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## Career Mapping Eyed to Prepare Students for College

Learning plans are beginning as early as the 1st grade

By Caralee J. Adams

Secondary schools are becoming more intentional about helping students discover their career interests and map out a plan to achieve them.

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About half of all states mandate that schools help create individual or student learning plans, and most others have optional programs. Enabling students to make their own plans puts them in the driver's seat and encourages a long-term look at their course selection so their choices match their career goals, experts say. Often, districts give students online accounts with passwords to track classes; create an electronic portfolio of grades, test scores, and work; research careers; and organize their college search.

The practice is picking up momentum with the increased emphasis on college completion, which research shows is more likely when students take rigorous courses and have a career goal.

But these career maps take an investment in technology and training. Finding time during the school day can be a challenge, and the job of overseeing the process often falls on already stretched counselors, according to researchers and program administrators. In some states, the plans have helped students understand the relevance of what they are learning, prompting higher enrollment in Advanced Placement courses and increased high school graduation rates. Others, meanwhile, have not yet experienced the same payback on their investment. As with many education programs, the rollout is left up to districts, creating a patchwork of approaches throughout the country.

"The focus on individual learning plans is so students enter college prepared to do good work," said Chad d'Entremont, the executive director of the [Rennie Center for Education Research and Policy](#). The Cambridge, Mass.-based nonprofit published a

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policy brief last year with research showing plans were linked to improved academic motivation, engagement, decisionmaking, and personal accountability. “The learning plans are providing a support system that we traditionally counted on families to provide,” he said.

## Online Tools

While researchers have been promoting student learning plans as a reform strategy for nearly two decades, state policymakers are catching on to the concept as a way to drive college and career readiness. Students create plans starting as early as the 6th grade. Of course, they can—and often do—change their minds about their career path.

Advocates say the plans can be fluid and be

a way to personalize learning and level the playing field for students who might not otherwise have access to resources for college planning.

Typically, a student might have a career-exploration unit in 7th grade. Through an interest inventory, in which the student answers a series of questions about preferences for working, say, with people or numbers, indoors or outside, his or her interests are matched with career clusters and pathways. If a student, for example, finds his or her passion is in nursing, the student would then look more deeply at what the profession pays, the employment opportunities, and educational requirements.

In planning high school courses, the student would be sure to take enough science credits. Perhaps he or she would sign up for a dual-enrollment class in chemistry and anatomy at a local community college with the idea of transferring those credits to a university nursing program after graduation.

Planning is often done online with interactive tools aimed at engaging today's tech-savvy students. Some K-12 districts buy ready-made software products; others partner with higher education, state departments of commerce, or business groups to come up with customized packages.

Knowing that high school students today connect best with online materials, the College Board recently launched a new interactive college-planning site, the [BigFuture.org](http://BigFuture.org). And U.S. Sen. Chris Coons, D-Del., recently introduced a bill to pilot a project in which students beginning in 1st grade could start portable online college-planning and -savings accounts.

## Hands-On Help

Some consider student learning plans one of the “softer reforms” that get pushed aside because of policymakers’ focus on accountability, said Mr. d’Entremont. While most policymakers aren’t against the idea, it’s reasonable for districts to think about cost and capacity.

Todd Bloom, the chief academic officer for [Hobsons](http://Hobsons), the Cincinnati-based company that produces [Naviance](http://Naviance), an online career- and college-readiness system, said the depth and breadth of individual learning plans are expanding, and the cost can run less than \$5 per student per year. “It’s not a hard sell,” he said. “It’s socially desirable to have that vehicle. ”

In Rhode Island, many schools use the Web-based system [WayToGoRI.org](http://WayToGoRI.org).

“It’s a great tool to plan ahead, reflect on what they’ve done, [SEE ALSO](#)

### Building Pathways

How a career-exploration unit works.



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and explore careers,” said William Pepin, the director of guidance at North Smithfield School in North Smithfield and the president-elect of the Rhode Island School Counseling Association. “It pushes students to think in a new direction.”

The process works best when students have an interested teacher or mentor who has been trained, time to devote to the plan, and the approach is tailored to local conditions, according to [research from the Rennie Center](#). Interest inventories also are an important component, along with access to technology and short- and long-term benchmarks.

Beginning in 6th grade, the District of Columbia requires students to launch an Individual Graduation Portfolio that they revisit each year and have a counselor approve.

“The biggest challenge is the time. There are so many things competing,” said Colleen McGuire-Horvath, an academic-planning specialist in the District. Students work on the plans independently in computer labs or at home. But since most students are comfortable with technology, it’s easy to use, she said, and the feedback has been positive. “It’s a student-owned vehicle,” said Ms. McGuire-Horvath. “Rather than telling students to do this or that, they have power.” Students like scanning their artwork and writing into the electronic portfolio, she said, and the expense is minimal to the district at \$150,000 a year for the software, license, technical support, and training.

It’s optional in Kansas, but most districts have students complete Personal Plans of Study. Many use technology, such as the online career-exploration game [The Drive of Your Life](#) or [Kansas CareerZoom](#) to check out job opportunities.

“That’s what you have to do to engage students,” said Kent Reed, a school counseling consultant for the Kansas education department. “It’s a generational thing. Kids have different learning styles, some are more visual, and you have to address that.” In the fall, the state will roll out a new career-interest website through a collaborative effort with the state commerce and education departments and the board of regents.

At Hesston Middle School, with 260 students in grades 5-8 in Hesston, Kansas, teachers have developed an interdisciplinary career unit for 8th graders to begin the four-year planning process. In language arts, students learn to write a résumé and cover letter. Math covers how to make a budget to live on based on career choice.

## Making Connections

### Forum Discussion: Career Mapping in Middle School?

Secondary schools are becoming more emphatic about helping students discover their career interests and map out a plan to achieve them. Are you in support of career mapping or career exploration programs? How early should students begin planning for their future careers?

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In his social studies class, Shannon Rewerts has students research a career and put together a five- to eight-minute speech and presentation board to share with parents at a career fair. "It's pretty intense with the project," he said, noting, however, that students also say it's their favorite unit all year. Students score high on the economic questions on the state test, which Mr. Rewerts said he covers in the career unit and is a good indication that the concept works.

In anticipation of Minnesota passing some kind of individual learning plan legislation, the Minneapolis district set milestones for students in grades 6-12 to meet and track through a program called **My Life Plan**. With the lowest ratio of counselors to students in the nation, 799-to-1, the system is trying to maximize its staff resources to make sure every student—not just those who might walk into a counseling office—develop a plan, said Shelly Landry, the leader counselor in the office of secondary transformation in the district's counseling and guidance department. Because teachers were reluctant to give up instructional time, the activities are tied as much as possible to academic standards, and counselors come into the classroom to deliver the content.

Through the planning process and partnerships with community agencies for work-based learning, students are seeing the connection between their high school choices and their career aspirations, said Ms. Landry. There have been significant increases in students taking AP and International Baccalaureate classes, as well as more applying for college in recent years.

Individual Career and Academic Plans in Colorado have been around for a while, but this year, a new mandate took effect with middle school students. To make sure the milestones for each grade were aligned with college expectations, the state consulted with the University of Northern Colorado, in Greeley.

#### **Staff Pushback**

As with any unfunded mandate, there was some pushback, said Judith Martinez, the director of the office of dropout prevention and student engagement for the Colorado education department. To connect students with the process, counselors often take the lead, and then classroom teachers get involved. The state hopes the program will increase student engagement, clarify graduation requirements, and keep students from dropping out and help them better understand how academics are relevant to their career goals, said Ms. Martinez.

South Carolina's legislature allocated \$21 million to pay for additional counselors when it required students in the 8th grade to develop individual graduation plans beginning in 2006. Five years later, 81 percent of students surveyed said they thought the annual planning conferences with counselors and parents helped them better understand the relationship between their career goals and academic progress.

Yet a goal of the program was to increase high school graduation rates and that did not happen, said Jay Ragley, the director of the office of legislative affairs for the state. "It's difficult to peg why we are not increasing graduation rates. That goal has still eluded the state," he said, adding that it's been a challenge to get parents used to the idea of career planning as early as middle school.

#### **Success Linked to Details**

"In theory it sounds great, but it's all about implementation," said Ellen Foley, the



interim director of district redesign and leadership at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University in Providence, R.I. Following up and getting students to remember their passwords and work around any technical glitches can be tricky. "It has great potential in terms of opening a dialogue, but it also could become a pressure and burden to do another thing," she said.

Counselors have a lot of duties, especially in those districts where there have been cuts, she said. "In some cases, where students have so many needs, triage is going on. Counselors are just thinking about how to keep kids in schools this week or this month, rather than on college."

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However, in an era of "college for all," Ms.

Foley said, counselors know they have a key role to play. College success is not just about academics, it's also about developing college knowledge and tenacity that can be supported by linking with community-based partners, she suggested.

The big benefit is the multiyear approach to planning and the concept of relevancy, said Mr. Bloom of Hobsons. If students understand why, for example, they need to take calculus to succeed in a college class and meet their end goal, they buy into the rigor. The focus is on "course" readiness for college, said Mr. Bloom. "You can't just not have a plan and hope and wish you get your dream job and career."

Ms. Landry said she'd love to expand student learning plans to elementary school in Minneapolis to get students and families to buy in earlier. "Kids are saying the plans helped them to know the process and it challenged them," she said. "It opens their eyes to careers they hadn't considered and just the idea of going to college."

*Special coverage on the alignment between K-12 schools and postsecondary education is supported in part by a grant from the Lumina Foundation for Education, at [www.luminafoundation.org](http://www.luminafoundation.org).*

Vol. 31, Issue 26, Pages 8-9

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Career mapping, goal setting, and planning are logical keys to success in high school and in preparation for a job and for application to schools of higher education. The obstacles to implementation of programs in schools include limited staff time and resources, the need for monitoring and mentoring to account for individual student needs, and the ongoing nature of the task. For many students, "career mapping" is informal and takes place as a part of family life. Unfortunately, in a significant number of families, parents lack the personal experiences in career and college preparation themselves to be able to assist their children in goal setting and planning. One way to lower the costs and burdens on the schools in accomplishing the career mapping goals is to educate parents so that they can take on the role of guiding their children through the process. Chad d'Entremont is quoted as saying, "The learning plans are providing a support system that we traditionally counted on families to provide." What better way "to personalize learning and level the playing field for students who might not otherwise have access to resources for college planning" than to provide parents with the tools they need to do the job at home. It is a better long-term investment and it allows the schools to focus on teaching, learning, and motivating. There will always be those students who will need school-based support to supplement what can be accomplished at home but the burden on these program will considerably lessened.

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GetReal!

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So excited to hear this kind of absolutely CRITICAL, essential piece of education that has been desperately needed by 21st century teens yet lacking in our system FINALLY being addressed.

As a high school teacher and parent I can tell you with certainty that, TEACHERS and/or schools cannot EVER be the solution alone, no matter how much money you pump into it. EMPOWERING and engaging kids is the solution that must also involve parents in ways and levels that we don't seem to be understanding.

As we look to politicians and policy makers to fix this suffocating dinosaur of education, we're losing MILLIONS of our future adults to apathy and lack of focus.

The answer isn't rocket-science and I found it on my own out of sheer desperation to help not only my own children as they approached launching their adult lives but to motivate students in my classroom to actually care about their education as early as possible and to give them realistic and real life

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information to help them see the complexities of building successful modern lives.

I've learned over the past decade that while it is simple and inexpensive, it takes TIME and sacrifice of parent's free-time to roll up our sleeves and DO this incredibly challenging work of coaching our kids to 21st century adulthood!

We all know that more education improves earning potential AND that middle class jobs that will REQUIRE post-secondary education are rising, while blue-collar jobs are shrinking. Even the high school drop outs know that...but they find school irrelevant. CLEARLY, the missing link is helping our kids internalize the motivation and abilities needed to respect and value for what education offers them. THEN they will and can learn anything we offer. We have to EMPOWER kids to learn for themselves and how to do that successfully...and invest in the WORK that takes! Just having them sit in front of computers however and research jobs for example doesn't do enough to create the internal motivation and drive needed. We do NOTHING concrete to help kids understand WHY high school must be taken seriously and HOW education impacts their future options and WHAT they want to do with their lives.

It all boils down to helping them see early enough that THEY will eventually be responsible for their own lives. We keep trying to make education ENTERTAINING for them and there are many more entertaining things than old, dusty teachers offering old dusty curriculum!

As a teacher and widowed mother of 3, I became so concerned with this that I stopped waiting for everyone else to fix this. I started to build a bridge between what schools/can and should offer to better prepare our kids to taking the reigns of their life as adults and building success for THEMSELVES.

I started by asking honest questions, gathering TONS of research and listening to it all.

The outcome of my decade long obsession and work with thousands of teens AND parents is a workbook project, called Get totally Real! a journey of self-discovery and life planning for 21st century teenagers. [www.getreallearning.com](http://www.getreallearning.com)

When parents began reaching out and asking for ways to be more involved in the transformation their children were experiencing, I created a Parent Companion that gives parents tools to begin this work.

I know I am just one parent/teacher with one tool, but I know that it is working for my students and hundreds of others. I hesitated sharing this with the bigger world because I fear people might think I am trying to make money off of kids/parents...but this is just too important.

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