

Introduction

One result of the 2016 US election is increased awareness of the fact that there is a large segment of our population that has been left out of the economic growth of the past thirty years. While there are many contributing factors, it seems clear that one area we can improve upon is making sure that today's youth are more strategic in developing the competencies and acquiring the postsecondary credentials and degrees needed to compete for jobs offering a living wage.

This growing economic and wealth disparity—arguably the most challenging consequence of increased technology and globalization—has decimated the middle class and left in its wake two economic groups. One economic group, constituting a relatively small percentage of the population, comprises generally higher-income communities with larger numbers of youth who successfully complete the postsecondary education that enables them to gain access to high-demand, high-earning careers. The second, larger economic group comprises those who do not complete a postsecondary program or degree and are left to compete for jobs within a growing service sector characterized by lower—often minimum-wage—earnings. For this second group, their employment is uncertain with respect to job security and offers little in the way of advancement opportunities.

In conducting the research that serves as the foundation for this book, my colleagues and I found that the majority of youth plan to go to college but otherwise have no clear idea of their career and life goals. This book promotes *individualized learning plans* (ILPs) as the key mechanism for helping youth

identify those goals by examining their own emerging talent and strengths and learning how these connect with the world of work. ILPs also help educators connect with their students' life stories, dreams, and challenges in caring and encouraging ways that empower youth to believe themselves capable of successfully achieving their career and life ambitions. The immediate positive impact is that youth realize that education matters—that academic coursework offers them the foundational skills needed to pursue their objectives. In addition, the ILP process makes youth and their family aware of the postsecondary education pathways that are most relevant to their particular goals.

THE HISTORY OF INDIVIDUALIZED LEARNING PLANS

ILPs are not new; they were first initiated by the American School Counselor Association (ASCA), which strongly encourages ILP implementation as part of its National Model emphasizing academic, social emotional, and career development.¹ They became more popular, however, when states were required to adopt more rigorous academic standards under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB). Within this context, ILPs became a means for helping ensure that youth and their families created an academic plan that reflected these new standards. As states mobilized their own efforts to increase college and career readiness as an economic strategy to graduate more youth with the skills needed to enter high-demand career opportunities, ILPs became more accurately understood as a career and academic planning strategy.

The ILP is often confused with the federally mandated *individualized education program* (IEP), which provides accommodations and services for students with disabilities, and the two programs are indeed complementary. ILP proponents are excited at how the ILP supports the design and implementation of the postsecondary transition plan that must be added to the IEP when students reach adolescence. Unlike IEPs, however, ILPs are applicable for all youth, whether living in urban, suburban, or rural communities; high achieving or disengaged; from high- or low-income families; and/or classified as English learners or youth with disabilities.

Though they are known by different names in different states (e.g., Individual Career and Academic Plan, or ICAP, in Colorado and Oklahoma; Education and Career Action Plan, or ECAP, in Arizona; and My Career and Academic Plan, or MyCAP, in Massachusetts), ILPs are being used throughout the country as a career development strategy to help students (a) examine their unique pattern of skills and competencies, interests, and values; (b) identify

careers that are commensurate with these skills and competencies; and (c) establish career and life goals and align their academic courses and postsecondary intentions in pursuit of those goals.

But while the vast majority of states are either mandating or strongly encouraging the use of ILPs, implementation quality has been uneven because many efforts rely on school counselors when a whole-school strategy is required. Quality ILP programs should be structured as *a process* centered on skill-building lessons beginning in middle school and continuing through high school. However, educators are often hesitant to join ILP implementation efforts because they have not been offered a clear rationale for how ILPs contribute to improving classroom engagement and academic performance. While there are a growing number of technical resources on ILPs available online, there has been no book for educators that gives a general overview of this research-based approach to career readiness. This book is an effort to remedy that.

ORIGINS OF THIS BOOK

This book draws from two research programs that focus on personalized learning for students both with and without disabilities. In 2007, I began a research project examining the nature and promise of ILPs with colleagues at the National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth (NCWD/Youth). Our project was funded by the US Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy from 2007 through 2018. We began our research by working closely with fourteen schools in four states to study and provide technical support for implementing ILPs. Subsequent research efforts included a comparative case analysis on the nature and value of ILPs from the perspective of over fifty education leaders from thirteen states. As the ILP research evolved, we found that a number of states were using our resources and toolkits. To further support their efforts, I launched the State Leaders Career Development Network, which meets monthly to discuss ILP implementation practices. In December 2016, the Council of State Governments, in partnership with the National Conference of State Legislatures, released a report from their National Task Force on Workforce Development for People with Disabilities promoting this research as the template for states to use in designing career development policies that improve the ability of all youth, and especially those with disabilities, to make successful transitions into adulthood. Over this period of research, my colleagues at NCWD/Youth and I have developed a number of research and technical reports that are currently being used by a number of states (e.g., Arizona,

Colorado, Massachusetts, Vermont, and Wisconsin) to guide their ILP design and implementation efforts.

The second strand of research that I draw on throughout the book covers the period from 1998 to 2005, when I designed, implemented, and evaluated a social emotional learning program in two Milwaukee high schools. During this period, my research questions, views about education, and ideas on how to design effective professional development programs were shaped directly by the educators and school leaders from South Division and North Division High Schools. These educators provided me with a much more robust understanding of the tremendous challenges faced by educators, youth, and families in urban school settings. I witnessed and participated in a number of powerful experiences that will be described throughout the book. Following my time in Milwaukee, the social emotional learning program was published as a curriculum titled *Success Highways*, which is being used in schools throughout the United States.

From our research, my colleagues and I concluded that the reason many schools fail to demonstrate improvement in academic outcomes and test scores is because their students fail to see how their academic courses are relevant or beneficial to their future quality of life. We found that once students identify career and life goals, they actively pursue a more rigorous sequence of courses and are motivated to do the best they can in them. While it is important that we offer youth high-quality pedagogy and materials, in this book I advocate for designing and implementing ILP programs that motivate youth to take advantage of these high-quality instructional opportunities.

This book focuses on helping individual educators, teams of educators, and community groups learn how to design, implement, and evaluate ILP programs that go far beyond the ILP document itself (often called an *e-portfolio*). It provides guidance on how those who are leading these efforts can improve the quality of implementation and increase the number of youth who have access to ILPs. It is also intended as an introduction for education leaders, teachers, and parents that communicates more fully the nature and promise of ILPs. Drawing from my experiences working with educators throughout the country, I share the best resources, ideas, and stories that I have encountered in my work. So many passionate educators have become strong advocates for ILPs.

Moreover, this book describes how an ILP program can be designed and implemented schoolwide through professional learning communities (PLCs), in conjunction with existing career development resources, and with the as-

sistance of educators serving as caring and encouraging mentors who facilitate ILP activities within advisory settings. It aims to connect educators to the wealth of exemplary resources available, which they can draw upon to create their own ILP program to meet the needs of their school and students.

Furthermore, this book advances a paradigm shift in career development theory and practice whereby career choice and decision-making—the dominant paradigm—is replaced by a focus on helping students attain necessary skills in three career development areas: self-exploration, career exploration, and career planning and management. It also demonstrates the role of social emotional learning skills as a key component of equipping youth to successfully complete postsecondary education and enter the world of work.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Following an initial chapter that introduces the concept of a quality ILP program, chapters 2 through 6 each focus on one key concept associated with this paradigm shift: self-exploration skills (2); career exploration skills (3); career planning and management skills, including social emotional learning (4); work-based learning opportunities (5), and caring and encouraging adults (6). Chapters 7 through 9 then go into more depth on how to design, implement, and evaluate a quality ILP program within the context of PLCs, with a focus on supporting the initial design and first year of implementation. Anecdotal experiences are recounted in each chapter to illustrate key points and offer concrete examples of the impact of these efforts on youth development and/or the power of educators to facilitate positive youth development and engagement.

As noted earlier, I wrote this book for educators, education leaders, and families. By “educators,” I am referring to a broad range of individuals (e.g., teachers, support staff, school counselors, career and technical education educators, special education teachers, school leaders and administrators, and staff from community organizations) that are serving in-school and out-of-school youth. The book is also intended for funding agencies, such as philanthropic organizations and policy makers at the district, state, and federal levels, who are determining how to direct resources to support school reform efforts—especially those aimed at assisting schools with high proportions of lower-income students, where the need to prepare youth for rewarding and profitable postsecondary opportunities is greatest.

If you are reading this book, hopefully it is because your school or state has adopted ILPs and you hope to learn more about them. Even better, perhaps

you are seeking a better understanding of ILPs because you have been asked to serve on an ILP leadership team in your district, school, or youth-serving community organization. Administrators as well as state and district leaders can use this book to assess the resources and supports that will be needed to design and implement ILPs and to track whether your district and schools are engaging in quality ILP efforts.

Over these many years studying the nature and promise of ILPs, I have come to two conclusions: (a) when implemented with quality and fidelity, as I describe in this book, ILPs have the potential to transform schools into tremendous learning centers that enable youth—even those with the most challenging backgrounds—to successfully complete school and prepare for their postsecondary life transitions; and (b) quality ILP design and implementation have been spotty. Most states that mandate or strongly encourage the use of ILPs have provided little or no funding for the professional development or resources needed to support quality design and implementation efforts. While my colleagues and I have produced a number of such resources, what has been missing until now is a more thorough description and explanation of what a quality ILP program looks like.

It is my hope, then, that this book will persuade state policy makers and philanthropic organizations to invest in the professional development and resources needed to more effectively implement ILPs. Hopefully, it offers enough evidence to convince skeptical educators and education leaders to take a chance on ILPs. No doubt we are all tired of the “innovation du jour” and do not have time to invest in “magic bullet” efforts to transform schools. I am encouraged by the state and district superintendents who have embraced ILPs and experienced the resulting improvement in their schools and communities. One of these, former Wisconsin state superintendent and current governor Tony Evers, eloquently attested to the transformative power of ILPs as part of his State of the State address to his fellow Chief State School Officers in 2016:²

In Wisconsin, we are growing our approach to individual learning plans statewide. We’re calling them Academic and Career Plans. What always strikes me about the power of a student portfolio is the way these kids can’t help but completely take over the conversation about their own learning when looking at their portfolio.

Lessly was no different, and it’s no secret why she was so proud. As we finished looking through her portfolio, she told me that she had secured over \$95,000 in scholarships to attend a four-year college in Wisconsin due in

large part to that portfolio. I wasn't surprised because her art was fantastic, but there was a nagging question in my head, and I couldn't help but ask it.

"So what are you planning to do with that art degree after you graduate from college?"

She looked at me with a straight face and said, "I'm not going to school for art! I'm going to be a biologist!"

She went on to explain that the skills that made her a great artist would also make her a great biologist; the patience it took to get something right, the meticulous attention to detail, the creativity and tenacity and sensitivity she applied to these paintings and drawings were skills she could use in her journey toward this career, or frankly, any career. And it's because of stories like these that I believe what we do at the state level can have a positive impact on a child's life.

Stories like Lessly's are being told all over the country. When educators have a personal experience to share, it is remarkable how inspired they are. These educators reflect the sense of wonder and amazement that comes from seeing firsthand the power of the ILP process to transform students' lives.