

Issue in Brief: Individualized Learning Plans



Overview

Many students are well into secondary school before they start to think seriously about what comes after high school. They may only begin to consider college and career options as graduation approaches, or they may have long-held postsecondary aspirations, but limited information about how to prepare for entry and success in their desired fields. The earlier students start to explore their interests and how those interests might align with various postsecondary options, the more time they have to build the knowledge and skills necessary to achieve their goals. Individualized Learning Plans (ILPs) are a long-term and comprehensive approach to education and career planning; they span multiple grade levels and courses and are personalized to each student. ILPs empower all students to think early and often about their postsecondary plans; continually check the alignment of their interests and skills with their college and career aspirations; and select academic and extracurricular options that support achievement of these aspirations. More specifically, an ILP is both a document, which records students' academic and career plans to better assess their readiness for college and careers, and a process, which helps youth self-define their career and life goals.

The Massachusetts context

The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) has prioritized creating new and enhancing existing tools and resources to support districts' efforts to implement college and career readiness strategies. While ILPs promote and enhance college and career readiness in their own right, they also can serve as a thread to tie together all of a school's or district's activities to encourage purposeful, effective planning and preparation for college and career. ILPs can be used to complement the Early Warning Indicator System (EWIS) by including steps to address areas identified as in need of extra attention. They can also enhance efforts to improve graduation rates by helping address some of the factors that lead students to disengage from and ultimately drop out of school, such as academic struggles, lack of supportive relationships with adults, and the sense that school is not relevant to "the real world."

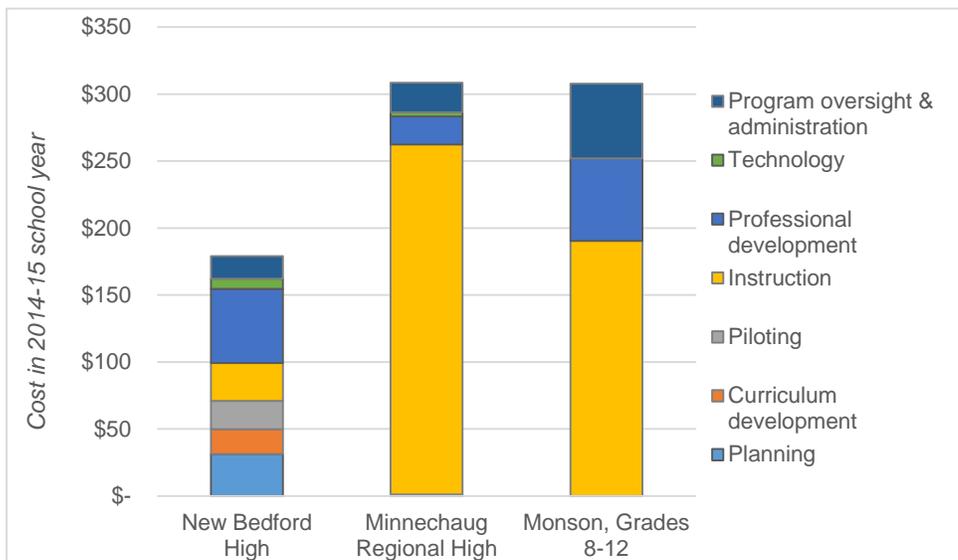
ILPs are gaining in popularity with additional research and information available on ILP-related outcomes. Nationally, and here in Massachusetts, ILPs are continuing to emerge as a critical strategy to meet college- and career-readiness goals. In 2014, ESE issued guidance for developing and implementing ILPs; the resulting *Massachusetts Guide for Implementing ILPs* addresses both the document and the process aspects of ILPs, providing tips, best practices, and sample tools related to both. It also describes the relationship between ILPs and school and district improvement plans. While district implementation of ILPs is voluntary, ESE highlights the relevance of ILPs to strong college and career readiness strategies.

The evidence: ILPs engage students in their own learning

Many districts across the Commonwealth have established, or plan to establish, their own ILP programs—making the timing of this report all the more relevant for documenting the lessons learned in the early stages of local ILP implementation. This document presents findings from the research study *Charting a Path to the Future through Individualized Learning Plans* featured as part of the project *Roadmap to Expanding Opportunity: Evidence on What Works in Education*. Findings in the report present the cost of promising practices based on a review of the literature base and original research into four schools utilizing ILPs—Monson High School, Minnechaug Regional High School, Leominster Center for Excellence, and New Bedford High School. Key lessons from study districts include:

- During the planning/pilot year, decide on the "placement" of ILPs in particular courses (e.g. an advisory period or content course) and grade levels; conduct a pilot of structures, content, and curriculum. Develop a technology plan that accounts for student access to their ILPs at school.
- During early implementation, fine-tune content delivery, and develop/implement supports to build professional expertise among educators who will have a role in ILP implementation.
- When sustaining and scaling implementation, identify needs to achieve vertical alignment of ILP activities and content across grade levels.

Table 1. Per pupil costs



For the 2014-15 academic year, total per student costs for the four programs ranged from \$179 to \$308. These costs are driven both by the amount and frequency of program activities and the number of students served across grade levels. Table 1 at left shows program component costs. Please note the costs of implementing a program fully aligned with the research base may exceed those documented here; it is rare in real-world settings for programs to implement all research-based activities discussed.

Considerations for state policymakers

Utilize ILPs to address both the academic and non-academic aspects of what it means for students to be college and career ready. Students can use ILPs to map out the specific courses, supports, extracurricula, and in- and out-of-school experiences needed to build the knowledge, skills, and competencies required by their chosen field and the workforce in general. These practices are central to the Massachusetts Model for Comprehensive School Counseling (MA Model), and ILPs are a practical way to operationalize many aspects of the MA Model in districts and schools. Further, the process of determining the academic and non-academic experiences necessary to achieve students’ postsecondary goals can be a natural entree into the state’s recommended course of study for high school students (MassCore).

Schools and districts can engage with ILPs to harness resources in a student-centered, student-driven way. Narrowing in on what students actually want and need—according to students themselves with guidance and support from trained adults—allows districts to streamline offerings and ease the burden of competing initiatives. Likewise, ILPs can help schools and districts make policy decisions that are responsive to student needs or interests and perhaps enable resources to be allocated in new ways.

Integrate, align, and promote ILPs as a more efficient administration of student supports and services. Through regular check-ins, each student will develop a close working relationship with at least one adult, while adults can more easily identify gaps in students’ college and career readiness and devise coherent approaches to address them. This ensures that appropriate interventions are targeted toward the students who need them, and it can help to avoid both redundancy and underutilization of student supports and services.

Create systemic ILP opportunities that allow students to take ownership of their education and their future. Allowing students to pursue their interests and make connections between their academic career and what they want to achieve can have a meaningful impact on their level of engagement and motivation. Further, as active participants in their school experience, and given the opportunity to make productive choices and articulate their preferences, students can achieve a greater sense of self-confidence and self-efficacy.

For the full report, *Charting a Path to the Future through Individualized Learning Plans*, and other research, visit the Roadmap to Expanding Opportunity website at:

ExpandingOpportunity.org