

# LEADERSHIP IN ACTION

a briefing series for new england's educational leaders

## I Want to Know More

A *Leadership in Action* Supplement

*I Want to Know More* is a selection of information and resources for education leaders, parents, and community members who want to learn more about the teaching and learning strategies taking place in today's most innovative high schools.

## What Are Personal Learning Plans?

Personal learning plans (often abbreviated as PLPs) are developed by students—typically in collaboration with teachers, counselors, advisors, and parents—as a way to help them achieve short- and long-term learning goals, most commonly at the middle school and high school levels.

Personal learning plans are based on the belief that students will be more motivated to learn, will achieve more in school, and will feel a stronger sense of ownership over their education if they decide what they want to learn, how they are going to learn it, and why they need to learn it to achieve their personal, educational, career, and life goals. The general goal of a personal learning plan is to bring greater coherence, focus, and purpose to the decisions students make about their education.

For a more detailed discussion, see the [personal learning plan entry](#) in the [Glossary of Education Reform](#).

## PLPs vs. IEPs

Personal learning plans are distinct from individualized education programs (IEPs), which are created for students with identified learning disabilities. Every student who qualifies for special-education services in public schools under the [Individuals with Disabilities Education Act](#) is entitled to an individualized education program, which is a “written statement for each child with a disability that is developed, reviewed, and revised in a meeting in accordance with [Sections 300.320 through 300.324](#)” of the law. As the name suggests, the plans are customized for each student and are intended to create a course of study that addresses a particular student’s abilities, learning needs, and educational goals. While graduation requirements for students with IEPs may be modified, or certain accommodations may be extended to these students to help them meet graduation requirements, PLPs do not modify graduation requirements or address learning accommodations. In most cases, schools will integrate IEPs and PLPs for students receiving special education.

## PLP Resources

The [Vermont Agency of Education](#) recently launched [Planning for Personalization](#), a selection of online tools dedicated to helping schools develop and implement personal learning plans. The agency’s website features a comprehensive set of resources for schools, including a [self-assessment survey](#), an overview of the [critical elements](#) of effective personal learning plans, a [PLP template](#), and a [step-by-step process](#) that educators can use to create their own PLP program. While some of the guidance is related to Vermont’s personal learning plan requirements for schools, which is evolving as the agency receives feedback from pilot programs throughout the state, most of the resources will be relevant and useful to any school leader, educator, or parent interested in learning more about personal learning plans.

The [Connecticut State Department of Education](#) also has a set of resources to support “[student success plans](#)” in Connecticut, and the [Rhode Island Department of Education](#) offers guidance related to “individual learning plans,” which are part of the [Rhode Island Diploma System](#).

## PLPs at Francis W. Parker Charter Essential School

Personal learning plans have been a part of the academic program at Francis W. Parker Charter Essential School in Devens, Massachusetts, since it opened in 1995. At Parker, personal learning plans include summaries of learning strengths, a set of three or four learning goals for the year, and two or three strategies that will help students achieve each individual goal. Personal learning plans outline a yearlong process during which each student works alongside trusted adults to personalize their educational experience and take responsibility for their own learning. The plans are saved as digital files and made available to all teachers, which is critical to the effective coordination of instruction and [academic support](#).

Teachers regularly set aside time during the school day for students to reflect on the progress they are making toward reaching their individual learning goals. Advisors check in with each student individually to see if the selected strategies are working, if adjustments need to be made, or if other interventions and support strategies are needed. Since they have access to each student's personal learning plan, teachers use the documents when making decisions about [curriculum](#), instruction, and [assessment](#) for individual students, classes, and groups of students within classes. The school's system of ongoing reflection and adjustment helps students adapt, refocus, or request the support they need throughout the year.

Debbie Osofsky, advisory coordinator at Parker, says that personal learning plans help students "recognize that they are central in their own learning....They support the [teacher's] ability to know the student well so the teacher can effectively advocate for the student and facilitate the student's ability to advocate for themselves."

Personal learning plans exemplify Parker's core educational philosophy: student as worker, teacher as coach. Teachers help students recognize the importance of setting goals, practicing and working toward them, learning from their mistakes, and revising their plans. To be effective coaches, teachers need to know their students well, including the level of knowledge and skills students begin with and the [scaffolding](#) they need to reach their full potential. [*Scaffolding* refers to a variety of instructional techniques used to move students progressively toward stronger understanding and, ultimately, greater independence in the learning process.]

A number of cultural factors make personal learning plans successful at Parker, including the school's commitment to self-reflection. Students are regularly asked to reflect on the progress they are making, and on what instructional strategies are working or not working for them. Teachers also reflect on their curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices during [common planning time](#), with an emphasis on how those strategies are meeting the specific learning needs of students. But perhaps the most important [cultural factor](#) is the belief that personal learning plans are for everyone, not just for students identified for intervention.

"All kids have strengths. All kids have things they are working on. All kids benefit from being known well and having this type of support as they learn to advocate for themselves," says Osofsky.

\*This profile of Francis W. Parker Charter Essential School was excerpted from [First Response: A Guide to Designing and Delivering Classroom Interventions](#), a tool developed by the [Great Schools Partnership](#) for the U.S. Department of Education.

For more information about the Francis W. Parker Charter Essential School, visit [www.parker.org](http://www.parker.org).

Parker is a member of the [Coalition of Essential Schools national network](#), and its academic programs and personal learning plans are grounded in the [CES Common Principles](#).

## Making Personal Learning Plans Work

Personal learning plans can be a critical instructional asset that can help teachers [personalize instruction](#) for all students. Yet it is all too common for schools to invest significant amounts of time and energy in perfecting their template, only to greatly underutilize personal learning plans in the classroom. This list of practices from Francis W. Parker Charter Essential School will help make personal learning plans an integral part of how teachers, students, and families communicate about teaching and learning.

- Students, parents, and advisors should all be involved in the development of personal learning plans. A collaborative process is more likely to result in a common understanding of student learning goals and support needs. Advisors should gather information from the student's academic record, parents should answer a few questions about what they would like their child to achieve, and students should review former learning plans or reflect on past habits to determine what has worked before and what hasn't.
- Limit personal learning plans to a few critical learning goals—between two and four—to keep students focused and give them an achievable set of [learning targets](#) that, when met, will result in a sense of accomplishment. Goals can address specific academic skills, such as improving math performance, or broader social-emotional goals, such as assuming a leadership role in the school.
- Parents should meet with students and advisors in the fall and spring to discuss learning progress. Student-led conferences are a great way to foster student ownership over the learning process. [Student-led conferences are an evolution of the traditional parent-teacher conference, during which students present and discuss their educational progress. The general goal of a student-led conference is to encourage students to take more responsibility and ownership over the learning process, while also giving them an opportunity to articulate, defend, or reflect on their academic accomplishments.]
- Advisors and students should meet regularly throughout the year—every four-to-six weeks—to review personal learning plans, discuss which strategies are working, and determine if new strategies are necessary. Scheduling regular review sessions in advance will make it far more likely that personal learning plans will continue to inform instructional practices and student learning throughout the year.
- Teachers need ready access to personal learning plans. The plans should be saved as digital files in a central internet-accessible location, which will make it much easier for teachers to consult personal learning plans when determining classroom interventions. Additionally, if teachers can frame interventions in terms of helping students meet their own learning goals, they can increase the likelihood that students will embrace adjustments to instruction, assessment, and learning activities.
- Teacher teams should schedule time, at least quarterly, to review personal learning plans and identify important trends and patterns. If a significant percentage of students are selecting specific goals—such as improving writing, for example—teachers can modify curricula and instruction to offer more learning or support opportunities in that area.

\*Making Personal Learning Plans Work was excerpted from [\*First Response: A Guide to Designing and Delivering Classroom Interventions\*](#), a tool developed by the [Great Schools Partnership](#) for the U.S. Department of Education.

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