Region 1 Comprehensive Center Reimagining Education Series: Strategies for Student-Directed Learning

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The COVID-19 pandemic has presented challenges and opportunities for students to direct their own learning and demonstrate agency in their learning. For some students, social distancing measures and remote learning in PK–12 schools limited opportunities to collaborate and to participate in student-driven learning opportunities. Conversely, remote and hybrid learning environments required many students to assume greater levels of responsibility and ownership over their education. Compared with the typical structures and rhythms of an in-person school day, some students gained more control over how and when they completed coursework, particularly coursework provided asynchronously.

Historically, students have had little influence over the design of education institutions or opportunities (Benner et al., 2019; Lac & Cumings Mansfield, 2018). Decisions about school policies, programs, and structures are primarily steered by administrators, policymakers, and teachers. In recent years, however, educators and policy advocates have amplified calls for education systems to grant students—the primary beneficiaries of these systems—more capacity to direct and personalize their learning (Project Tomorrow, 2020; Schwartz, 2020). As school leaders plan the transition to the 2021–22 school year, there is an opportunity to strengthen and incorporate promising practices to increase student agency and ownership in the classroom, which we refer to throughout this paper as student-directed learning.

Two promising strategies to promote student-directed learning are described in this paper:

1. **Personalized learning plans**

2. **Supporting student voice and choice**

The paper is organized by strategy and offers a brief description of each strategy, a summary of the evidence supporting the strategy, and common barriers to implementing the strategy. Stakeholders will also find actionable steps for implementation in schools. Although this paper describes each strategy separately, implementation of both strategies within an education system holds promise to further increase student-directed learning opportunities.

All Region 1 States are Implementing Strategies to Support Student Ownership and Agency

States within Region 1—Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Vermont—prioritize student ownership and agency in their education systems.

- The **Maine** Department of Education offers [multiple avenues](#) for students to exercise leadership and share ideas about state-level education policies. For example, Maine's State Board of Education includes two nonvoting student members. Further, the Maine Department of Education Student Cabinet is composed of students from across the state who meet quarterly with the Commissioner to discuss issues related to education. The state's Student Advisory fosters even broader participation by welcoming input from any Maine student who wants to share ideas with the Student Cabinet and the Department of Education.

- In 2018, **Massachusetts** introduced My Academic and Career Plan ([MyCAP](#)), a tool to support personalized learning plans (PLPs) statewide for students in Grades 6–12. MyCAP is "designed to provide students with ongoing opportunities to plan for their academic, personal/social, and career success" through a multiyear process that promotes goal setting and reflection; career development education; and communication among students, their parents/guardians, and school staff.

- As **New Hampshire** develops its school reopening plans in 2021, the state Department of Education has engaged students in a workgroup specifically targeting student voice in the School Transition Reopening and Redesign Taskforce ([STRRT](#)). Student voice has been central to many statewide initiatives, such as the [New Hampshire Learning Initiative](#) and the state's larger goal of [advancing competency-based](#) practices in schools. Schools in New Hampshire have been implementing student-centered learning strategies for many years. For example, Pittsfield Middle High School received [national attention](#) for implementation of student-led parent-teacher conferences.

- In **Vermont**, [Act 77](#) requires all schools to support Grades 7–12 students in developing and revising PLPs. Under the law, students' plans must identify their emerging abilities, aptitudes, and dispositions while informing choices about course offerings and other educational opportunities. The legislation also prompts schools to provide ways for families to participate in the PLP process. Vermont's Agency of Education provides schools with multiple [resources](#) to support implementation of PLPs, including a [manual](#) with actionable guidelines.

Personalized Learning Plans

Personalized learning plans (PLPs), also referred to as student success plans or individualized learning plans, are a tool for students to articulate academic, career, and personal objectives while identifying action steps to meet those goals (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). PLPs are different from individualized education plans (IEPs); IEPs are legal documents for students receiving special education services. PLPs are often characterized as both a *document* and a

process (Grant et al., 2018; Solberg et al., 2014). As a document, PLPs provide students with a structured template to record information about their accomplishments, strengths, needs, and short- and long-term goals. As a process, PLPs regularly engage students in activities designed to help them develop and iteratively revise their plans with support from counselors, teachers, parents/guardians, and other adults. Equipped with an awareness of their personal aspirations and interests, students can use their plans to target specific courses, career exploration activities, and extracurricular activities.

In a recent [review of PLPs](#) from a range of districts and states, three main purposes emerged for using PLPs:

1. Track student progress towards graduation.

2. Support college and career exploration and planning.

3. Inform personalized learning approaches in curriculum and instruction.

Other related objectives for implementing PLPs might include strengthening communication with parents/guardians and expanding students' sense of ownership over their learning (Grant et al., 2018). Schools and districts might adopt PLPs with the intention of advancing one or all of these goals. The types of information included in a student's plan may vary depending on the identified purposes of the PLP but often include documentation of one or more of the following elements: postsecondary goals, career objectives, course of study plans, grades, progress towards graduation requirements, personal interests, extracurriculars, self-assessments, learning needs, portfolios of past work, and records of accomplishment (Duffy, 2020; U.S. Department of Education, 2017).

As of 2016, [most U.S. states](#) have policies that require districts to support students in creating and adapting PLPs. Within Region 1, Vermont requires PLPs, Maine encourages their use, and Massachusetts requires plans for certain students. In New Hampshire, statewide policies do not require or urge districts to implement PLPs. Although states across the country vary in the grade levels expected to use PLPs, many begin the process during middle school years (U.S. Department of Labor, 2014). Some districts and states have also extended structured self-exploration and career awareness activities to the elementary grades, with the goal of helping young students understand the connection between educational attainment and available career opportunities while fostering students' social-emotional skills (Solberg et al., 2018).

Although research on PLPs is evolving, existing evaluations point to PLPs as a promising strategy to support students' academic and postsecondary outcomes. In one study, focus groups and surveys of students, families, and educators from schools using PLPs found that these

stakeholders viewed PLPs positively and perceived benefits from their use, including for students with disabilities (Solberg et al., 2014). Specifically, participants felt that the PLP process was associated with increases in patterns of rigorous course taking and increases in the extent to which students perceived their coursework as relevant. Stakeholders also described PLPs as a mechanism to strengthen relationships between students, educators, and families. Similarly, in an evaluation of a PLP pilot involving 16 schools, teachers indicated that PLPs positively influenced students' attitudes, engagement in goal setting, and relationships with educators (John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development, 2011).

Risks to the successful development and deployment of PLP programs include failure to engage all stakeholders during the planning process, prioritization of rapid implementation over long-term quality, and lack of a curriculum to structure the PLP process (Grant et al., 2018; Solberg et al., 2011). Other notable challenges include absence of teacher buy-in and insufficient professional development for educators responsible for implementing PLPs (John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development, 2011; Solberg et al., 2011). The importance of teacher buy-in was a key theme across multiple sources and may be especially important in schools that expect teachers—as opposed to counselors or other educators—to lead the PLP process. Administrators and policymakers can build teacher support for PLPs by including teachers in the PLP planning process, providing professional development on how to engage students with PLPs, and allocating sufficient time for teachers to prepare for PLP sessions. Communicating a clear theory of change is also important; districts and education agencies should help teachers understand how PLPs support student outcomes, such as postsecondary readiness. These PLP implementation strategies, among others, are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Action Steps for Stakeholders to Support Personalized Learning Plans

	Teacher	Administrator	Policymaker and education agency Staff	Student/Guardian
1. Engage a range of stakeholders, including students, families, teachers, counselors, and administrators, in the development and rollout of PLPs.	•	•	•	•
2. Provide initial training and ongoing professional development for educators who implement PLPs.		•	•	

	Teacher	Administrator	Policymaker and education agency Staff	Student/Guardian
3. Prior to districtwide or statewide implementation, pilot PLPs with a subset of students, such as students in one school or one grade level.	•	•	•	
4. Develop and implement a communication and outreach strategy to ensure all stakeholders—including students, parents, and families—understand the goals of PLPs and how they will be used.	•	•	•	•
5. Allocate regular time during the school day—ideally, two to three times per week—for students to work on their PLPs.	•	•		
6. Design PLPs to help students connect their career and academic interests to courses or other opportunities in their school and community.	•	•		
7. Develop grade-level-specific curricula to guide the PLP process.	•	•	•	
8. Share your PLP progress and postsecondary goals with parents, guardians, teachers, and friends.				•
9. Revise your PLP based on new experiences, interests, and personal goals.				•

Sources. Grant et al., 2018; National Association for College Admissions Counseling & Hobsons, 2015; Rennie Center for Education Research and Policy & MassBudget, 2016.

Supporting Student Voice and Choice

Student voice and choice (referred to in the remaining text as "student voice") encompass opportunities for students to actively shape their learning experiences and education systems at the classroom, school, district, and state levels (Benner et al., 2019; Mitra, 2004). Student voice initiatives aim to elevate students to the role of active decision makers about education programs, policies, and instructional practices. Although students may take on significant leadership roles, most student voice activities involve collaborative partnerships with school, district, or education agency staff.

Efforts to promote student voice typically include a collection of strategies, each of which affords various levels of student agency and ownership (Benner et al., 2019; Mitra & Gross, 2009; Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012). Opportunities for feedback, such as a student survey or an invitation to provide feedback on a course, allow students to share input but are primarily led and acted upon by educators. Alternatively, student-driven activities such as participatory action research provide space for students to assume ownership of a meaningful issue, including proposing and implementing change ideas. Even strategies that initially seem to offer limited student agency can often be modified to expand students' roles. For example, following administration of a student survey, students might work alongside adults to analyze and interpret the resulting data (Benner et al., 2019). Table 2 presents several strategies stakeholders can employ to support student voice and choice.

A recent [report](#) on student voice identified several strategies educators, schools, and policymakers can implement to encourage student input and leadership:

- **Student-led conferences**, an alternative to teacher-parent conferences in which students take the lead role sharing their progress and reflections.
- **Democratic classroom practices**, in which students have a say in classroom activities, assessment, classroom guidelines, or other practices.
- **Student surveys** to understand student opinions and perspectives.
- **Student participation in governing bodies,** such as school boards or advisory committees.
- **Student government or councils**, in which students lead the planning and implementation of schoolwide student activities or events.
- **Student journalism**, including newspapers, podcasts, blogs, and television shows.
- **Youth participatory action research**, in which a group of students follows a structured process of identifying a problem or issue of interest in their school, collects relevant data, and generates data-based recommendations for improvement.
- **Personalized learning,** which provides students with flexibility in choosing topics of interest, types of assessment, and the pace of learning.

Although rigorous studies of systemic student voice initiatives are limited, proponents suggest student voice strategies can increase student engagement, thereby improving academic and postsecondary outcomes (Brenner et al., 2019). Other theorized benefits include strengthening the skills required for effective civic engagement and developing students' critical consciousness (Lac & Cumings Mansfield, 2018). Qualitative studies of schools employing

student-led initiatives suggest a positive relationship between student participation in student voice activities and youth development outcomes, including agency, belonging, and competency (Mitra, 2004; Mitra & Serriere, 2012).

Ensuring all students benefit from student voice initiatives requires reflecting on the extent to which the initiatives promote equitable platforms and attend to the traditional power dynamics present in most schools (Benner et al., 2019; Lac & Cumings Mansfield, 2018). Absent intentional efforts by adults to encourage participation among all students, especially students who have not been as engaged as others in conventional academic settings, student voice activities risk exclusively amplifying the perspectives of students who are already highly involved in their schools. Further, some school faculty and staff may be reluctant to share authority with students. Students, for their part, may hesitate to share authentic feedback. Revisions to the power dynamics in education systems that promote opportunities for shared decision making should include steps that respond to these concerns, such as separating grading and evaluation from student voice activities; allocating more than one seat on governing bodies to student representatives; identifying administrators and teachers who can be champions for student voice; and providing training and time for educators and students to learn about and engage in instructional practices that promote student voice (Zeiser et al., 2018).

Table 2. Action Steps for Stakeholders to Support Student Voice and Choice

	Teacher	Administrator	Policymaker and education agency staff	Student/Guardian
1. Regularly collect and analyze feedback from students through surveys, focus groups, and feedback protocols.	•	•	•	•
2. Dedicate one or more school board seats to student representatives.		•	•	•
3. Encourage and support students who have not typically held leadership positions to participate in student voice activities.	•	•		•
4. Provide structures and opportunities for student-led initiatives, such as participatory action research groups and student governments, to share concerns with adult educators and discuss solutions.	•	•		•

	Teacher	Administrator	Policymaker and education agency staff	Student/Guardian
5. Provide students with opportunities to determine what and how they will learn.	●	●	●	●
6. Engage students in collaboratively developing classroom rules, norms, and guidelines.	●			●
7. Create student advisory committees to provide student input to local or state-level administrators.		●	●	
8. Implement or advocate for student-led conferences as an alternative to parent-teacher conferences.	●	●	●	●
9. Support multiple student-run media outlets, such as newspapers, podcasts, or blogs.	●	●		●
10. Ensure that school schedules include dedicated blocks of time for student-driven activities, such as student government, to meet.		●		
11. Incorporate opportunities for students or nonfaculty adults to lead a faculty professional development session on a topic of interest.		●		●
12. Take advantage of day-to-day opportunities at your school to make your voice heard, such as through surveys, focus groups, and student representatives.				●
13. Talk with other students at your school, your family, and others about your opinions on educational opportunities and policies at your school.				●
14. Join or support student organizations and activities that elevate student voices related to school and educational issues. If none exist that are of interest, work to create a new student-led organization or other way to elevate student voices.	●	●		●

Sources. Benner et al., 2019; Zeiser et al., 2018; Ziegler, 2020.

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