

Families and College and Career Readiness: What Schools Can Do to Engage Families in the Individualized Learning Plan (ILP) Process

Introduction

Families play an important role in helping their youth become college and career ready. Based on a number of research studies, literature reviews, and program evaluations, one can conclude that active family engagement supports the positive academic, career and life outcomes for youth with and without disabilities.¹ Families' aspirations and expectations have been shown to directly affect students' aspirations and expectations of themselves and their actual achievements.² High parental expectations for student success and achievement have been found to be the most significant influence on high school seniors' achievement, including completion of high school credits needed for graduation.³ Included among the positive outcomes linked to family involvement are improved achievement test results, decreased risk of dropping out, improved attendance, improved student behavior, higher grades, higher grade point average, greater commitment to schoolwork, and improved attitude toward school. Further, studies have shown that family involvement is linked to higher rates of college enrollment.⁴

Individualized Learning Plans (ILPs) are a relatively new strategy being used by schools in a number of states to enable students to document their course taking and postsecondary plans and ensure these plans are aligned to their career goals. ILPs are also used to document the college and career readiness skills that the student has developed, and are more generally understood as a career development

This Information Brief is designed to assist educators in working with parents and family members to facilitate students' career development through the use of individualized college and career planning tools. This brief discusses families' perceptions of whether and how they were engaged in schools' implementation of Individualized Learning Plans and describes suggestions from families of youth with and without disabilities about actions schools can take to improve family engagement in the ILP process.

strategy that enables youth to develop self-exploration, career exploration, and career planning and management skills. As a result of engaging in these processes, ILPs are believed to result in youth understanding the relevance of how their school and out-of-school learning opportunities prepare them to pursue postsecondary degree training and degree programs as well as enter desired careers and occupations.⁵ Family engagement is a critical part to the success of ILPs.

This brief discusses families' perceptions of whether and how they were engaged in schools' implementation of ILPs, and describes suggestions from families of youth with and without disabilities about actions schools can take to improve family engagement in the ILP process. The information was derived from a web-based review of relevant literature as well as

focus groups and surveys involving 1,400 parents of youth with and without disabilities and 526 school personnel in ten schools across four states⁶ as part of a larger five year study sponsored by the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP).⁷ The overall purpose of this larger study was to examine whether ILPs were a promising college and career readiness practice for all youth and whether and how youth with disabilities are participating in these efforts.

Some of the characteristics of quality ILP implementation include the following:⁸

- Processes are provided for students to identify and define their own career-related skills and interests through access to assessment and related self-exploration activities;
- Academic and postsecondary plans for each student are developed with input from students, family members, and school staff;
- Individual and/or group advisory opportunities or sessions are provided (often through school counseling programs and increasingly by teacher mentors in collaboration with school counseling, special education, and career and technical education staff);
- Student-led ILP conferences or presentations are scheduled to provide an opportunity for students to formally share the results of their exploration activities and future academic and career plans with family members and others;
- Plans are used to help students select courses of study that align with their postsecondary goals;
- Exposure is provided to college and work-based learning experiences (ranging from college visits to job shadowing to internships, etc.);
- ePortfolios are developed to provide students with a way to document their academic, extracurricular, work-related, and personal experiences and achievements; and

- Regular opportunities are provided to reevaluate and update the students ILP.

ILPs have recently become an important component of state driven efforts to ensure all youth graduate with the college and career readiness skills needed to successfully pursue a training program, two-year, or four-year college degree. Across the country, at least 37 states and the District of Columbia encourage the use of ILPs; 21 have passed legislation requiring that schools use an individualized planning process to help students successfully transition from school to postsecondary education and employment. While the names and scope of the plans vary by state (e.g., the Next Step Plan in New Mexico, the Individualized Graduation Plan in both Louisiana and South Carolina, and the Student Success Plan (SSP) in Delaware). For additional information about the status of ILP implementation across the U.S., see the Interactive Policy Map, www.dol.gov/odep/ilp/map/#TextOnly.

ILPs typically involve a planning and monitoring tool and process that provides opportunities for students to identify postsecondary goals, explore college and career options, and select courses that will help them reach their postsecondary goals. The push for ILPs has come about in large part due to the growing recognition of the need for a more individualized and personalized approach to education and career planning to address concerns about high dropout rates, low achievement scores, and a lack of college and career readiness among high school students in this country.⁹

Findings From Our Research

Families Perceive ILPs as Valuable and Important

Survey responses from families indicated that ILPs were perceived as valuable in helping their children become college and career ready and that both they and their child were actively involved in the ILP process. Focus group discussions further amplified

the positive attitudes families maintained about ILPs. One family member stated that “[This school] really seems focused on launching adults as opposed to getting through a curriculum.”

ILPs Help Families Start the Conversation about their Child’s Future

Families felt that one of the most valuable things about the ILP process was that it allowed them to begin a conversation with their children about their future. They noted that becoming involved provided a way for them to advocate for their child’s career-related interests, that goal setting was the primary way that the ILPs were truly individualized, and that their child became more engaged in their plans and more committed to achieving them.

School Personnel Value Having Families Involved

In all of the schools included in the study, school personnel pointed out the importance of families in the ILP process—repeatedly asking for more involvement. School personnel also reported that the popularity and success of the ILP program had increased each year, and that a greater number of families sought more information on the ILP process and seemed more aware and engaged in the ILP process over time. Increased family involvement was also seen as a way to help alleviate one of the central challenges identified by both families and school personnel—the lack of school personnel’s time to spend with students to support them in their ILP planning.

Family Involvement Matters

Families and school personnel involved in the study both felt that the level of family involvement heavily

influenced the degree to which students were invested in planning and setting goals for the future.¹⁰ In schools using an ILP approach, research has shown that among all students, where family support was provided to help them maintain high expectations and engagement in career and transition planning, students tended to report higher career search self-efficacy expectations, higher academic self-efficacy, stronger connections with peers, lower academic stress, and lower psychological and emotional distress.¹¹

Recommendations to Improve Family Involvement in ILPs

What follows are recommendations made by families during the study about what needs to be done to ensure family involvement in the ILP process, and related actions schools can take to enhance their participation.

Families Want Tailored Communication—Neither too Much or Too little

Families indicated they received both too many and too few communications. On one hand, many families commented that through the ILP process, their child’s school became more of an “an open house.” As one parent noted, “One of the things I have enjoyed the most is the communication via email. Providing information regarding scholarships, test dates, college visitations ... Very helpful!” However, others stated that at times they felt bombarded with communications from the school and unable to discern what was most important.

To improve communication with families regarding ILPs, schools can

- Ensure that their school-wide ILP plan includes a component that addresses communicating

and engaging parents.

- Ensure that families receive information tailored to their child’s situation and, at a very minimum, to their grade level.
- Allow families to select the topics and mode of communication they prefer; offer a variety of channels and degrees of frequency (i.e., e-mail, phone, text, and postal service).
- Provide all information with alternative language translations.
- Facilitate annual student led parent/teacher conferences where the student shares his/her course taking plans, and postsecondary training/educational goals, and the school explains how it will support the student in achieving his or her college and career readiness goals.

Families Want to Track Their Child’s ILP Progress on an Ongoing Basis in Real Time

While families were typically aware that an ILP process was being used in their child’s school, few knew what the process consisted of and even fewer knew where their child was in the process. They expressed a need for a more real-time method to help them track their child’s progress and be involved in the ILP process so they do not feel “out of the loop.” This was particularly so in the case of families of youth with disabilities.

To keep families in the loop on their child’s progress, schools can

- Provide families with a syllabus outlining, by grade level, the ILP activities that students will be doing, as well as ideas on how families can support these activities.
- Offer more meetings to discuss ILPs throughout the process.
- Offer access to free or fee-based online career

information systems to help students and families understand the ILP process and help families monitor their child’s progress (see resources in Section 5).

- Supplement these systems with a component on their own online websites and information systems where student ILPs and progress can be posted with access and training available to families.

“We get a lot of emails from the district and the school on things other than advisory, so sometimes we feel bombarded . . . [Having] an outline or a year-long plan, like: ‘Here’s where your kid’s going to go in advisory and here are some key things that you can talk to them about or support them on’—that would be cool.”

Families Want a Broader, Clearer, Ongoing Role in the ILP Process

While the majority of families responding to the ILP survey indicated that they were involved in the ILP process, some felt that their role should be broader, clearer, and ongoing. In addition, they felt that too often once the ILP was developed it was not altered even when their child’s interests and aspirations changed as they became aware of more options and progressed through school. Families in the study also felt that schools relied too heavily on career assessments alone to identify potential career options and ILP goals for students. This was particularly true of families of youth with disabilities, who felt that relying solely on these assessments sometimes led to their children’s placement in courses and career paths that did not adequately account for their children’s interests, needs, and abilities.

Their suggestions centered on ways they could offer insight into their children’s interests, aspirations, and needs; help their children fully explore the many

paths open to them; and provide assistance to them in finding and gaining the resources needed to support their further education and career goals.

“And our student-led conference was like speed dating. So, she had us in there, it was by ourselves, it wasn’t like the open conference, which was truly very much like speed dating, . . . But it was really hard to talk to his advisor regarding [student name], because she didn’t even know him.”

To provide families with a broader, clearer, and ongoing role, schools can

- Involve families from the beginning of the ILP process. While career assessment tools can be very helpful, family members generally know their children very well and can play a critical role by sharing their understanding of their child’s strengths, interests, and abilities. It is also important, however, to ensure that all families understand the full scope of options available to their youth, and in the case of families of youth with disabilities, that their opinions not be limited by outdated perceptions as to what people with disabilities can do.
- Provide families with the support they need to expand what schools are able to offer directly. If provided with resources and information, families can help with such things as arranging on-site visits to potential schools, helping their children stay abreast of important admissions requirements, and helping their children find opportunities for job exploration and work-based learning experiences such as internships and job shadows.
- Support the formation of career interest groups for families and students to facilitate the sharing of information and resources among families with common interests.
- Engage families in completing parallel activities

to those occurring in the school and in having ongoing conversations with their children about their emerging career interests and goals.

Families Want Their Children to Have More Opportunities to Learn Occupational Skills in Real-Life Settings

Families and school personnel often noted their desire for more opportunities for students to learn occupational skills through exposure to real work experiences and to receive training to improve their job-seeking skills.

To provide students with more opportunities to learn occupational skills, schools can

- Partner with businesses within their communities to provide students with more opportunities for job shadowing, internships and other work-based experiences.
- Partner with community organizations to provide entrepreneurship and/or service learning opportunities during or after school.
- Partner with local American Job Centers to utilize their connections with employers to provide work-based learning experiences for students.

Families Want Students to Have Access to and Support for Pursuing Postsecondary and Career Options That Take Less than Four Years

Some families expressed concern that students who might find career options requiring less than a four-year degree to be viable and appropriate paths may not receive adequate attention and support because secondary schools are geared toward preparing

youth for careers primarily through enrollment in a traditional four-year college program.

To ensure students are supported in pursuing a continuum of postsecondary education and career options, schools can

- Offer all students information on the full range of vocational and educational options that provide career preparation through varying levels and types of further education and training.
- Ensure that community colleges, technical schools, apprenticeship providers and trade organizations are included in career and college fairs.
- Support students and families in exploring two-year colleges, technical colleges, and apprenticeships as part of the ILP process, depending on the youth's desired career path.
- Ensure that all students are informed about the disability services and accommodations process at four-year and two-year colleges, technical schools, and apprenticeship programs.

“The kids that we get [with disabilities] have never been spoken to about college even being an option, or guided as to how they get through it. So when they dive into that, all of a sudden, it’s kind of ‘Oh, I can do that? Really?’ The whole concept of their future changes.”

Families Want Their Child to Have Opportunities to Develop Basic Skills Needed for Success

As part of the ILP process, families also tended to become more aware of their children's need to acquire additional skills for future success that may not be provided through the core school curriculum.

Families frequently mentioned the need for youth to become self-determined and develop stronger life management and soft skills to prepare them with the competencies needed for college and the workplace. Helping youth gain essential skills for living on their own was also identified as a critical need.

To assist youth in developing self-determination, life management, and soft skills, schools can

- Provide opportunities for students to learn about soft skills, such as having a good work ethic, effective communication, punctuality, self-discipline, problem solving, organizational skills, teamwork, and a willingness to accept supervision. The publication, [*Skills to Pay the Bills: Mastering Soft Skills for Workplace Success*](#) from the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy, includes 30 specific soft skill activities for use by instructors and counselors organized around five broad work-readiness categories.
- Provide youth with opportunities to take on leadership roles; this can involve using the ILP as the subject matter for establishing annual student-led parent-teacher conferences and senior exit interviews with community leaders. For youth with disabilities, the ILP can provide the foundation for helping youth and families become stronger advocates during the annual IEP meeting.
- Provide opportunities for youth to serve as peer mentors to other youth and opportunities to connect with adult and more experienced peer mentors who can provide guidance and support in the areas of self-advocacy and career development.
- Incorporate a range of work-based learning opportunities into ILP activities to provide critical exposure to work environments and access to adults and peers in formal and informal settings.
- Incorporate financial literacy development into ILP activities to help students transform

abstract theories and ideas about economics into practical life and career skills.

- Inform students and families about classes and after school clubs and activities where students can learn about nutrition, cooking, doing laundry, and other important life skills.
- Design high-quality learning environments that strive to help students realize their true potential.¹² Based on over 30 years of research, the [Guideposts for Success](#) identify a number of empirically supported learning experiences that all students should be offered to prepare them for making successful postsecondary transitions.¹³
- Provide all students with instruction and skills development related to decision making, problem solving, goal setting and attainment, self-advocacy, self-efficacy, self-awareness and understanding, self-observation, evaluation, and reinforcement to develop self-determination. Research suggests that becoming more self-determined during high school may be of particular importance in the transition success of youth with disabilities.
- Collaborate with families to identify places outside of school where students can learn these types of skills.

“I think focusing more on study skills, money management, time management, leadership skills, etc., would be better than focusing on specific classes for a career that most students will never go into . . . Why not give them skills and core values that will help them succeed in ANY career.”

Specific Recommendations to Improve Family Involvement in ILPs by Families of Youth with Disabilities

Both ILPs and Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) share common objectives, including providing individualized learning supports, promoting high standards for learning, and providing postsecondary transition guidance. However, unlike ILPs, IEPs are federally mandated for youth with disabilities who meet the criteria contained in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and are determined to be in need of Special Education services.¹⁴ ILPs extend individualized, personalized planning opportunities to all students.

Families of Youth with Disabilities Want the ILP and IEP Processes To Be Better Coordinated and Want Their Youth to Have More Career Exploration Options and Work-Based Learning Opportunities

Survey and focus group responses indicated that families of youth with disabilities tended to be less involved with and less positive about ILPs than the parent of youth without disabilities. The largest discrepancy was found in relation to whether families perceived their child as taking a leadership role in the ILP process with only 32% of the families of youth with disabilities answering affirmatively compared with 60% for families of youth without disabilities. Focus group discussions indicated that families perceived ILPs and IEPs as two completely separate and unrelated documents and did not understand how ILPs and IEPs support one another in preparing youth to become transition-ready. Families in the four states often indicated that their student’s ILP advisor was not present at their IEP planning meeting, and they felt they should be so they were aware of the

student's IEP when advising them on their future. School personnel also tended to feel that in many cases ILP advisors appeared to be overly reliant on Special Education teachers to advocate for the post-secondary career and education needs of students with disabilities.

Families of youth with disabilities also generally felt that their children were less likely to participate in certain types of career-related activities due to inaccessibility of some of the activities which placed a heavy emphasis on reading and internet-based exploration. Moreover, families felt that their youth had fewer options for worked-based learning, and were more likely to be engaged in work-based experiences that were misaligned with their interests.

“My daughter wants to take photography and art . . . and the career counselor that helps put them in different places and jobs . . . put her in a Piggly Wiggly, and she went off for a couple of hours during school to Piggly Wiggly to wash windows, wash down cash registers, put the things on the shelf. That has nothing to do with photography. . . . She doesn't want to work at Piggly Wiggly; she wants to do photography.”

To better coordinate the ILP and IEP processes and promote the career development of youth with disabilities, schools can

- Promote a team approach, including families and general and Special Education staff in the development of both IEPs and ILPs to ensure that these two processes support and enhance each other.
- Ensure that all school personnel involved in the ILP process receive training on the needs of students with disabilities.
- Offer youth with disabilities the same range

of career exploration opportunities as are available to those without disabilities to expand their exposure to job possibilities and to help them learn job-seeking and occupational skills.

- Collaborate with community organizations to identify career role models with disabilities.
- Assist youth and their families in developing an understanding of how the youth's disabilities may affect education, career, and daily living options; and of rights and responsibilities under various disability-related legislation.
- Educate youth and their families about accommodations the youth may need in the workplace or postsecondary settings, and about pros and cons and timing issues associated with disability disclosure in a variety of settings. Connect them with relevant resources such as the Job Accommodation Network, www.askjan.org.
- Include disclosure and accommodation information and exercises in the ILP; and if the student has an IEP, ensure that the accommodation information parallels what is in the IEP.
- Ensure that youth and their families have access to quality transition support staff who have the knowledge, skills, and abilities to help them manage potential challenges and handle the uncertainty associated with the transition process.

Resources that Can Support Family Engagement

National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth (NCWD/Youth) Resources and Links

Funded by the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy, NCWD/Youth (www.ncwd.org)

ncwd-youth.info) offers a wide variety of resources focused on improving transition-related outcomes for all youth, including those with disabilities. There is extensive information regarding the ILP process (www.ncwd-youth.info/ilp) and a number of resources focused on families, including the following:

- [*Understanding the New Vision for Career Development: The Role of Family*](#) – This InfoBrief introduces families to career development. It highlights ILPs as a tool to promote career development and provides tips for how families can be involved.
- [*Helping Youth Develop Soft Skills for Job Success: Tips for Parents and Families*](#) – This InfoBrief discusses the importance of soft skills and offers strategies parents and families can use to help their child develop skills for employment success.
- [*Individualized Learning Plans Across the US*](#) – This interactive map highlights the status of ILPs in each state. Families can use this map to learn more about ILPs in their state and how students with disabilities are included in ILP activities.
- [*Kickstart Your ILP*](#) – This youth-focused guide provides a breakdown of ILP activities by grade level.
- [*Promoting Quality Individualized Learning Plans: A “How-to Guide” focused on the High School Years*](#) – This guide presents a wide range of curricula and strategies to assist schools in successfully implementing ILPs.
- [*“Shelly Saves the Future: A Story of Career Development” Informational Comic*](#) – This comic follows the high school senior, Shelly, as she learns to take charge of her future through the use of an ILP.
- [*Graduation Options and Diploma Requirements: What Families Need to Know*](#) – This article from Our Children, the national PTA magazine, outlines the changing landscape of graduation requirements and diploma options

to ensure students graduate prepared for college and careers.

- [*Youth and Disability Disclosure: The Role of Families and Advocates*](#) – This Info Brief highlights NCWD/Youth’s The 411 on Disability Disclosure, and explores the role families and advocates play in helping youth understand the importance of appropriate disability disclosure.

Helpful materials developed by other organizations and schools

An extensive number of materials relating to the role of families are available from the **PACER Center** (www.pacer.org).

A number of resources are available on the national **Parent Teacher Association** website (www.pta.org), including a thorough document on [*State Laws on Family Engagement in Education*](#).

Several resources specific to engaging families in supporting student success and transition are available from the **Harvard Family Research Project** (www.hfrp.org), including the following:

- [*Taking a Closer Look: A Guide to Online Resources on Family Involvement*](#) – Which links to research, information programs, and tools from over 100 organizations, a number of which target home-school relationships.
- [*Adolescence: Are Parents Relevant to Students’ High School Achievement and Postsecondary Attainment?*](#) – Documenting research showing the link between parent expectations and students achievements and postsecondary paths.
- [*Innovative Approaches to Preparing and Training Educators for Family Engagement*](#) – Highlighting new and innovative approaches to professional development in the area of family engagement with a particular focus on future and current educators learning and practicing family engagement techniques through hands-

on activities, simulations, e-courses, and case-based discussions.

The **Institute for Educational Leadership** (www.iel.org) hosts the Family and Community Engagement (FCE) Network, a national peer learning and action network that brings together parents, teachers, school and district leaders, and other family focused practitioners. The FCE Network involves individuals interested in improving systemic family and community engagement and learning more about evidence-based, high impact strategies. A number of important resources developed by members and partners of the network can be found at www.fcenet-work.iel.org, including the following:

- [Seeing is Believing: Promising Practices for How School Districts Promote Family Engagement.](#)
- [Taking Leadership, Innovating Change: Profiles in Family, School and Community Engagement.](#)
- [How to Develop a Logic Model for Districtwide Family Engagement Strategies.](#)
- [Tools for Latino Family Outreach: Supporting Student Success in the Middle-grades and Beyond.](#)
- [Charleston County School District: Parent University in the 2011-2012 Academic Year.](#)

Endnotes

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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. To obtain this publication in an alternate format please contact the Collaborative at 877-871-0744 toll free or email contact@ncwd-youth.info. This InfoBrief is part of a series of publications and newsletters prepared by NCWD/Youth. All publications will be posted on

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