
Project Overview
Refinements in Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1990 gradually shaped the focus of individual education plans (IEPs) from a document and process for record keeping to a comprehensive education strategy to set high standards, measure student outcomes (Thompson, Thurlow & Whetstone, 2001) and as a method of supporting students with disabilities to develop transition plans to active participation in work and college (Benz, Yovanoff, & Doren, 1997; Benz, Lindstrom & Yovanoff, 2000; Eisenman, 2000).

Concurrent efforts to improve the standard of education by a number of national and state commissions initiated middle and high school reforms that emphasized the movement towards smaller and personalized learning environment. The introduction of individual learning plan, ILP, was among the various education initiatives recommended by National Association of Secondary School Principals’ (NASSP, 1996) in the Breaking Ranks report. ILP becomes a crucial education strategy for schools to build learning climates that are conducive for learning and an important tool for School Advisory to build relationships between teachers and students (NASSP, 2004).

A recent report by the Education Commission of the States (2007) indicated that ILPs are being legislatively mandated in a least 20 states. To date, however, there has been no research looking into whether ILPs when implemented effectively are having a beneficial impact in school performance or in preparing students to make effective post-secondary transitions. ILP is an important document and process in supporting the movement toward student-centered learning. Learning plans are usually created by students under close advisory from a significant and caring adult mentors in school who follow their progress and guides their development over several years with a strong intention in bridging the relevance of knowledge to their learning interest. Students engage themselves in their planned strategic actions to guide their learning experience in high school and eventually toward active participation in work and college (DiMartino and Clarke, 2008). The planning process is usually developmental in nature and trains students to take responsibility and exercise personal agency for their own education. In many ways, ILPs shared common objectives and intentions with Individual Education Plans (IEPs) by: 1) Individualizing learning for students, 2) preparing students to transit effectively after secondary schools and 3) striving toward high standard in learning and student outcome, the design of ILP is modeled closely after IEP.

What is missing is a clear understanding of whether ILPs are impacting student development, academic achievement and post-secondary transitions. The Center on Education and Work at the
University of Wisconsin – Madison is working with the Institute of Educational Leadership to engage in a series of research studies to evaluate the effectiveness of ILPs and to evaluate the extent to which students with disabilities and students without disabilities achieved equitable access to the ILP processes and ILP experiences of comparable quality. Additional research questions include examination of the interactive effects of ILPs on IEPs and an examination of post-high school outcomes.

Using the Education Commission of the States (2007) report, the research project began with a review of states that mandate ILPs. The purpose of this research was to identify promising state practices by reviewing available language and interviewing state-level administrators who were responsible for overseeing ILP implementation. Four states were selected to participate in the next phase of research based on the quality of the policies that were found. These states include: Louisiana, New Mexico, South Carolina and Washington. These states were selected in consultation with ODEP following a review of state policies and interviews with state officials. States were selected based on the unique features of their ILP policy framework, and the prospects for identifying and documenting promising practices. Once states were selected, State education or workforce development agency leaders nominated districts and the districts, in turn, nominated high schools to participate in the study.

Based on recommendations from state and district administrators, 15 schools were solicited and agreed to participate in a research study and technical assistance related to ILPs. In Fall 2008, an Institute was convened with teams from each school in New Orleans as a kick-off for the project. Each team consisted of a school administrator, two to three teachers and a school counselor. The Fall Institute introduced school teams to the goals of the study and a suite of useful ILP resources, and assessed their technical assistance needs for advancing local ILP practices and quality.

In Spring 2009, schools participated in two research studies. One was an online survey completed by students. The survey included quantitative questions about a number of resilience/self-determination skills, exposure to quality learning environments and ILP activities. The survey also included open-ended questions about their career decision-making patterns. The second data collection activity engaged groups of parents, educators, and students in role-centric focus groups at each school. A total of 53, one-hour focus groups were completed in the 15 schools.

Presently, a new data collection of 10th grade students is underway for Spring 2010 and a one-year post-high school follow-up of graduating seniors is being prepared for data collection in Summer 2010.

A number of research studies are underway and some of the key findings are described below. In addition, possibilities for new questions are emerging as data is being analyzed, and the importance of conducting a longitudinal follow-up continues to be a critical opportunity.
Research Completed
At present, a number of manuscripts are under development and currently five are in draft form for review and comment. For this briefing, additional research data from three studies in preparation will be provided to compare students with disabilities with students without disabilities.

1. The Nature and Use of Individual Learning Plans as an Effective Career Intervention Strategy (Draft). This paper defines ILPs and describes the ways in which they could serve as an effective strategic planning tool.

2. The Effectiveness of Individualized Learning Plans in Supporting Preparation for Making Successful Post-Secondary Transitions: Parent, Educator and Student Perspectives (Draft). This study reports on the positive response to ILPs from focus groups conducted with parents, educators and students.

3. The Impact of Quality Learning Experiences on Self-Determination Skills: Promoting Transition Readiness Among Students with Disabilities (Draft). This study tests a hypothesized path model that links exposure to quality learning environments with a number of post-secondary transition readiness skills.

   a. Additional Research Data: Comparison with path model from general student population.

   b. Additional Research Data: Comparison of Mean Differences in transition readiness skills for students with and without disabilities.

4. Developing Transition Readiness Skills for Students with Disabilities: Identifying What Quality Learning Experiences Promote Which Self-Determination Indicators (Draft). This study evaluates the role of activities identified in the Guideposts for Success in relation to their relative impact on a number of critical post-secondary transition readiness skills.


5. Individual Learning and Graduation Plan Policies in Four States: Examining Federal-State Policy Leverage Points (Draft). This paper compares and contrasts ILP policies in four states and reports on the wide range of policy variation. The alignment of federal education and workforce development policies with State learning plan policies is also examined.

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