Preparing students for a bright future: Individual learning plans

Individual learning plans (ILPs) are both a process and a tool to help students define their college and career goals and choose middle or high school courses to support these goals.[1] ILPs may contain several components to describe students' progress toward their goals, including planned class schedules, personal reflections, strengths assessments, career information, and service learning goals and achievements.[2] Developing an ILP also allows students to actively plan their coursework and learning goals, ultimately developing their metacognitive and reflective skills.[3] With support and ongoing discussions with parents, family members, teachers, and guidance counselors, students discover more about their own ambitions, explore postsecondary options of interest, choose classes that build toward college and career goals, and adjust their planned coursework as their goals and aspirations change.

Although there currently is no rigorous evidence about the direct outcomes of the complete ILP model, such as whether ILPs help students find employment or attain a postsecondary degree, research indicates that components of ILP practices show promise to help students prepare for college and careers.[4]

The following is a sampling of practices associated with ILPs that studies have linked to improved student academic performance, engagement, and metacognition.

> Developing an individual learning plan allows students to actively plan their coursework and learning goals, ultimately developing their metacognitive and reflective skills.[3]

Practices that can support student success

Guidance counseling specific to postsecondary planning

Guidance counseling is a key part of developing and adjusting ILPs. The research base on the topic is still developing, but one study indicated that **students who participate in at least one guidance counseling session were more likely to enroll in postsecondary education** than their peers.[3] Another study indicates that this outcome was particularly true for students from low-income backgrounds, who are **nearly twice as likely** to attend college if they attend guidance counseling sessions during high school.[5]

Transition plans to support students with special needs

Many features of ILPs may help students with special needs maximize their high school experience and postsecondary options:[6]

▸ Identifying college and career goals that map to the student's unique needs and aspirations

▸ Bridging a student's individualized education program (IEP), or the student's plan for K–12 special education services, with postsecondary goals

▸ Adjusting the IEP as needed

▸ Identifying meaningful opportunities for the student to develop college- and career-ready skills

▸ Monitoring a student's progress and adjusting instruction accordingly

Personalized learning experiences to increase student engagement

ILPs allow students to choose coursework that aligns with their postsecondary goals. Research indicates that rigorous coursework and career learning opportunities tailored to a student's particular interests **are promising levers to increase student engagement**.[7,8,9] In turn, higher student engagement is correlated with higher student learning and academic achievement.[10,11]

The following are some examples of personalized learning experiences that may help students prepare for college and careers:[5]

- ▸ Community-based experiences in which students work at local businesses
- ▸ Flexible class schedules to allow more time to focus on relevant coursework
- ▸ School-to-work internships that provide a smooth entry into a career
- ▸ Service learning opportunities, either in the local community or as field trips to support other communities

Related REL resources

Want to learn more? Check out these resources from the REL network:

Visit the Southwest College and Career Readiness Research Partnership page to learn more about REL Southwest's work supporting postsecondary readiness.

Check out REL Midwest's summary of Minnesota district plans under the World's Best Workforce initiative, including ILPs.

Read REL Southwest's Ask A REL reference desk response on effective strategies to implement ILPs.

Browse REL Appalachia's report on the effects of Kentucky Virtual School instruction on grade 9 math achievement. Kentucky Virtual School is one option that students can use in their ILPs.

Watch REL Southwest's archived webinar on how states can support the use of ILPs.

Read REL Southwest's blog post to learn more about the effects of specific practices associated with implementing ILPs.

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