

CONNECTING THE DOTS: INDIVIDUAL CAREER AND ACHIEVEMENT PLANS FOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

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Advocates for high school reform nearly always stress the need for schools to focus on three elements for student success: rigor, relevance, and relationships. Students need to be challenged academically, to understand how that challenge relates to life in the “real world,” and to know that adults in the system care about them and are invested in their success.

Many states and high schools are responding to the need for relevance through the establishment of individualized learning plans that are developed jointly with students, their families, and the school. If this reform is paired with school structures that view teachers and counselors as the mentors to students along their educational paths, the goal of relationships can also be realized.

Individualized learning plans are referred to in many different ways. In general, they are modeled after the individualized education plans required for students receiving special education services. An IEP is jointly developed by students, families, and a school team, and provides academic and other goals together with the implementation plans for meeting those goals. ILPs take this same concept and apply it to general education students, with the rationale that every student will benefit from understanding learning goals and the path to achievement.

In many cases, individual learning plans require students to articulate their plans after graduation from high school. This has the advantage of focusing the student on future planning, and allowing coursework and other learning experiences to be tied to areas in which the student has already indicated interest. For purposes of this memo, such plans will be referred to as “individual career and achievement plans,” or ICAPs.

As states around the country are reviewing their graduation requirements, many are adding new requirements that students develop ICAPs as early as eighth

grade. The following list shows states that have ICAP-type requirements in place.¹

Arkansas: Students must complete at least six units in a “career focus” area, to be established through guidance counseling at the high school in accordance with the student’s contemplated career aspirations

Delaware: All middle schools must develop an Individual Learning Plan for each 8th-grader, together with the student, parents, guidance counselor, and at least one content area teacher. ILPs may be amended upon consultation with the student and parents, and may require an extra year of school if courses have been failed. All students must also complete 3 units in a “career pathway.”

District of Columbia: With assistance from the guidance counselor, all 9th-graders must develop a plan showing the courses they will take during high school.

Florida: Students may choose to participate in a 3-year college prep diploma or career prep diploma (as opposed to the standard 4-year diploma) provided they meet basic requirements in reading, writing, and math. Students’ individual learning plans are to specify their “major area of interest,” which may be in CTE, academics, or art, and must complete 4 units in the area of interest. Students may have more than one area of interest, and may amend their plans annually.

Hawaii: Students must complete .5 unit in “Personal/Transition Plan.”

Idaho: Students and parents complete a “student learning plan” in consultation with school staff. The plan describes at a minimum the courses and other learning activities in which the student will participate while working towards graduation requirements. The plan can be amended at any time.

Indiana: Students must complete 3 units in a “career-academic sequence.”

Iowa: Each 8th-grade student must complete a core curriculum plan that includes career options and courses that must be taken to satisfy graduation requirements and prepare the student for postsecondary and career options. Parents must sign plans for students under 18.

Kentucky: Each student must have an Individual Learning Plan by the end of 6th grade that sets learning goals for the student based on individual career and academic interests and that identifies coursework needed for career and postsecondary goals. The ILP is reviewed and approved at least annually by

¹ Information from Education Commission of the States. Dounay, J. (2007). “High School Graduation Requirements: Mathematics.” Retrieved online at <http://mb2.ecs.org/reports/Report.aspx?id=900>. Dounay, J. (2007). “Additional High School Graduation Requirements and Options.” Retrieved online at <http://mb2.ecs.org/reports/Report.aspx?id=740>.

students, parents, and school personnel. Schools are to use the information from the ILPs to plan academic and elective offerings. Students must also develop individual graduation plans that emphasize career development.

Louisiana: By the end of 8th-grade, each student and family must develop a Five-Year Educational Plan that includes a sequence of courses consistent with the student's plans for one year after graduation. The plan is reviewed annually. Students must have the opportunity to complete an area of concentration with an academic and/or career focus.

Maine: Students must complete at least one application to a university, college, or other postsecondary institution.

Michigan: All 7th-grade students must have the opportunity to create an Educational Development Plan, and all students entering high school must have developed such a plan. The plan is developed in consultation with the guidance counselor and must be based on a career pathways program or similar career exploration program.

Minnesota: Students participating in "learning year programs" (providing instruction throughout the school year) must have a continual learning plan that specifies the learning experiences that will occur during the year.

Mississippi: Upon completion of grade 8, each student must have developed a "career plan which includes career goals, objectives, and a plan for achieving them; and selection of appropriate secondary and postsecondary curriculum." Parent signature is required.

Nevada: Each 9th-grader must have a four-year academic plan developed by the student, parents, and counselor that sets forth the specific educational goals the student intends to achieve before graduation. The plan may designate a career pathway and include enrollment in dual credit courses, CTE, AP, and honors courses.

New Mexico: For each year from 8th-grade through 11th-grade, students must complete a "next-step plan" that sets forth the coursework for the grades remaining until graduation, as well as post-high school goals and coursework that will allow the student to achieve these goals. The final next-step plan must show that the student has committed or intends to commit to a four-year or two-year postsecondary institution, a trade or vocational program, an internship or apprenticeship, military service, or a job. Next-step plans are completed in consultation with parents and counselors, and school districts are responsible for making sure students have information about their choices.

North Carolina: The state "strongly recommends" that local districts provide four-course concentrations that allow students to focus on student interests and

career goals, providing an opportunity for students to participate in “a rigorous, in-depth, and linked study.”

Ohio: Students may opt out of the state’s core curriculum if the student, parent, and school develop an individual career plan supported by counseling that plans for the student to enter two-year postsecondary education, earn a business or industry credential, or enter an apprenticeship upon graduation.

Oregon: Students must (1) develop an education plan and an education profile; (2) demonstrate “extended application” of learning; (3) “demonstrate career-related knowledge and skills in the following areas: personal management, problem solving, communication, teamwork, employment foundations, and career development”; and (4) “participate in career-related learning experiences outlined in the education plan.”

Rhode Island: The state is working on a system that would allow data-rich transitions between elementary and middle school, eventually leading to the creation of individual learning plans.

South Carolina: Eighth-graders, in consultation with their parents, select a “preferred cluster of study and develop an individual graduation plan.” The individual graduation plan must (1) align career goals and course of study; (2) be based on the student’s cluster of study and an academic focus within that cluster; (3) include core academic subjects; (4) include experience-based, career-oriented learning experiences; (5) be both flexible and structured; (6) be approved by parents and guidance counselor. Throughout high school, students are to be provided with guidance activities and career awareness programs, and annual counseling conferences must be scheduled with parents from grades 6 through the end of high school. Each high school must adopt a career guidance program model or prototype approved by the state department of education.

Washington: Students must create a “High School and Beyond Plan” that addresses their educational plan in high school and their plans for the year after high school. Schools that create “educational pathways” for students must allow them to change pathways.

West Virginia: Each student has an Individualized Student Transition Plan, developed in consultation with parents and counselor. In grade 8, the ISTP is developed for grades 9 and 10, using ACT EXPLORE results and other career exploration activities. The student selects a career cluster for exploration in grades 9 and 10, and then selects a “concentration” at the end of 10th grade. ISTPs can be amended at the end of any semester. For gifted students, a four-year educational plan is created in grade 8 that provides for IB, AP, and Honors courses during high school.

This is not a new idea. In 1996, the National Association of Secondary School Principals released *Breaking Ranks*, a guide to high school reform. Among the recommendations listed in *Breaking Ranks* and its related publications are (1) development of a Personal Learning Plan for each student; (2) identification of a Personal Adult Advocate for each student; (3) connection of learning to real-life applications; (4) extension of learning opportunities beyond the four walls of the high schools; and many others.²

Many high school models incorporate these ideas. For example, High Schools That Work and Big Picture Schools feature internships tied to student interests as a prominent part of the high school curriculum. Early college high school students develop individual learning plans as an essential element of that school model. Individual high schools across the country have also adopted similar requirements.

As can be seen by the various state requirements, the role of adult mentor during implementation of the plan can be filled by school counselors, teachers, or a combination of both. A structure where individual teachers are assigned to advise individual students is called an “advisory.” Advisories can take many shapes. In some cases, advisories function merely as an extension of the traditional “home room” concept. In others, students meet regularly in small group advisories to talk specifically about issues related to their plans and overall success. Ideally, teachers in advisories are knowledgeable about their advisees and their goals, and are able to provide encouragement and resources for students as they move through their chosen educational path.

So why aren’t schools regularly using ICAPs and advisories to ensure student success? The traditional school structure and culture presents some barriers to implementation of these reforms. These include:

- ◆ A very high student to counselor ratio at the high school level. The average school counselor in Colorado is responsible for more than 500 students.
- ◆ Teachers who are not trained in advising students
- ◆ Teachers who view advisories as an unnecessary addition to their workload
- ◆ Scheduling practices that do not easily accommodate regular advisory sessions
- ◆ Lack of technology that could help in monitoring ICAPs
- ◆ Difficulty in engaging families
- ◆ Lack of time and resources to plan for new structures

A lack of commitment to or capacity to implement ICAPs and advisories will doom reform efforts. The most prominent example is the multimillion dollar

² See *Breaking Ranks II: Strategies for Learning High School Reform*.

investment by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation in small schools. This initiative featured individualized learning plans and advisories as essential school design elements in schools funded by Gates. The Foundation learned an expensive lesson: simply having these structures in place does not by itself guarantee student success. It is only in those schools where staff is committed to rigor, relevance, and relationships, and knows how to turn that commitment into real instructional and relationship change, that the benefits of these reforms will be realized.

For all the reasons above, a state mandate of ICAPs and advisories is a move in the right direction, but may not result in real changes unless schools have the motivation and the resources to effectively implement the mandate. Colorado has several choices in how to encourage this reform. For example, it could mandate ICAPs and advisories, and incorporate these elements into the state's accreditation framework. It could decide to provide incentives to schools that want to make these reforms, by providing a competitive grant fund. It could also provide funding to schools that have successfully implemented these reforms to develop implementation toolkits and resources for helping other schools.