engaging in ILPs may increase the likelihood that students with disabilities receive a regular diploma and are more effectively prepare for their post-school transition.[xxvi] These perceptions are speculative at this point but worthy of deeper study in order to provide solid evidence that students with disabilities benefit from quality ILP implementation. Multiple examples of relatively new online IEP "how to" materials identify ILPs as a major way to improve post-school outcomes for students.

Ensuring Access and Inclusion for Students with Significant Disabilities

Many states exempt students with significant disabilities from participating in ILPs.[xxvii] There are considerable variations within the states regarding the criteria for which, if any, students will be held exempt from participation and parental sign off is normally required for this to occur. The percentage of students being excluded is unknown, and the lack of a common definition for what constitutes "significantly disabled" adds to the challenge. It is understood that students with significant disabilities represent a low incidence group composed of those with substantive cognitive, emotional, and/or significant physical challenges. Normally these students spend 50 percent or more of the school day in resource rooms and often stay in the public education system through the extended year programs that generally end at age 21.[xxviii] Interviews with state officials indicate that some states use academic assessments at the 8th grade to determine whether a student must participate in the ILP process or whether they will be excluded.

One factor contributing to this exclusion of students with significant disabilities is a lack of accessible career development materials and web-based career information systems technology.[xxix] While remarkable strides have been made over the last decade in improving access to technology for students with disabilities, the move from innovation to application has been slow. Without major accommodations, students with significant disabilities are often unable to complete available assessments needed to engage in self-exploration or career exploration activities. While many may receive work-based learning opportunities, these experiences need to be intentionally designed to support the student's interests and skills in order to effectively prepare them with the career planning and management skills needed for successful post-school transitions.[xxx] The inaccessibility of tools and activities used for self-exploration and career exploration inhibit educators' ability to tailor work-based learning opportunities to the individual student.

Based upon a history of local control, states traditionally have not provided transition-related curricula and instructional materials. However, this tradition is starting to change, evidenced by the implementation of common core state standards in courses required for graduation. States must therefore seize this opportunity to develop accessible and inclusive curricula for this population.

Four state, district, and school recommendations include:

- *Districts and schools should convene a task force focused on designing accommodations for ILP activities and work-based learning opportunities to create quality transition support systems that allow students with significant disabilities to effectively prepare for post-high school education and career opportunities.*
- *Districts and schools should ensure that career development activities and web-based online career information systems adhere to universal design principles to ensure accessibility for all students.*
- *State and districts should reexamine any ILP exclusion policies and promote strategies to ensure that all students have access to ILP activities.*
- *State officials should consider designing demonstration projects for the purpose of evaluating whether students in resource rooms and extended year programs improve their college and career readiness outcomes through participation in ILPs.*

The ILP's Role in Relation to the IEP

Throughout the different phases of the ILP research, regular and special education state and district officials, families, and educators expressed confusion regarding how state-mandated ILPs connect with federally-mandated IEPs.[xxxi] While both IEPs and ILPs personalize the education process, the key differences are: (a) ILPs engage students with disabilities and their families in transition planning starting well before IDEA's age 16 requirement; and, (b) ILPs engage students in transition planning in a more in-depth fashion than is often possible with a single annual IEP meeting. Starting transition planning in high school is seen by many as "too late" to effectively support students with disabilities with navigating the various support systems and opportunities needed to make a successful transition.[xxxii]

Special education officials and educators who perceived ILPs as valuable reported that ILPs contribute to making IEP meetings more efficient and improved the overall quality of the IEP meetings. The quality was improved because students and their families were able to be stronger advocates for ensuring that academic accommodations were in place to support the course plans identified in the ILP that align with their career goals. Students and families were also able to advocate for work-based learning opportunities that help them develop the employability skills needed to support their desired career and life goals. Recently, some states have posted affirmative policy language that clearly articulates the value of ILPs in supporting the IEP process. A growing number of states have developed multiple technical assistance tools for use in districts and schools to assist IEP teams in strategically embedding in ILP plans directly into the IEP processes and to create alignment between the two plans. Such efforts merit emulation and expansion in other states.

Two recommendations for states are:

- *State education officials should consult with local special educators and family advocacy organizations to identify potential barriers that may impede some students' successful participation in ILPs (e.g. assessment instruments to determine eligibility to participate, capacity to access materials required to develop ePortfolios, or limiting their access to work-based learning opportunities). They should develop and implement a set of strategies to eliminate such impediments.*
- *States should develop tools to assist districts and schools to promote coordination and alignment between ILP and IEP plans and processes. The technical assistance tools should include examples of how to ensure ILP generated materials are accessible and strategies for building upon ILP generated career goals, course taking plans, and career planning and management goals to achieve the IEP post-school outcome goals.*

Looking Forward: Recommendations for National Organizations

This nation has a rich history of non-governmental organizations performing roles that in many other countries are reserved for the national/federal government. In the last few decades, there has been a proliferation of these organizations. The lessons garnered from the ILP research studies repeatedly demonstrate the reliance of state and local officials and individual staff on membership organizations and professional organizations. NCWD/Youth believes various national organizations can provide critical support to help address the challenges identified in this work.

The recommendations that follow include a strategy observed in the states; that is, reliance on collaborations with others. These recommendations build upon state and local policy makers' recognition that working through national organizations is a more efficient and effective way to develop shared goals on issues that cross state lines.

Improving Technology

Improved access to and use of technology is of critical importance for multiple reasons well documented in the school, district and state interviews. In a few schools, the basic issue of access to computers was noted and access by students with disabilities remains a widespread and problematic issue. There is keen awareness in states and districts that solutions must be found to improve the technical and accessibility issues surrounding web-based platforms.

To facilitate this improvement, associations such as the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), the National Association of State Boards of Educations (NASBE), and the National Association of Chief Information Officers (NACIO) should consult with specialty organizations such as: (a) the Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST) to provide expertise in developing universal design systems; (b) Rehabilitation Engineering Society of North America (RESNA) and the World Wide Web Consortium Accessibility Group (WCAG) to support access to and use of assistive technology for students with disabilities; (c) the Alliance of Career Resource Professionals (ACRP) to assist in the design of career information systems; and, (d) the Family Center on Technology and Disability (FCTD), to name just a few. These organizations can assist in the development of standards for ePortfolios and direct a myriad of stakeholders toward information and resources.

Measuring Success

- *CCSSO is encouraged to build upon its work of supporting states on a range of college and career readiness accountability issues by establishing a task force of state officials with substantial experience in implementing ILPs to recommend voluntary common measures and metrics to track the value added role of ILPs in the mix of strategies to achieve college and career ready graduates. Consultation with Achieve, the National Association of State Directors of Career Technical Education Consortium (NASDCTEC), the National Career Development Association (NCDA), the American Counseling Association (ACA), the Council for Exceptional Children's Division of Career Development and Transition (CEC/DCDT), and other national associations can all inform the development of these measures and metrics.*

Providing Standards of Practice and Promoting Professional Competencies

- *Accreditation agencies for schools and colleges should consider how to ensure evaluation standards include accountability for creating personalized learning opportunities that allow all students to participate in ILP activities.*
- *Combined efforts from national associations such as ACA, NCDA, National Association of Workforce Development Professionals (NAWDP), National Rehabilitation Association (NRA), and university training programs could serve to expand and articulate a range of quality career development training and professional development offerings at introductory and advanced levels targeted to a wide range professionals including school counselors, career and technical education staff, special and general education teachers as well as professionals in higher education and America's career centers (e.g., NCDA's Career Development Facilitator program).*
- *Professional organizations involved in career development should consider evaluating guidelines for professional standards to ensure that career development professionals are able to support youth and adults in a wide range of self-exploration, career exploration, and career planning and management activities throughout the lifespan as well as to effectively use web-based career resources to build and maintain users' ILPs/ePortfolios.*

Recommendations for Disability-Focused Organizations

An array of organizations such as the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE), the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), TASH, the Collaboration to Promote Self Determination (CPSD), the network of parent information centers, and other organizations concerned with the transition of youth with disabilities are encouraged to review this research and consider how the findings can inform strategies to improve or modify transition planning processes and tools such as the IEP and the Summary of Performance (SOP) documents. In fact, some of

these organizations are uniquely positioned to assure parent engagement and assist in addressing issues raised in this research around the involvement of students with significant disabilities in the ILP process.

The following three recommendations are offered:

- *Disability organizations are encouraged to review and monitor what is happening nationally and within individual states regarding the experiences of youth with disabilities who have ILPs so that they can understand and access their potential to improve career development opportunities. Through print material, conferences, webcasts, etc. they can also highlight the importance of family engagement to the ILP process and how the ILP is adding value to the IEP/ITP, etc.*
- *Organizations that focus on youth with the most significant disabilities are encouraged to work with their local chapters to become knowledgeable about what is happening in their local schools regarding ILPs and to work to ensure the inclusion of these students.*
- *Disability advocacy groups should consider how lessons learned from this research study can inform strategies to improve or modify transition planning processes and tools such as the IEP, transition plan, and SOP.*

Looking Forward: Recommendations for the Federal Government

Throughout the overall ILP study, no state expressed an interest in ILPs becoming a requirement of federal legislation for all students. However, state officials did recognize the important role that the Federal Government could play in supporting innovation and capacity development to enhance state efforts and in promoting ILPs for the multiple array of targeted populations (e.g. disconnected youth, court-involved youth, foster youth, those receiving Social Security disability services). Having common definitions, evidence-based research, and greater coordination across Federal programs would also be beneficial. The recommendations that follow are geared toward strengthening the focus on career development through Federal activities.

A recent GAO report has recommended that the Departments of Education, Labor, Health and Human Services, the Social Security Administration, and other agencies work collaboratively to improve outcomes of transition-age youth.[xxxiii] ***As they move forward in this effort, they may wish to consider the following four recommendations:***

- *Federal agencies should consider including language specifically authorizing career development activities as an allowable activity in relevant Federal legislation guiding workforce development (e.g. WIA, including VR) and education (ESEA, IDEA, Higher Education Act, Perkins, etc.). These Federal statues should be aligned, particularly related to common definitions, terms, and age eligibility requirements.*
- *Federal agencies that support research should consider establishing research priorities to conduct: (a) randomized efficacy studies of ILPs with students in general and special education to evaluate whether and how ILPs are effective in supporting academic performance, reducing dropouts, promoting matriculation into higher education, and increasing college and career readiness outcomes in a variety of settings; (b) a longitudinal study of ILPs to determine whether quality ILPs are associated with key secondary, post-secondary, and labor-related outcomes; (c) a study on how and whether ILPs can support students' exploration and matriculation into undergraduate STEM majors; and, (d) a study on how and whether engaging in ILPs promotes optimal health by engaging students in career planning and management behaviors that lead to improving career and life success.*
- *Federal agencies could support state efforts through the development of technology based education, professional development, and web-based services that promote individualized services (including online courses, testing, and assessment tools), the development of effective practices, and the enforcement of universal access standards.*
- *Federal agencies with responsibility for supporting programs and services for transition-age youth should consider: (a) conducting an analysis of the various agencies' materials focused on promoting college and career ready young adults including those developed by national and regional technical assistance centers; (b) sharing with their constituencies, through guidance letters and information bulletins, strategies to promote individualized services that promote college and career ready young adults; (c) developing a range of demonstration projects designed to improve the transition planning processes, including the use of well constructed ILPs in tandem with the formal IEP; and, (d) infusing quality career development strategies into college and university pre-service and in-service education and training programs.*

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NCWD/Youth is a national technical assistance center housed at the Institute for Educational Leadership's (IEL) Center for Workforce Development (CWD). NCWD/Youth assists state and local workforce development systems to better serve all youth, including youth with disabilities and other disconnected youth. NCWD/Youth partners in the ILP R & D Project include:

IEL's Center for Workforce Development (CWD): IEL/CWD helps public and private sector leaders promote career readiness and successful transitions to adulthood for all youth (with a special focus on youth with disabilities and other disconnected youth) by increasing the capacity of and connections among all stakeholders in the workforce development system. IEL/CWD is the lead and responsible for all aspects of the ILP R & D project.

Boston University: V. Scott Solberg, Ph D., Associate Dean for Research, serves as the principal investigator for a research study analyzing the nature of Individualized Learning Plans as a promising school practice. This project includes data collection and analysis as well as providing technical assistance to 14 schools nationally who were selected to participate in this longitudinal study.

University of Wisconsin-Madison's Center on Education and Work (CEW): CEW played a strong role in designing and implementing the research study centered on the effects of schools instituting Individualized Learning Plans. CEW also served as the lead on data collection and analysis as well as provided technical assistance support to project schools.

University of Minnesota, Institute on Community Integration (ICI): ICI played a key role in developing state-level research and providing ongoing technical assistance to project schools.

PACER Center: *PACER* Center provides ongoing assistance to the project, particularly school personnel, around family involvement and engagement.

Social Dynamics, LLC: An independent research partner on the ILP R & D Project, Social Dynamics, LLC reviews state-level ILP policy, and collects and analyzes data from multiple stakeholders, including students, parents, teachers, and administrators at the school, district, and state levels. Social Dynamics, LLC works to ensure that the results of this research are presented in such a way as to inform both practice and policy.

Altarum Institute: A non-profit health care research firm, Altarum Institute has conducted focus groups and surveys to further understanding of the attitudes and roles of parents and school personnel in the implementation of Individualized Learning Plans in the project schools. A particular focus of this research has been to uncover differences in approaches and perceptions of parents and school personnel toward all students and students with disabilities.

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Related Resources

Individualized Learning Plans How-to Guide

Promoting quality individualized learning plans: A "how to" guide focused on the high school years. (2012). By J. Wills, V. S. Solberg, & D. Osman, National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth. Available online: http://www.ncwd-youth.info/ilp/how-to-guide

This guide is designed for schools, educators, and other professionals who assist youth with college and career readiness and transition planning. This guide was developed in response to feedback from schools indicating a need for curriculum and implementation guidelines to support whole-school buy-in for implementing individualized learning plans (ILPs). The career development activities and resources in this guide are also useful for youth service professionals in the workforce development system.

Journal Articles

Quality learning experiences, self-determination, and academic success: A path analytic study among youth with disabilities. (2012). By V. S. Solberg, K. A. Howard, S. L. Gresham, & E. Carter published in *Career Development & Transition for Exceptional Individuals, 35* (2), 85-96.

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The National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth (NCWD/Youth) is composed of partners with expertise in disability, education, employment, and workforce development issues. NCWD/Youth is housed at the Institute for Educational Leadership in Washington, DC. NCWD/Youth is charged with assisting state and local workforce development systems to integrate youth with disabilities into their service strategies. This Policy Brief was written by V. Scott Solberg, Joan Wills, and Mindy Larson.

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