

## Understanding the Role of Individual Learning Plans in Transition Planning for Youth with Disabilities

*This InfoBrief explains how schools and families can supplement the required Individualized Education Program (IEP) by using an optional Individual Learning Plan (ILP) as a tool to help youth successfully transition from high school to employment and postsecondary education.*

### What is an Individual Learning Plan?

The Individual Learning Plan is a strategic planning tool intended to help youth identify and achieve postsecondary goals. The ILP provides students with opportunities for career development and exploration activities, and helps them choose high school courses that will prepare them to reach their postsecondary goals.

ILPs can be used to link a student's career interests with the educational steps and subjects needed to enter that career. For students receiving special education services, ILPs can also help them to become actively involved in creating their transition plan.

While use of the ILP varies widely as a graduation requirement and is not federally mandated, some states do require its use. Families should ask their school district if it uses the process. School districts that require general education students to use the ILP process should also expect students receiving special education services to use an ILP.

Research shows in order to have a successful transition from high school to employment and postsecondary education, students need to be exposed to career exploration and planning. An Individual Learning Plan (ILP) is an option that can help all students, including those with disabilities, create a career and academic pathway as well as compile a comprehensive, multi-media online document of their skills and experiences. Instead of considering the Individualized Education Program (IEP) as the only transition-planning tool, schools and families should view the ILP as an option to expand the transition-planning sections of the IEP. Even if a school district does not require the use of ILPs, families can still use most ILP websites to help their youth better prepare for the future.

In an effort to support school-wide ILP efforts and the design of learning experiences for work readiness skills, NCWD/Youth is conducting research in collaboration with the Center on Education and Work at the University of Wisconsin and the National Center on Secondary Education and Transition at the University of Minnesota. The collaboration is working with 14 schools from Louisiana, New Mexico, South Carolina, and Washington to document and support their school-wide ILP implementation efforts. The information gathered from that research thus far has been used in this brief.

States and schools have their own definition of what an ILP is or needs to be, and it can be called by many names, including Next Step Plan (New Mexico), Individual Graduation Plan (South Carolina), and High School and Beyond Plan (Washington).



While the ILP can take many forms, most are web-based and follow the same basic format. They include information such as a student's academic record, extracurricular activities, and volunteer or intern experiences, along with documentation of those experiences. The ILP can be used as a resume or to augment a postsecondary application.

### **Example of what may be included in an Individual Learning Plan:**

- Personal Information (name, address, parent/guardian, personal statement of goals, educational accommodations, etc.)
- Skills and Abilities (courses taken, presentations, computer and media skills, projects)
- Career Exploration (assessment results, workplace and transferable skills, job shadow, and internship experiences)
- Academic Record (transcripts, ACT and other test scores, graduation requirements, teacher feedback)
- Activities (extracurricular, athletics, volunteer, service learning, leadership, and leisure activities with awards, documentation, teamwork tasks)
- Accomplishments (awards, honors, licenses and certificates, memberships, publications, academic honors, and exhibitions with documentation photos, videos, etc.)
- Program of Study (course plans for middle school, high school and post-secondary, postsecondary majors or training program areas, goal statement)
- Favorite Occupations (interest inventory results, career goals statement, etc.)
- Favorite Colleges (college or postsecondary training search results, comparison lists, financial requirements, financial aid information, requirements checklist)
- Job Seeking Profile (letters of recommendation, references, work experience, resume, cover letter, related coursework)
- Budget Plan (current and future budget plans, career path salary options/outlook)
- Miscellaneous (health records, life goals, etc.)

According to focus group results of students who used the ILP process, youth appreciated the online career assessments and especially the “how do I get there?” planning. They also found great value in the self-assessments portion of the ILP, which helps students discover such things as their learning styles and interests. The process also helped them understand the relevance of their academic classes as they were linked to specific career goals.

Parents in the focus group witnessed how using an ILP helped their students focus and connect career choices to possible salaries. In some schools, the principal and staff (teachers and counselors) actively engage in the design and use of the ILP, integrating them into the curriculum on an ongoing basis. School staff also reported positive results, such as increased links to community workplace experiences and more students discussing their future plans and considering college.

Students preparing for postsecondary education can share their ILP with admission counselors to help provide alternative evidence of their unique skills and readiness for such opportunities. When students are ready to enter the world of work, they can also share their ILP with employers to showcase a range of skills that can't be clearly communicated in a resume or cover letter.

### **What is the difference between an ILP and an Individualized Education Program?**

The use of an Individual Learning Plan is not required by federal law. ILPs do not replace IEPs. ILPs can serve as a catalyst for collaboration among administrators and staff in career and technical



education, special education, and school counseling. An ILP is generally created in a high school student's advisory period and can be used to engage students in the transition planning process.

It is important to know that ILPs and IEPs are not the same document. Research conducted for NCWD/Youth found no instances where ILPs and IEPs were used in an interchangeable manner and this is unlikely to occur given the legally binding nature of IEPs. The Individual Learning Plan can be viewed as an additional document that can be used to improve and expand the sections of the IEP relating to transition planning if the student wishes to pursue such an approach.

### **Research on successful transition and the ILP**

According to the National Secondary Technical Assistance Center, certain indicators point to a higher chance of students being engaged in employment or postsecondary education after high school. Many of those success indicators, such as career awareness, correlate with ILP categories.

Research has also identified specific social, cognitive, and psychological skills that are necessary for a person to become prepared for the world of work. For example:

- necessary social skills include the ability to cooperate and resolve conflicts,
- required cognitive development skills include the ability to use technology and to problem solve, and
- psychological development skills include self-management and a strong work ethic.

Use of an ILP can help students, families, and schools focus on specific activities and areas that promote these skills and increase the likelihood of a successful transition to the world of work.

*Guideposts for Success* (NCWD/Youth, 2007), a publication based on 30 years of research, describes the range of learning experiences needed by all youth to become ready for the workforce. *Guideposts* describes learning experiences that are necessary for all students, as well as accommodated, supplemental, or additional learning experiences that should be provided for students with disabilities. The *Guideposts* consists of five separate categories of experiences:

- school-based preparatory activities,
- career preparation and work-based learning experiences,
- youth development and leadership,
- connecting activities, and
- family involvement and supports.

These categories can be used by parents and educators to identify additional activities that are likely to increase workplace success. *Guideposts* can also generate ideas about what documents of those activities could be included in an ILP.

### **Advice for families using the ILP as a transition tool**

- ILPs can help youth and their families focus on gaining needed career skills and experiences that are linked to the youth's individual goals and a successful transition.
- ILP support from a school is not a right. It is not mandated by federal law, but parents should consider its use to support transition planning and the IEP.
- In the absence of school assistance with ILPs, parents can help their youth create an ILP on a commercial site, such as CareerLocker, IHaveAPlanIowa, or WISCareers.
- ILPs should include specific documents, projects, videos, or other examples that show a student has the knowledge and skills required by the workplace or postsecondary training.



- The creation of ILPs can begin in the middle school years.
- ILPs are relevant for all students, whether they are college-bound, moving from high school to work, military-bound, or have an IEP.
- Online formats of ILPs allow for the creation of multi-media portfolios that provide a unique showcase of a youth's skills.

### Summary

To successfully transition from high school to postsecondary education and the world of work, youth with disabilities and their families need to be intentional about planning activities that help youth reach their goals. Individual Learning Plans can help in this process. By linking a student's career interests with the educational steps and subjects needed to enter that career, the ILP helps students see a pathway to their future. While Individual Learning Plans are not required by federal law, families should view the ILP as an optional way to strengthen the transition-planning sections of their youth's IEP and to help students become actively involved in creating their transition plan.

### Contact Information

Links to Individual Learning Plan website resources:

- [wiscareers.wisc.edu](http://wiscareers.wisc.edu)
- [careerlocker.com](http://careerlocker.com)
- [IHaveAPlanIowa.gov](http://IHaveAPlanIowa.gov)
- [laeportal.com](http://laeportal.com)
- [scpathways.org](http://scpathways.org)

### Resources

Durham, Julie F., et al., "Strategic Use of Individualized Learning Plans: Preparing Students with Workforce Readiness Skills for 21 Century Jobs," Photocopy, U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Disability Employment Policy.

Lippman, Laura, and Julie Keith (2009), "A Developmental Perspective on Workplace Readiness: Preparing High School Students for Success," Child Trends.

Haakenson, Kristin, (2009), "ILP Focus Groups – Quick Summary and Overview."

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