John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development

evaluation report

New Jersey Department of Education Personalized Student Learning Plan Pilot Program, 2009-2010 Evaluation Report

Executive Summary

In 2009, the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) contracted with the John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey to conduct a two-year evaluation of the NJDOE Personalized Student Learning Plan (PSLP) pilot program. The New Jersey Department of Education is undertaking the two-year pilot program to assess the effectiveness of personalized student learning plans in transforming New Jersey's schools into "student-centered learning environments" (Jensen, n.d.). This initial formative evaluation includes specific examples of successes and challenges related to implementation and outlines lessons learned that provide guidance for schools considering implementing PSLPs. The final summative evaluation will include a summary of the first- and second-year implementation, lessons learned, and recommendations for replication.

The New Jersey Administrative Code defines a personalized student learning plan as "a formalized plan and process that involves students setting learning goals based on personal, academic and career interests, beginning in the middle school grades and continuing throughout high school with the support of adult mentors that include teachers, counselors and parents" (N.J.A.C. 6A:8).

Effective personalized student learning plan initiatives have been implemented in schools throughout the United States in a variety of forms and with varying success. Past research suggests that successful PSLP models can positively affect the daily personal experience of students if they receive the active support of the entire school community (DiMartino, Clarke, & Wolk, 2003).

The NJDOE PSLP pilot program was implemented to assist the New Jersey Department of Education in identifying promising personalized student learning plan formats, curricula, and resource materials as well as implementation and assessment practices. A total of 16 schools from urban, suburban, and rural districts throughout New Jersey — including 6 middle schools and 10 high schools — applied and were selected to participate in the pilot program. Together, the pilot schools are representative of New Jersey's schools and student population. The participating schools committed to a pilot program that runs from July 1, 2009 to June 30, 2011.

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Evaluation Purpose and Methodologies

The Heldrich Center used a variety of qualitative and quantitative methodologies to evaluate the PSLP pilot program. The evaluators conducted 36 in-person interviews with school principals, teachers, and counseling staff; 7 focus groups with students; and collected survey data from approximately 385 respondents.

This evaluation report documents the implementation of the Personalized Student Learning Plan initiative at the 16 participating schools during the 2009-2010 school year, provides initial conclusions regarding its effectiveness, identifies promising practices, and describes barriers to successful implementation that other school districts might face in the future.

Principal Findings

The Heldrich Center's research generated 11 principal findings. Descriptive findings about how schools implemented PSLPs are presented first, followed by findings on which PSLP implementation strategies were most effective, then findings related to the challenges schools faced in implementing PSLPs, and finally overall findings about the perceived impact of PSLPs among students and teachers.

Finding #1. For a majority of the pilot schools, implementing the PSLPs substantially shifted the way they approached student development.

Over half the pilot schools reported implementing **all** of the following student development activities for the first time: formal goal setting, personality and interest inventories, occupational search and career videos, career awareness and exploration activities, career planning, and preparation activities. In addition, this year was the first year that many schools established a team that worked to provide activities to personalize the student experience.

Finding #2. Almost all pilot schools implemented PSLPs using some sort of a web-based student planning and career guidance system.

The schools were required to identify the products or tools that they intended to use to help students develop PSLPs. All but one school used some form of an electronic tool as part of the PSLP system. In fact, an online student planning and career guidance system was typically the cornerstone of the PSLP process.

Finding #3. A committed program coordinator who guides the overall initiative is necessary for successful PSLP implementation.

NJDOE required that each school or district assign a staff member to be the program coordinator. Seven of the program coordinators were administrators, four were guidance counselors, and three were teachers. Program coordinators were responsible for leading the selection of the supplemental software programs, organizing training sessions, ordering and distributing materials, and handling any logistics. School representatives reported that PSLP programs require substantial coordination and planning, and agreed that without someone acting as the central coordinator in each school, PSLPs would be difficult to implement.

Finding #4. The schools that reported the greatest positive impact from the PSLPs were those that in addition to presenting PSLP lessons in average-sized classes created opportunities for small group interaction between students and teachers.

Most schools facilitated an initial "lesson" or introduction in an average-sized class. According to the NJDOE (2009), the average class size for the state of New Jersey was 18.4 in 2008-2009. The schools that reported the greatest positive impact on students, faculty, and staff, however, also implemented

a small group component to their program. These schools assigned a school staff member, or a student who was a senior, to mentor, facilitate discussions, or complete activities with a group of 10 students or less. Schools reporting less of an impact maintained a typical class-size group for all PSLP activities throughout the school year. Half of the pilot schools implemented a small group component.

Finding #5. District size, socioeconomic status, location, and past experience with implementing PSLPs were unrelated to how well the pilot schools implemented the PSLP program.

The schools participating in New Jersey's pilot PSLP program are from districts of varying size, socioeconomic status, and locations throughout the state. Although one might expect these factors to affect PSLP program implementation, the evidence the evaluators collected suggests that they did not. In fact, the schools that reported that PSLPs had the most significant effects were from district factor groups DE, CD and B, included high schools and a middle school, were located in different regions of the state, and had varying levels of past experience in implementing PSLPs.

Finding #6. The degree of teacher buy-in, training quality, staff resources, and staff communication had the greatest influence on whether a school reported that the PSLP program had a positive impact.

Data — from surveys and one-on-one interviews — showed a clear delineation between the schools that reported greater impact from PSLPs and the schools that reported weaker results. The most effective schools were those with:

- High levels of teacher buy-in to both the concept of PSLPs and commitment to taking active roles in PSLP implementation;

- High-quality PSLP training for participating teachers, guidance counselors, and student mentors;

- Adequate staff resources, including computer equipment, Internet access, and flexible scheduling; and

- Regular opportunities for teachers and counselors to voice their concerns and share ideas about PSLP implementation.

Finding #7. Principals who provided verbal support, but who were unwilling to "take action," were perceived by staff as not being supportive of PSLPs.

During independent interviews with the evaluator, teachers and program coordinators at the pilot schools indicated that lack of support from the principal was a major challenge in the implementation process. In many instances, principals who were unwilling to adapt the school schedule or to provide flexibility in staff time, and who would not consider increasing the number of PSLP sessions, were perceived as unsupportive.

School representatives explained to evaluators that there are many teachers who were disappointed in the past when they contributed their efforts to initiatives that were discontinued after a brief implementation. Therefore, these teachers choose not to support new programs that they deem to be of low priority for their schools. Ultimately, the principals affect teacher buy-in because the teachers look to the principal to determine the degree to which new initiatives are worthy of teacher buy-in.

Finding #8. Teachers reported that students are able to discuss long-term goals, but are less likely to outline actions and plan short-term goals.

In general, teachers reported that during the first year, students focused most of their time on developing long-term goals. Most schools implemented activities related to long-term academic planning (e.g., plans for college),

career exploration, and personal assessment in the first year. Significantly less time was devoted to identifying concrete short-term goals the students could set to support their long-term goals. For example, few schools focused on helping students to connect what they learned about their learning styles and interests to how they went about studying, selecting courses, and planning activities for the summer. At the end of the year, school staff members, across pilot schools, generally found that students were able to discuss long-term goals, but were less likely to outline actions and plan short-term goals in the first year.

In focus groups with students, the evaluators learned that some students were comfortable applying what they learned in their PSLP sessions, others struggled to apply what they learned, and still others remained unclear about the relevance of what they learned in their PSLP sessions to their daily lives. One group of high school students, for example, expressed that they became frustrated when they tried to apply what they learned during their PSLP sessions to academic course selection. They concluded that the staff members who facilitated the PSLP were not trained to discuss course selection and the staff members who work with course selection were both unfamiliar with the PSLP process and not sure how to guide students who wanted advice about how to incorporate career and personal interests in their short-term academic planning. Although these students said they would keep their long-term plans in mind when presented with short-term enrichment opportunities, they also said that based on their experiences in the first year, they were less motivated to try to connect what they learned in the PSLP sessions to other aspects of their current "in-school" academic experience (e.g., academic classes, course selection).

Overall, the evaluators concluded that at the end of the first year, many students remained unclear about the importance of short-term goal setting in relation to planning for long-term goals.

Finding #9. The evaluators identified three challenges common to most pilot schools: teacher buy-in, scheduling, and access to technology.

- Teacher buy-in was critical to the success of PSLP implementation because the teachers were responsible for delivering the curriculum. The evaluators found that some schools had difficulty obtaining teacher buy-in, especially in terms of the teachers' willingness to take active roles in implementing PSLPs.

- Several program coordinators and school principals reported that scheduling was a major challenge. The school administrators had to schedule classes to use computer labs, staff to participate in training sessions, and periods for small group interactions in the confines of the typical school schedule and associated challenges. Flexible class scheduling was particularly important for high schools that relied on select senior class mentors to help faculty and staff introduce freshman students to the PSLP process.

- Access to technology was a major obstacle for many schools that assigned web-based activities to students. In many schools, the school computer labs are shared space. As a result, the teachers who were not involved in the PSLP program often resented the program because it monopolized use of the computer labs. For some schools, the problems stemmed from an inadequate number of computers and insufficient maintenance of the computers they did have.

Finding #10. A clear majority of participating teachers and school staff from pilot schools reported that the PSLP process had a positive impact on students in the first year.

A single school year was not long enough for educators and administrators to fully assess the long-term impact of the PSLP program on students. Survey responses from most teachers and staff from the pilot schools, however, indicate that stakeholders think the PSLP

process is already having a positive impact on students and teachers, though to a lesser degree for teachers.

- At least 70% of teachers and staff members at the pilot schools believe PSLPs have already had a positive impact on student-teacher interactions, abilities of the students to set long-term career and academic goals, students' help-seeking behaviors, participation in clubs and class, overall motivation to succeed in school, and students' understanding of the importance of decision making.

- Seventy-four percent of teachers and staff members at the pilot schools reported that PSLPs had a positive impact on teachers' commitment to students. Overall, teachers and staff at the pilot schools reported that the PSLP process had less impact on teachers than on students. Although a few teachers worked to incorporate personalization concepts in the classroom (e.g., student learning styles), a majority of teachers and school staff involved in the pilot did not view the implementation of PSLP as a tool to help them personalize their teaching approaches.

Finding #11. A majority of teachers and administrators from the pilot schools would recommend that other schools consider implementing PSLPs. Even respondents who had encountered problems with their own PSLP programs often stated they would encourage colleagues in their districts to explore the PSLP option.

- Seventy-three percent of teachers and staff from the pilot schools said that they would recommend PSLPs to the schools in their districts; twenty-seven percent would not recommend them.

- One hundred percent of the program coordinators at the pilot schools said they would recommend PSLPs to other schools in their districts.

Lessons

The Heldrich Center's evaluation of the NJDOE PSLP pilot program's first year yielded some initial lessons that might inform other schools' efforts to implement PSLPs.

Lesson #1. Administrators should work to implement the small group component. The underlying goal of PSLPs is to motivate students to become engaged in school by having them work with an adult mentor to set personal, career, and academic goals, and establish a plan for success. The "personalized" element should reflect both the fact that students are setting individualized goals for themselves, and that each student has an opportunity to develop a (personal) mentoring relationship with a school staff member. When the PSLP activities are held in average class-size groups, the students are less likely to develop a close relationship with the facilitator and may be less likely to be engaged in the PSLP process.

Lesson #2. Principals need to communicate their support for PSLPs verbally from the start, and demonstrate their ongoing support of the program through subsequent actions. Principals who signal strong administrative support for PLSPs when they are first introduced to the curriculum, and who work to adapt scheduling to accommodate the program, send a strong message that the program is important. Principals who offer verbal support, but refuse to take follow-up action send the message that the initiative is not a long-term priority worthy of teacher buy-in.

Lesson #3. Teacher buy-in is critical and schools should consider it throughout the planning and implementation processes. Schools with stronger teacher buy-in reported greater impact. Schools need to work to ensure teacher buy-in by not only persuading teachers that PSLPs are a valid approach to helping students learn, but also by convincing them to take active roles in implementing PSLPs. Schools promoted teacher buy-in by including teachers in the planning process,

allowing teachers to ask questions and voice their concerns at regular meetings, providing scheduling flexibility, and by providing ready-made lesson plans that offer some guidance but leave room for teacher creativity.

Lesson #4. Program coordinators should start planning before the school year begins and delegate tasks to a team. The program coordinator role requires substantial work, but with solid planning, that work can be subdivided into manageable tasks that the program coordinator can delegate to other team members. In interviews with the evaluators, program coordinators emphasized the critical importance of planning and delegation to successful PSLP implementation.

Lesson #5. School staff members need to be well trained before implementing the program. Much early resistance from teachers arose because they did not feel that they were adequately trained about both the online system and their roles in curriculum delivery. If a PSLP program is to realize its full potential, the school administration may need to offer a series of training sessions rather than a single workshop to make teachers comfortable with the initiative.

Lesson #6. Schools should consider developing ways to help students focus on establishing both short- and long-term goals throughout their academic careers. There is extensive research that suggests that long-term goals are more likely to be achieved when the steps for goal accomplishment are identified and used to establish short-term goals (Locke & Latham, 2002). Schools may want to develop goal-setting activities in every year of implementation that help students learn how to set short- and long-term goals in their daily lives. In addition, schools may want to consider strategies to ensure the PSLP pilot programs help students balance short- and long-term goal setting related to academic, personal, and career development. For example, schools may be able to strengthen

the academic development component of their PSLP programs by bolstering the role of school counselors or by providing professional development related to academic planning for the teachers and school staff members who facilitate PSLP sessions.

Introduction

Background

The New Jersey Administrative Code defines a personalized student learning plan as "a formalized plan and process that involves students setting learning goals based on personal, academic and career interests, beginning in the middle school grades and continuing throughout high school with the support of adult mentors that include teachers, counselors and parents" (N.J.A.C. 6A:8). PSLPs are grounded on the notion that students perform better and achieve more under a smaller, more personalized approach to learning.

Personalized learning is the idea that students who feel a connection to their school, or to a teacher or another adult in the school building, tend to perform better both academically and socially (The Education Alliance at Brown University, 2003). The Education Alliance at Brown University refers to a personalized approach to learning as a "student-centered reform" that emphasizes real engagement of the student with the school community. In a more personalized approach to education, students avoid anonymity because the school has found a way to connect the student to something or someone who is paying attention. An example of what many consider a personalization strategy might include creating an advisory class that students must attend as they would any other academic class, and work with a teacher on interest and personality inventories, college exploration, study skills, time management, high school requirements, and other similar topics. Other personalization strategies include student-to-student mentoring, expansion and increase in extracurricular offerings and enrollments, high school courses for college credit, and changes to traditional classroom instruction to appeal to a broader range of learning styles (The Education Alliance at Brown University, 2003).

Personalization is an important approach to learning because not every student learns in exactly the same way (The Education Alliance at Brown University, 2003). The same approach of the seven-period day, with a teacher lecturing in the front of the classroom and individual assignments, is not effective for every student. Evidence suggests that students who do not respond to the typical uniform approach tend to tune out, perform less academically, drop out more, and engage in greater incidences of violence and other inappropriate activities (Silver, 2004). Schools that offer a personalized approach to learning will be better able to connect with students and find ways to engage them, keep their attention and focus, and help them to capitalize on their strengths as learners.

In addition to helping students learn and become more focused on school, personalization can also encourage students to think about the path they will follow after high school. Unfortunately today, many students wait too long to think about their next step after secondary school, only to find that when the time comes to graduate, they are unprepared. Already spread thin, school guidance departments often lack the time to adequately assist students in preparing for careers or making informed education decisions based on their career goals. Without someone engaging them and encouraging them to do it, a student might never take a course that piques her interest in chemistry, might never join the mock trial club and decide the law is something she really enjoys, or take the biology course that will help her get the entry-level job at a hospital or pharmacy lab. Personalized learning, and PSLPs specifically, help students think sooner, rather than later — when later may be too late — about where they want to go and who they want to be.

Implementing personalization may require schools to make major changes in how they structure themselves. A major shift toward personalization might include career exploration and planning at much earlier stages than high school. It might include a more deliber-

ate process for helping students to select high school courses that best prepare them for the college they want to attend or the career they wish to pursue. Or it might include adding class periods to the day, while shortening others, to ensure that students spend some time each day thinking about what they need to do to be successful in school and beyond. But regardless of how schools decide to personalize the school experience for their students, research indicates that personalization can improve schools' ability to connect with students, enhance their academic focus, and assist students in planning for the future.

Recognizing the benefits of personalization, the New Jersey Department of Education launched the Personalized Student Learning Plan pilot project in July 2009. NJDOE's purpose in initiating the pilot program was to identify the model or models of PSLPs that would be most effective in school districts across the state and have the greatest potential for yielding positive outcomes for New Jersey students in the future.

NJDOE released an application and invited schools to apply. Ninety schools from 66 schools districts applied. NJDOE selected 16 schools to participate in the pilot program. NJDOE required that each of the pilot schools engage **all** students in an entire grade level (i.e., either sixth or ninth grade) in the first year of the pilot. During the second year, NJDOE will require each school to implement PSLPs at two grade levels: sixth and seventh and ninth and tenth respectively. In addition, NJDOE required that each school establish a PSLP team that included a program coordinator, district administrator, principal, teacher, counselor, special education representative, local teacher association/union president or designee, and a parent.

NJDOE provided each pilot school with $7,500 in the first year and will provide an additional $7,500 in the second year to support the implementation of the PSLP program. In addition, NJDOE offered ongoing technical assistance, as well as several opportunities for the pilot schools to share resources,

present strategies, and discuss challenges. NJDOE mandated that each school send the program coordinator and at least three representatives to a one-day orientation prior to the 2009-2010 school year and to three additional meetings throughout the first year. In addition, NJDOE supported collaboration across schools by facilitating webinars and implementing a PSLP WikiSpace that allowed schools to share implementation tools.

To help it identify promising PSLP models, NJDOE contracted with the John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development to evaluate the pilot schools' implementation of PSLPs. The goal of the evaluation was to identify the practices and models of implementing PSLPs that were the most effective at meeting the needs of students, teachers, and school administrators. The Heldrich Center also sought to identify the implementation challenges that the participating schools faced and document how the schools overcame those challenges. The evaluation also provides critical information about promising practices. The lessons from the evaluation can serve as technical assistance to school districts that may implement PSLPs in the future.

Profile of Schools

NJDOE selected 16 of the 90 schools that applied to participate in the pilot program. Together, the schools represent the diversity of schools in New Jersey's school system. They represent district factor groups ranging from A to I, vary in their levels of experience with implementing a PSLP, vary in size, and were from urban, suburban, and rural districts throughout New Jersey. Six of the schools were middle schools and ten were high schools. The participating schools committed to a pilot program that began July 1, 2009 and will end June 30, 2011.

Evaluation Purpose and Methodology

The Heldrich Center's evaluation of NJDOE's PSLP pilot initiative used a variety of quantitative and qualitative methodologies to:

- Assess the implementation of personalized student learning plans,

- Collect perceptual outcomes objective performance measures (when possible) and objective performance measures (when possible), and

- Identify promising practices that can be used to inform the possible implementation of PSLPs in other schools in New Jersey.

NJDOE and the Heldrich Center identified 10 research questions that the full scope of the evaluation should address. For this report, the Heldrich Center addressed the following eight questions. The Heldrich Center will address the remaining two research questions in its final report. (See Appendix A for the complete list of research questions.)

Process Assessment

1. To what extent do the personalized learning plans developed in this initiative incorporate the essential elements of personal, academic, and career development?

2. What roles do principals, teachers, school counselors, students, parents, and the community play in the implementation of the plans? Were these roles clearly defined prior to implementation?

3. What are the primary challenges associated with the implementation of student plans?

Outcomes

4. To what extent have participating students increased their ability to articulate specific personal, academic, and career-related short-term and long-term learning goals?

5. To what extent are students implementing their plans and performing the short-term activities outlined in their personalized learning plans?

6. Does development of a personalized learning plan influence student behavior (e.g., improve attendance, reduce disciplinary action, and increase reported study time)?

Additional Questions

7. What impact did school-level differences have on the implementation of PSLPs?

8. What strategies were implemented to promote buy-in from teachers and counselors?

The evaluators used a variety of qualitative data collection methodologies to gather the data used to evaluate NJDOE's PSLP pilot program. They collected data at two points during the first year. The team conducted the baseline assessment between August and October 2009 and the first-year implementation review between March and May 2010. During each data collection period, the evaluation team collected surveys from every school and conducted site visits at seven schools.

Online Questionnaires

The Heldrich Center emailed two online questionnaires to the program coordinator and the principal at all 16 pilot schools. The evaluators administered a baseline survey in October 2009 and a follow-up survey in May 2010. In the baseline survey, the program coordinator and principal were asked to describe any related strategies that they used in the past few years, as well as any counseling efforts that they were using concurrently with the PSLP pilot program. Pilot program coordi-

nators also summarized the existing resources, relevant funding, and facilities that they anticipated using to support the program. In the follow-up survey, the evaluators collected information on the PSLP implementation design, teacher buy-in, student engagement, perceived benefits of the PSLP, and challenges and strategies for overcoming barriers.

Using an online questionnaire, the evaluators also surveyed teachers from all 16 pilot schools at the end of the 2009-2010 school year to collect information on teacher buy-in, belief in the personalized learning concept, school-level support, training, administrator buy-in, school-community collaboration, student impact, teacher impact, and lessons learned.

The evaluators developed customized items for the surveys, and included adapted items from Turnbull (2002).

Site Visits

The Heldrich Center partnered with NJDOE to identify a subset of 7 schools that were roughly representative of the 16 pilot schools to receive in-depth site visits. The site visit schools represented five district factor groups, had different levels of past experience in implementing PSLPs, and had differently sized student bodies. Five schools were high schools and two were middle schools. On average, 449 students participated in the PSLP at each school.

For this evaluation report, the Heldrich Center conducted two sets of site visits — baseline site visits in October 2009 and follow-up site visits in May 2010 — to each of the seven site visit schools. The purpose of all the site visits was to gather more detailed participant feedback about the schools' personalized learning plan strategies.

During the baseline site visits, the principal, program coordinator, two teacher representatives, and two school counselor representatives participated in one-on-one interviews with the evaluators.

In spring 2010, the evaluators returned to conduct a second site visit at each of the same seven case study schools. On this occasion, they received feedback from program coordinator and/or the principal of the school, two teachers, and two counselors. The Heldrich Center also conducted a focus group with 7 to 10 students at each school to gather common impressions. The evaluators used site visits to gather personal experiences, perceptions, and concerns about the PSLP program.

The evaluators will conduct a third set of follow-up site visits in spring 2011 to get a sense of how implementation of PSLPs has changed since this year's site visits.

PSLP Model

The New Jersey Department of Education defines personalized student learning plans as a formal plan and process that involves students setting learning goals based on personal, academic, and career interests. Although the primary goal was the same, each school implemented its own, customized approach to the PSLP model. The schools varied in how they went about facilitating the sessions (i.e., small groups vs. averaged-sized classes), the web-based student planning and career guidance systems they used to support their efforts, how they addressed scheduling concerns, the curriculum they used, the roles that they identified for key stakeholders, and the level of school support that was demonstrated to the staff.

Facilitation: Size of Group Setting

In general, the schools implemented one of two approaches to facilitate the PSLP sessions. The two approaches were evenly distributed across schools. The approaches were:

Class-Size Group Setting. The facilitator who implemented the PSLPs typically introduced the lesson to an average-sized academic class (i.e. 18.4 students; NJDOE, 2009), delivered the curriculum, and gave the students assignments. The students then went off and completed the assignments. In focus groups with students, the evaluators learned that students who participated in this approach typically believed that the sessions were informative, but lacked the "personalized" element. In fact, one student said, "The program was helpful, but it was missing the 'p'." This student was referring to the first letter P in the acronym PSLP, which represents the word **personalized** in the title **personalized student learning plan**.

Small Group Component. In this approach, larger groups of students were divided into small groups. Each group facilitator either conducted a lesson or led small group discussions and activities. The "groups" ranged from 1 student to 10 students. The schools that implemented the small group design generally reported that the administrators made scheduling changes to accommodate logistical challenges. Although some teachers initially expressed reservations about facilitating PSLPs using the small group method for fear that they would be forced to address topics that they were not comfortable discussing, by the end of the year, most teachers reported that the small groups helped them to learn more about their students.

Web-Based Student Planning and Career Guidance Systems

Most schools used some type of web-based student planning and career guidance system. These systems usually included features such as career inventories, career assessments, online career search tools, online access, and an academic portfolio. Half the schools reported using either Naviance or Career Cruising. Other tools and online systems that the schools used included Navigator 101, COIN, Learn/Do/Earn, Discover ACT, Kuder, and Weblocker. Feedback from school staff suggested that the electronic nature of the program had a positive impact on student buy-in.

Scheduling

The PSLP sessions were held during one of three following period types:

- A previously scheduled period of time when everyone in the school was doing the same thing (e.g., a homework or special activity period).

- A class period in which the schools substituted the PSLP curriculum for the traditional lesson. This typically happened in subject areas in which all of the students in a particular grade were required to take the course (i.e., physical education/health).

- A custom period of time that was created to accommodate the implementation of the PSLP program.

The schools varied in how often the students participated in PSLP activities. The schools ranged from weekly to once or twice during the marking period.

Curriculum

Curriculum Content. NJDOE suggested that schools develop a curriculum that focused on academic, career, and personal development.

In focus groups with the evaluators, students reported that they believed that the program centered primarily on career and personal development.

According to NJDOE, career development incorporates planning for career goals, career exploration, and resume development. Career exploration and assessment was the most popular career development strategy. In addition, several schools implemented planning for career goals and offered occupational search and career videos. Personal development seemed to be a secondary focus. Personal development incorporates interest and skills assessments, learning style assessment, and portfolio development. The schools used a variety of activities in this area. The most popular activity was interest and skill assessment. Several schools also implemented learning style assessments and personal goal-setting activities.

In implementing PSLPs, schools gave less priority to academic development. Academic development incorporates planning for academic goals, activities linked to statewide test results and curriculum standards, postsecondary transition planning, course selection, and other student learning opportunities.

Curriculum Development. Evaluators learned from interviews that the program coordinator typically worked with a small team of teachers to develop and distribute the lessons to the larger group of participating teachers. The schools varied in the degree to which facilitators expected the teachers to deliver the curriculum uniformly. Overall, teachers reported that they wanted the program coordinator to provide the curriculum and supplemental materials in their entirety. In addition, they preferred to receive the lessons early enough to familiarize themselves with them. A few teachers reported that they preferred to have flexibility and input in how they delivered the content.

Roles

The PSLP programs required a team approach. The schools typically developed a team that consisted of a program coordinator, principal, teachers, and school counselors. The roles were clearly defined for program coordinators and principals throughout the year. The roles of the teachers and school counselors were not as clearly defined at the beginning of the year but were well defined by the end of the first year. To date, the schools have not established formal roles for parents and community members.

Program Coordinators. The program coordinator at each school was typically responsible for coordinating the professional development for school staff, overseeing the development and delivery of the curriculum, planning for carrying out the sessions, and maintaining communication with school administrators, teachers and counseling staff, students, and the community. Seven of the program coordinators were administrators, four were guidance counselors, and three were teachers. In a survey conducted by the evaluators, a majority of the program coordinators reported that they already had many responsibilities before they became the program coordinator and that they really could not afford to devote an extended amount of time implementing PSLPs. Just about half the program coordinators who reported that they did not have the time that they wanted, reported that they relied on collaboration and commitment from various stakeholders to plan and carry out the everyday activities needed to support the program. The remaining coordinators reported that they planned and carried out the everyday activities needed to support the program entirely on their own.

Teachers. The level of teacher involvement varied greatly across schools. Teachers were the primary facilitators of the PSLP lessons. Aa small group of teachers were either selected or volunteered to participate in a committee to develop the curriculum and act as liaisons between teachers and administrators.

Principals. Principals typically demonstrated their support for the program by speaking to the staff, working with the program coordinator to make scheduling changes, and providing resources and flexibility related to training. The schools that reported limited administrator buy-in also tended to be less likely to consider teacher buy-in, hold regular meetings related to PSLP, and work to schedule time for students to work closely with an adult on academic development, career development, or personal development.

School Counselors. A typical role for the school counselors did not emerge. Counselors were either co-facilitators of PSLP sessions, lead facilitators of the sessions, or had no role in the process.

Parents and Community Members. Overall, parents and community members were not involved in the process. Several schools, however, stated that they purchased online systems with parent access capabilities.

Challenges to Implementation

One of the key goals of the PSLP pilot program evaluation was to study the challenges that the participating schools faced and understand the strategies they used to address them. By identifying the successful strategies schools used and offering suggestions for other actions the schools might have taken to address the barriers they encountered, this evaluation seeks to highlight effective ways to promote successful PSLP programs in the future.

Throughout the first year of the PSLP pilot program, six main challenges were consistently identified at all participating schools.

- **Teacher Buy-In.** Schools found it difficult to motivate teachers to engage the students in a joint effort to personalize the learning atmosphere in their schools.

- **Scheduling.** Finding time in an already busy, pre-scheduled day for the students, teachers, and counselors to break from their academic courses and other legally required activities was difficult. In some schools, especially those with limited resources, getting students to think about their futures was nearly impossible. In others, the constraints of collective bargaining agreements, which limited how many hours teachers could spend teaching, made it difficult to carve out time in teachers' schedules for them to participate in delivering the PSLP curriculum.

- **Physical Space in the School Building.** Many school buildings are already overcrowded and space is being used in multiple ways. Finding physical classroom or other space for small groups of students to gather was problematic for some schools.

- **Internet Access at School and at Home.** Web-based student planning and career guidance systems can be effective tools to help students develop their PSLPs. Even so, Internet accessibility for some students is limited to school hours only, and prevents students from continuously updating their information and sharing it with their parents at home.

- **Implementation Consistency.** Some teachers embraced the idea of a PSLP at their schools and proactively used PSLP terminology and curriculum techniques in their classrooms on a regular basis, while others did not. Because buy-in and training varied across teachers and grade levels, some schools experienced inconsistency in implementation.

- **Parental Involvement.** Although parental involvement is considered a major component of PSLPs, as defined by N.J.A.C. 6A:8, overall parents were not heavily involved in the implementation of the PSLP pilot programs across schools.

Teacher Buy-In

Teacher buy-in is probably the greatest challenge most schools faced when trying to implement their PSLPs. Because the success or failure of a personalization strategy rests almost entirely on the teachers, it is imperative that they wholeheartedly believe in the overall objective, and have a direct role in developing and implementing the strategy. The evidence collected from the teacher survey for this evaluation suggests that teacher buy-in was greatest in schools where the perception that PSLPs had a positive impact on students was greater. Teachers also must feel that they have the support of the administration. In particular, teachers reported that they must see the strategy as a sincere effort to achieve real change, and must believe their hard work in designing and implementing the strategy will result in something more than a one-year quick fix.

Overall, teachers at the pilot schools were generally less enthusiastic about PSLP implementation than administrators and program coordinators. While agreement in overall principles of the PSLP seemed clear, teachers were less likely to feel a sense of personal responsibility in making PSLP work for their students. It is important to note, however, that the first year of PSLP implementation occurred in a particularly difficult political and budgetary environment for the education system in New Jersey. Local school districts faced deep cuts to school funding and school personnel. Teacher morale, no doubt, affected their attitudes toward taking on new roles and responsibilities for programs such as PSLP.

Inclusion in the Process

True teacher buy-in to PSLPs occurs when teachers support the concept of PSLPs and are personally willing to take the steps to implement them. Teachers supported the concept of a PSLP and of making learning more personalized. More than half (52%) of the teachers agreed that they understood how

PSLPs were supposed to work to improve student learning and nearly three-quarters (74%) said they believed PSLPs were a good choice for their schools. The vast majority (90%) agreed that meaningful student-teacher interactions are essential in fostering personalized schools, and 76% agreed that personalized student learning plans can make a difference in improving student engagement in learning.

While they strongly supported the PSLP concept, teachers at some schools were dissatisfied with their roles in implementing PSLPs and did not feel personally motivated to take active roles in PSLP implementation. Only 45% of the teachers agreed that they felt personally motivated to make PSLPs work in their classrooms, and fewer than half (47%) agreed that they had opportunities to give input, ask questions, or express their concerns about the PSLP pilot at their schools. Less than one-third (28%) agreed that PSLPs were good for teacher morale at their schools. One teacher commented that the teachers felt imposed upon and that the PSLP was "extra work for no pay." Another teacher interviewed in a site visit felt that she was overwhelmed with an additional PSLP responsibility and that the PSLP was "one more thing teachers are asked to do when our plates are already overflowing."

In order for teachers to become vested in the PSLP process and really buy in to it, they must feel that they are part of the process and that their voices are heard in the development and implementation of a new program or policy. Less than half (43%) of the teachers surveyed participated in decisions on what changes were needed in order to implement PSLPs in their classrooms, and fewer (39%) indicated they participated in decisions on how those changes would take place.

Comfort with the Technology

An area of great concern for nearly all teachers at schools where they were using software to complement their PSLP activities was comfort with the technology. In most cases, the

depth and breadth of the software programs was so great, teachers never had time to become completely comfortable with using it as a tool to help the students develop their plan. One high school program coordinator remarked that when teachers began feeling overwhelmed by the technology, they began to lose interest in the entire project.

Preparation for their Role

Most teachers felt unprepared, given the vast scope of most software packages, the number of students they were expected to reach, and their discomfort with some of the topics they were expected to cover outside of their discipline. With insufficient training time, the software programs overwhelmed many teachers and made them technophobic. Little, if any, time was given to teachers to explore the website during the day. Teachers were expected to spend time on the website during their lunch at school or on their own time at home.

Other teachers felt uncomfortable with their role as an advisor or mentor. One teacher wrote in the survey that he/she felt like he/she was being asked to be a social worker or guidance counselor, both roles for which he/she had not been trained. Another teacher commented, "Guidance should do this, not classroom teachers." Many teachers felt that the PSLP, while important in theory, took time away from doing their primary job of teaching core academic concepts and preparing students for state examinations.

Teacher displeasure with the PSLP did not always undermine their actual performance as advisors. One high school program co-ordinator found that when she went around the school to observe the teachers actually delivering the PSLP material, many who complained were prepared and were working well with the students. Other teachers reported being negative at first but, over time, saw the PSLP having an effect. As one teacher explained, "I believe students were able to bond more with their PSLP advisor than I originally expected. Often the PSLP and the student were able to discuss important life issues and the teacher/PSLP advisor were able to help the student with crucial steps toward his/her goals."

Inconsistent teacher training led to inconsistent results for students in certain pilot schools. In one instance, the PSLP was being implemented for one specific grade only, and many teachers in that grade chose not to participate in voluntary training. In the end, the teachers who voluntarily attended the training were more prepared and more comfortable with the program and served as ambassadors for it while other teachers remained a little more skeptical toward it. The end result was an inconsistent and uneven implementation where students would begin understanding their learning styles in one class, and hardly discussing the issue at all in other classes.

Scheduling

Scheduling was also a serious challenge for many of the schools for two reasons:

- There is enormous pressure on school administrators to ensure that students meet all of the necessary graduation requirements. The little spare time available in their schedules is often consumed with remediation courses needed to pass state examinations or specific advanced placement courses.

- Collective bargaining agreements with the teachers' union make it difficult, if not impossible, for some schools to allocate sufficient time in the school day for students and teachers to work together on the PSLP.

Without major shifts in the traditional school day, most schools found it difficult to "fit" the PSLP into the school day. In some schools in the pilot, a period was already set aside for "advisory," as it is called in one school, or "family advocacy" in another, to cover PSLP, goal setting, and other topics pertinent

to the PSLP. These periods were sometimes created by shortening every other period by a few minutes and inserting the PSLP. Another approach was to discontinue an established course and replace that class with PSLP activities. In both cases, a successful transition required the utmost support and decision-making authority of the principal.

Some schools simply did not put the PSLP as high on the priority list as to warrant such a scheduling change. One principal firmly dismissed the notion of making scheduling changes to the school day. While he was adamant that the PSLP was important, he argued that it had taken years for several sweeping reforms he'd initiated to start yielding results. He was unwilling to make more changes that might threaten the tenuous progress being made in other areas of greater importance to him.

Meeting after school was not seen as a viable option. Students who would be willing to attend after-school sessions on PSLP already have strong ties to school. After-school sessions could never be mandated for **all** students, and would exclude students with after-school jobs and those who participate in sports and clubs.

A collective bargaining agreement with the teachers' union could often be a particularly difficult obstacle in terms of scheduling. Due to the terms of most teachers' contracts, the actual time they were required to teach varied by school but was dictated, to the minute, by their contracts. A principal would be subject to arbitration if even the slightest change was made to the day's schedule. Unless "duty" periods or other non-class time were deleted from a teacher's daily schedule to be replaced with PSLP responsibilities, there was essentially no time for anything but teaching their courses, preparing for their classes, and a lunch period.

Physical Space

Many schools already struggle with insufficient space and overcrowded hallways and facilities, especially computer labs. Schools found it difficult to find ample, unoccupied space to house small group sessions with teachers. Many had to be creative to find the space they needed, using, for example, stages in auditoriums and science labs. Yet unless PSLP activities were being implemented during already scheduled classroom time, it was difficult for schools to physically put the groups anywhere in the school building.

An even more difficult dimension to the lack of space was the need for computer access. Some schools, particularly those in lower socioeconomic district factor groups, have inadequate personal computer stations and often defunct computers. Managing to give students the opportunity to explore the PSLP software and have time to upload data and create their online portfolios was only barely possible at these schools.

Teachers also described some resentment in having to share valuable computer lab time with PSLP implementation. Teachers not involved in PSLP implementation were hard-pressed to understand having to give up computer lab access that directly related to their lesson plans in favor of PSLP implementation whose value and purpose was less clear to them.

Internet Access

The seemingly limitless personal, career, and college exploration a student could do on many of the PSLP software programs schools had purchased was severely limited by students' inability to access the Internet outside of school. For many students, Internet access is not available at home and, if it is, time is shared among siblings, parents, and other relatives. Many program coordinators interviewed at school site visits noted that students' limited computer time kept many from

taking full advantage of all the tools these comprehensive systems offer.

Quality of PSLP Implementation

For a variety of reasons, PSLPs were implemented inconsistently across classes, which became frustrating for some teachers. In some cases, teachers were simply unprepared to carry out their roles in implementing the PSLP whether it was due to insufficient training or general opposition to their PSLP responsibilities. Less than half (42%) of teachers reported that the training for implementing the PSLP was effective in preparing them to carry out their roles in the PSLP and only 45% of teachers felt motivated to make it work. Given that low level of preparedness and desire for success, teachers did not always present PSLP terminology, concepts, or curricula in an even and consistent manner.

In addition to training and motivation, program coordinators usually took on the responsibility of managing the PSLP projects at their schools, in addition to their already full-time responsibilities. As a result, PSLP activities gave way to competing priorities as teachers and staff members at the pilot schools were sometimes left to carry out the program without consistent leadership and direction.

Parental Involvement

Researchers have found that parental involvement improves student achievement. Jeynes (2005) conducted a meta-analysis of 77 studies that have examined the effect of parental involvement on student achievement and concluded that "parental involvement is associated with higher student achievement outcomes. These findings emerged consistently whether the outcome measures were grades, standardized test scores, or a variety of other measures, including teacher ratings."

Generally, educators are aware of the benefits of parental involvement. Representatives from some pilot schools told the evaluators that lack of parental involvement continues to be a school-wide concern. The evaluators learned during site visits that the program coordinators considered parental access when selecting their student planning and career exploration systems. In addition, several schools notified parents about the program using flyers and postings on school websites.

The evaluators learned that, in spite of the efforts listed above, parents were not involved in PSLP implementation at most schools. For example, only 23% of program coordinators and 17% of teachers at the pilot schools agreed that parents had been key partners in the implementation of personalized student learning plans at their schools.

Strategies to Address PSLP Implementation Challenges

Teacher Inclusion

One school visited for this evaluation knew that if the program were to succeed, the teachers had to have a place where they could offer suggestions and voice their concerns. If the teachers felt this was something that was put upon them, and not driven by their own vision, it would not work. With that in mind, this school set up a team of teachers and counselors who met once per month to discuss only issues regarding PSLP implementation. Teachers were all well aware of this team and if any teacher, including those not directly on the team, had concerns about the PSLP program, they voiced these concerns at that meeting. The program coordinator made great efforts to show some level of responsiveness to nearly every complaint or concern so the teachers and counselors felt they were heard and their opinions had impact.

Comfort with Technology

An effective strategy one high school used to help teachers become more comfortable with the PSLP software was to reduce their levels of responsibility in exposing software to students and to put the responsibility on student mentors. The program coordinator created a student mentor system where students of various academic standing were trained on the software, including how to use it and how to troubleshoot problems. Given the quick pace most young people pick up technology applications, training students was not difficult. As a reward for their service, student mentors were granted community service credits, which are a graduation requirement at this school. It also gave other students, particularly those who were not the typical academic stars, a chance to shine in the school and gave them a sense of pride. The program coordinator even presented them with certificates at an assembly attended by the administration and student body. The program coordinator noticed an enormous sense of relief on the part of teachers once the student mentor program was introduced, and she believes that it helped immensely in keeping teacher morale high and instilling a favorable attitude toward the program.

Physical Space

One school faced a severe shortage of space, preventing students and teachers from breaking into small groups. After deliberating over the problem, the program coordinator divided the entire grade involved in the pilot into two larger subgroups. The groups rotated their use of the PSLP software week by week. When one group was using the computer lab to work on the PSLP, the other group was discussing pertinent PSLP topics such as goal setting and study habits in other non-computer lab space. Each week, the groups would switch. While the solution helped, it was not ideal. It did reduce the students' in-school computer usage time by half but it also gave a structure that ensured that all students had at least some exposure to the software.

Findings

Descriptive Implementation Findings

- **For a majority of the pilot schools, implementing the PSLPs substantially shifted the way they approached student development.** Under the traditional student development model, a student had to be identified as "at risk" or "in need" before being referred for developmental services. The PSLPs substantially shifted the way schools approached student development by encouraging schools to take a more proactive approach that supports the development of all students. Instead of focusing student development efforts solely on the at-risk students, through the PSLP model, schools also worked with students who excel in the traditional paradigm, and marginal students who have not been identified as needing help, but who are also not excelling academically.

  Before implementing the PSLP programs, many of the participating schools offered support and referral services, peer leadership programs, comprehensive counseling programs, and individualized student learning opportunities. This year, when the PSLP program was introduced, most schools maintained their existing services, but added a series of new services that were designed to proactively support student development. Over half of the pilot schools reported implementing formal goal setting, personality and interest inventories, occupational search and career videos, career awareness and exploration activities, career planning, and preparation activities for the first time (see Appendix C).

- **Almost all pilot schools implemented PSLPs using some sort of a web-based student planning and career guidance system.** A web-based student planning and career guidance system was typically

the cornerstone of the PSLP process. The student planning and career guidance tools offered comprehensive career and college exploration content, allowed students to receive individualized feedback, and allowed students to store information about themselves in a portfolio over time. In addition, in many cases, the tools included a feature that allowed school staff members (e.g., guidance counselors), and parents to access sections of the students' portfolios. The evaluators learned, from feedback from school staff, that the electronic nature of the program had a positive impact on student buy-in and that the school staff enjoyed working with the systems after they gained confidence in using them. The challenges associated with electronic tools are that the facilitators have to be trained to operate and deliver the curriculum using the tool and that there is a disparity in student Internet access outside of the classroom.

Findings on Factors Associated with Success

- **A committed program coordinator who guides the overall initiative is necessary for successful PSLP implementation.** NJDOE required that each school or district assign a staff member to be the program coordinator. Seven of the program coordinators were administrators, four were guidance counselors, and three were teachers. Program coordinators led the selection of the supplemental software programs, developed the logistics plan, ordered and distributed materials, and organized training sessions.

School representatives reported that PSLP programs require substantial coordination and planning, and agreed that without someone acting as the central coordinator in each school, PSLPs would be impossible to implement. A majority of the program coordinators were asked to assume this role in addition to their other

responsibilities and were unable to give the program the attention that they would have liked to offer. Of this group, half took on the project without delegating tasks to the PSLP team.

- In a survey, 75% of the program coordinators who responded indicated that they already had many responsibilities and could not afford to devote an extended amount of time implementing the PSLP initiative. The remaining program coordinators indicated that they had the time allocated that they needed to coordinate their efforts.

- Approximately half of the program coordinators who responded said that they rely on collaboration and commitment from various stakeholders to plan and carry out the everyday activities needed to support the program.

- Approximately half of the program coordinators who indicated that they already had many responsibilities and could not afford to devote an extended amount of time to implement the PSLP initiative also indicated that they found ways to plan and carry out the everyday activities needed to support the program almost all on their own.

Most of the program coordinators interviewed during the site visits recognized the time constraints on teachers and purposefully tried to reduce the burden on them by handling nearly all the implementation details on their own. One program coordinator took time over the summer to plan, strategize, and anticipate program details, because she knew that if the curriculum was not completely prepared for the teachers, they would not have time to do it and the program would not get off the ground. Additionally, one school introduced a major career event as part of the career exploration portion of the PSLP program. Although the initiative was successful among students and local

employers, the planning for this initiative monopolized the program coordinator's time for several weeks. Expanding the career event to include other grades might not be possible, unless the coordinator receives additional staff assistance.

▪ **The schools and districts that reported the greatest positive impact went beyond simply presenting PSLPs in an average-sized class and created opportunities for small group interaction between students and teachers.** In delivering the PSLP sessions, half of the schools maintained their normal class structure and facilitated their sessions in an average-sized class. Generally, the schools that reported greater impact also implemented a small group component. These schools assigned a school staff member, or a student who was a senior, to mentor, facilitate discussions, or complete activities with a group of 10 students or less. The schools that reported less impact maintained an average-sized class throughout the lessons. (See Appendices D and E for a discussion of how the evaluators measured impact.)

In determining impact, the evaluators asked teachers, counselors, and program coordinators to indicate the degree to which they believed the PSLP process had influenced a series of student attitudes, school motivation, and behavioral items in the first year. The evaluators computed an overall student impact score and an overall teacher score for each school by averaging the associated impact items. The evaluators rank-ordered 15 of the schools, but chose not to rank one school because of missing and non-representative data. After ranking 15 of the schools, the evaluators found that the schools with the greatest impact reported implementing a small group component and schools with less impact did not implement a small group component. (See Table 1.)

▪ **District size, socioeconomic status, location, and past experience with implementing PSLPs were unrelated to how well the pilot schools implemented the PSLP program.** Successful implementation of PSLPs at the schools in the pilot was not related to factors such as prior experience with PSLPs, school size, socioeconomic status, and geographic region of the state. The evidence collected in the evaluation actually demonstrates that the highest levels of positive impact came from schools in district factor groups DE, CD and B, included high schools and a middle school, were located in different regions of the state, and had varying levels of experience in implementing personalized student learning plans.

▪ **Factors such as teacher buy-in, training quality, staff resources, and staff communication distinguished schools reporting greater impact from the schools that reported weaker results.** The data show that four factors clearly distinguished schools reporting greater impact of the PSLP program from the schools that reported weaker results (See Appendix E). The most effective schools were those with:

- High levels of teacher buy-in;

- High-quality PSLP training for participating teachers, guidance counselors, and student mentors;

- Adequate staff resources, including computer equipment, Internet access, and flexible scheduling; and

- Regular opportunities for teachers and counselors to voice their concerns and share ideas about PSLP implementation.

▪ **Principals who provided verbal support, but who were unwilling to "take action," were perceived by staff as not being supportive of PSLPs.** Teachers and program coordinators at the pilot schools indicated that lack of principal support

Table 1. Reported Impact of PSLP by Facilitation Approach

School Ranking from High Reported Impact to Low Reported impact	Class Facilitation Approach
School 1 (High Impact)	Small Group
School 2	Small Group
School 3	Small Group
School 4	(Incomplete Data)
School 5	Average-Sized Class
School 6	Small Group
School 7	Average-Sized Class
School 8	(Incomplete Data)
School 9	Small Group
School 10	Average-Sized Class
School 11	Average-Sized Class
School 12	Average-Sized Class
School 13	(Incomplete Data)
School 14	Average-Sized Class
School 15 (Lowest Impact)	Average-Sized Class

was a major challenge in the implementation process during interviews with the evaluator. In many instances, principals who were unwilling to work to adapt the school schedule or provide flexibility in staff time and who would not consider increasing the number of PSLP sessions were perceived as unsupportive.

School representatives explained to evaluators that many teachers have participated in "fly-by-night" initiatives and been disappointed when they worked hard to make an initiative successful only to have it discontinued after a brief implementation. Because of their past experience, these teachers have become jaded when it comes to implementing new programs. School staff went on to explain that there are many teachers who will not give an initiative a chance if they believe that an outside organization is asking them to do extra work to support a program that is not a priority at their schools.

- **Teachers reported that students are able to discuss long-term goals, but are less likely to outline actions and plan short-term goals.** During interviews with school staff, the evaluators asked school representatives to discuss the degree to which the students were implementing short- and long-term academic and career goals. Overall, the response was that the students focused most of their time on long-term academic planning, career exploration, and personal assessments. Teachers and school staff at the pilot schools explained that they used the first year to focus on long-term goals and that they would have the students focus on short-term goals in the second year. Significantly less time was devoted to identifying concrete steps the students could take to achieve their short- and long-term goals.

In student focus groups, evaluators learned that there were a few students who established short-term goals for themselves based on what they learned in the PSLP sessions. For example, students reported that they adjusted their study and test-taking strategies based on their learning styles. These students indicated that they were given direction about how to apply what they were learning in the PSLP program in their daily lives during their PSLP sessions and in at least one of their classes.

A majority of students, however, remained uncertain about the connection between the long-term planning and their short-term choices and behaviors. Some students understood that the PSLP strategies could be applied to their current lives, but were unsure how to do so. Other students were unclear about the relevance of the PSLP personalization strategies to their daily lives. One group of high school students, for example, explained that they struggled to apply what they learned during their PSLP sessions to academic course selection. The students surmised that the staff members who

facilitated the PSLP were not trained to discuss course selection and that the staff members who work with course selection were both unfamiliar with the PSLP process and not sure how to guide students who wanted advice about how to incorporate career and personal interests in their short-term academic planning. Although these students said they would keep their long-term plans in mind when presented with short-term enrichment opportunities, they also said that based on their experiences in the first year, they were less motivated to try to connect what they learned in the PSLP sessions to other aspects of their current "in-school" academic experiences (e.g., academic classes, course selection).

Findings Related to Challenges

- **Three significant challenges that were common across pilot schools were: teacher buy-in, scheduling, and access to technology.**

  - Success of the PSLP depended critically on teacher buy-in. Evidence from the evaluation showed that without the critical support and motivation of the teachers toward personalizing the learning experience for the students, the PSLP had little chance of working. The evaluators found that schools with greater teacher buy-in also reported the greatest impact on students and teachers alike.

  - Several program coordinators and principals reported that scheduling was a major challenge. Finding time in the school day for students to be focused on their PSLP, and not one of their core curriculum courses, and for staff to meet to plan their PSLP curriculum, was difficult. Scheduling space for PSLP activities was also problematic at most schools where there is already insufficient classroom and computer lab space to support students.

- Access to technology was a major obstacle for many schools that assigned web-based activities for students. Many schools already suffer from a dearth of sufficient computer access and fully functional computer terminals. In addition, a significant percentage of students in some schools do not have Internet access at home and, if they do, it is shared time with the entire family, which does not leave ample time for exploration and updating information on their student planning and career guidance systems.

Overarching Findings

- **The overwhelming majority of teachers and school staff involved in the PSLP pilot reported that the PSLP process had a positive impact on students in the first year in some form.** It is premature to assess the impact the PSLP process has had on students. The evaluators did, however collect data on stakeholder perception of the effectiveness of the PSLPs, and the data suggest that teachers and school staff involved in the pilot saw the PSLP process as having positive impacts on students and, to a lesser extent, teachers. (See Appendices D and E for a discussion of how the evaluators measured positive impact.)

  - More than two-thirds (70%) of teachers and staff members participating in the pilot believe PSLPs had already had a positive impact on student-teacher interactions, abilities of the students to set long-term career and academic goals, students' help-seeking behaviors, participation in clubs and class, overall motivation to succeed in school, and students' understanding of the importance of decision making.

- Nearly three-quarters (74%) of teachers and staff members at the pilot schools reported that PSLPs had a positive impact on teachers' commitment to students.

  - Teachers provided information related to both student and teacher impact. The teachers reported greater perceived impact on students than on teachers. At least 70% of the teachers reported positive impact for eight student impact items. In contrast, the teachers indicated that PSLP had a positive impact on one measure of teacher impact. That item was teacher commitment to students.

  - Although some teachers worked to incorporate personalization concepts in the classroom (e.g., student learning styles), teachers and school staff involved in the pilot did not view the implementation of PSLP as a tool to help them develop their teaching styles. In a survey conducted by the evaluators, approximately 40% of teachers agreed that participation in implementing personalized student learning plans helped them become better teachers.

- **Despite challenges to implementation in their own schools, nearly all of the teachers and administrators involved in the PSLP pilot reported that they would recommend that other schools consider implementing a PSLP initiative.**

  - Nearly three-quarters (73%) of the teachers and school staff involved in the pilot said that they would recommend PSLPs to the schools in their districts and 27% would not.

  - Program coordinators were unanimous in agreeing that they would recommend PSLPs to the schools in their districts.

Lessons

In considering all of the survey data, interviews, and focus groups conducted by the Heldrich Center, the evaluators have arrived at the following conclusion:

The New Jersey Department of Education's Personalized Student Learning Plan is a promising program for schools throughout New Jersey's school community. The participating stakeholders have clearly stated that it takes a lot of work to develop and implement a PSLP program, but most, preliminarily, believe that the program is beneficial to students when it is implemented effectively.

The Heldrich Center's evaluation of the NJDOE PSLP pilot program's first year yielded some initial lessons that may be relevant to efforts by other New Jersey schools that are considering implementing a PSLP initiative:

In facilitating the implementation of PSLPs, teachers should include a small group component. The underlying goal of PSLPs is to motivate students to become engaged in school by having them work with an adult mentor to set personal, career, and academic goals, and establish a plan for success. The "personalized" element should reflect both the fact that students are setting individualized goals for themselves, and that each student has an opportunity to develop a mentoring relationship with a school staff member. When the PSLP activities are held in average class-size groups, the students are less likely to develop a close relationship with the facilitator and may be less likely to be engaged in the PSLP process.

In conducting a comparison across the more- and less-effective schools, the evaluators found that the schools that reported greater impact implemented a small group approach. Principals, school staff, and students who participated at schools that did not establish a small group component seemed to regret that they did not incorporate it into their programs. In an end-of-the-year survey, princi-

pals reported that if they could do something differently, they would have scheduled time for students to meet with their mentors in small groups.

Principals need to communicate their support for PSLP verbally from the start, and demonstrate their ongoing support of the program through subsequent actions. Principals set the tone for much of what happens in their immediate school environments. Principals who signal strong administrative support for PLSPs when they first introduce the curriculum to their staff, and who work to adapt scheduling to accommodate the program, send a strong message to the school staff that the program is important. Principals who offer verbal support but refuse to take follow-up action send the message that the initiative is not worthy of teacher buy-in.

Teacher buy-in is critical and should be considered throughout the planning and implementation processes. Teachers have a major impact on the success of the PSLPs because they deliver the curriculum. The evaluators found that the schools with stronger teacher buy-in reported greater impact. Schools promoted teacher buy-in by allowing teachers to ask questions and voice their concerns at regular meetings, providing scheduling flexibility, including them in the planning process, and providing already prepared lesson plans that allowed teachers the freedom to be creative in their delivery of the material.

Program coordinators should start planning before the school year begins and delegate tasks to a team. The program coordinator role requires a lot of work, but with solid planning that work can be broken down into small manageable tasks that can be distributed across team members. Several program coordinators highlighted this point when asked what they would have done differently. In addition, several teachers suggested that earlier and better planning would have improved the implementation process at their schools.

School staff members need to be well trained before implementing the program. Much of the early resistance from teachers related to the fact that they did not feel that they were adequately trained to facilitate the PSLP sessions. The primary training session typically introduced the web-based student planning and career guidance system used to maintain and update a personalized student learning plan. Several teachers reported that they left the training program with several unanswered questions about both the online system and their roles in curriculum delivery. The administration may need to offer a series of training sessions in order to prepare staff to implement a PSLP program that realizes its full potential.

Schools should consider developing ways to help students focus on establishing both short- and long-term goals, and identifying concrete steps they can take to achieve those goals, throughout their academic careers. There is extensive research that suggests that long-term goals are more likely to be achieved when the steps for goal accomplishment are identified and used to establish short-term goals (Locke & Latham, 2002). Schools may want to develop activities that begin to help students see the connection between their short- and long-term goals. In addition, schools should consider incorporating both types of goal setting in the curriculum each year so that students understand that they should make it a practice to establish and adapt both short- and long-term goals in tandem. Finally, schools may need to provide additional professional development for PSLP facilitators and other participating school staff members related to personalized student advisement.

Next Steps

The Heldrich Center will submit a summative evaluation report in June 2011. That report will identify changes in the implementation process, as well as assess the effectiveness of the Personalized Student Learning Plan

initiative in relation to the key questions that were used to guide the evaluation process. In addition, the report will provide recommendations related to replicating PSLPs and a process for statewide implementation. Finally, the report will address topic areas that were deemed inconclusive in the current report. For example, the evaluation will further explore the role of school counselors, parents, and the community; highlight successes and challenges related to implementing at two grade levels concurrently; and investigate the impact of changes in leadership on the pilot programs and the degree to which the PSLP program is perceived to be a comprehensive initiative (i.e., school-wide versus segmented).

In winter 2011, the Heldrich Center will collect information from participating schools through questionnaires and site visits to assess the implementation of PSLP pilot activities in the 2010-2011 school year. The Heldrich Center will administer web-based questionnaires with the program coordinators and principals at each school. In addition, the evaluators will conduct a third and final site visit at each of the seven case study schools. The site visits will provide an opportunity to receive feedback from the program coordinator, principals, teachers, school counselors, and students. All site visits will include interviews with the program coordinator and the principal of the school, two teachers, and two counselors. During the site visits, the researchers will also observe a personalized learning plan meeting between students, teachers, and/or school counselors, if possible, and conduct a focus group with 7-10 students to gather common impressions.

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Appendix A: Evaluation Research Questions

Process Assessment Questions

1. To what extent do the personalized learning plans developed in this initiative incorporate the essential elements of personal, academic, and career development?

2. What roles do principals, teachers, school counselors, students, parents, and the community play in the implementation of the plans? Were these roles clearly defined prior to implementation?

3. To what extent do the plans work in coordination with other existing student plans (Health/Individual Educational Plans)?

4. What are the primary challenges associated with the implementation of student plans?

5. Are all components of the initiative implemented consistently throughout the year and in accordance with each school's original plan?

Outcomes Questions

6. To what extent have participating students increased their ability to articulate specific personal, academic, and career-related short-term and long-term learning goals?

7. To what extent are students implementing their plans and performing the short-term activities outlined in their personalized learning plans?

8. Does development of a personalized learning plan influence student behavior (e.g., improve attendance, reduce disciplinary action, and increase reported study time)?

Additional Questions

9. What impact did school-level individual difference factors have on the implementation of personalized learning plans?

10. What strategies were implemented to promote buy-in from teachers and school staff in implementing the PSLP?

Appendix B

Table B-1. Pilot Schools Characteristics

	DFG	High School/Middle School	Students Participating
School A	A	High School	160
School B	A	High School	1,000
School C	B	High School	125
School D	B	Middle School	710
School E	B	High School	206
School F	CD	High School	325
School G	DE	High School	471
School H	DE	High School	306
School I	FG	High School	414
School J	FG	Middle School	415
School K	GH	High School	95
School L	GH	Middle School	95
School M	I	Middle School	330
School N	I	Middle School	375
School O		High School	375
School P		Middle School	23

Appendix C

Table C-1. Prevalence of Formalized Programs, Activities, and Services in which Adults Work with Students

	Number of Schools that Offered in the 2008-2009 School Year	Number of Schools that Will Offer for the First Time in the 2009-2010 School Year
Formal goal setting	4	12
Team provides activities to personalize the student experience	5	10
Personality/interest inventory	4	11
Occupational search and career videos	5	10
Career awareness and exploration activities	6	10
Career planning and preparation activities	7	9
Course selection with a focus on interests and skills	5	8
Career interest/skills survey	8	8
Learning style survey	8	8
Advisory programs	7	4
Mentoring programs	7	4
Individualized student learning opportunities	9	4
Comprehensive counseling program	12	2
Peer leadership (student to student)	8	1
Support services and a referral process	15	1

Appendix D: Method Summary - Student and Teacher Impact

The Heldrich Center measured school staff perceptions of the PSLP initiative's impact on students and school staff. The school staff's opinions are extremely valuable because staff interact with students on a daily basis. The respondents indicated the degree to which they thought the PSLP process had influenced a series of student attitudes, school motivation, and behavioral items in the first year. In addition, the evaluators asked the school staff to report the degree to which they believed that the PSLP process affected staff commitment, morale, communication, and comfort with technology.

For each item, survey respondents indicated the nature of the PSLP's impact by rating their responses on a five-point Likert scale that ranged from "very negative" to "very positive," with "no impact" being the center option. In addition, the evaluators gave respondents the option of indicating if they were "not sure" about the particular attitude or behavior of interest. Between 11% and 19% of the respondents indicated that they were not sure of the impact on any given item. The overall results for each item, excluding the "not sure" responses, are listed in Tables D-1 and D-2.

The evaluators computed an overall student impact score and an overall teacher impact score for each school by averaging the associated impact items. The evaluators rank-ordered 15 of the schools, but chose not to rank one school because of missing and non-representative data. Finally, the program coordinator data were reviewed to ensure consistency.

Table D-1. Perceived Impact of PSLPs on Students

	Negative Impact	No Impact	Positive Impact	N
Student-teacher interaction	0.9%	24.7%	74.5%	251
Ability to set long-term career-related goals	1.2%	25.5%	73.3%	239
Help seeking	1.3%	26.6%	72.2%	239
Participation in clubs	0.8%	27.5%	71.7%	224
Ability to set long-term academic goals	0.4%	28.3%	71.3%	240
Participation in class	0.8%	28.6%	70.6%	240
Overall motivation to succeed in school	0.4%	28.9%	70.7%	243
Understanding the importance of decision making	0.4%	29.6%	70.0%	235
Ability to set short-term career-related goals	0.4%	33.9%	65.7%	237
Understanding the academic expectations and requirements of their school	1.3%	36.7%	62.1%	235
Attendance in class	0.4%	39.7%	59.8%	234
Study time	0.9%	44.9%	54.3%	228
Ability to set short-term academic goals	0.9%	45.2%	53.9%	245
Homework completion	0.4%	47.2%	52.4%	231

Table D-2. Perceived Impact of PSLPs on Teachers

	Negative Impact	No Impact	Positive Impact	N
Teacher commitment to students	0.8%	25.1%	74.1%	259
Counseling staff commitment to students	0.9%	31.2%	68.0%	231
Overall counseling staff morale	3.3%	34.7%	62.0%	213
Counseling staff-administrator communication	3.1%	37.9%	58.9%	224
Counseling staff comfort with technology	1.4%	43.0%	55.6%	207
Teacher-administrator communication	2.8%	42.9%	54.3%	254
Teacher comfort with technology	3.2%	47.2%	49.6%	252
Overall teacher morale	9.3%	43.1%	47.6%	246

Appendix E: Method Summary - How Heldrich Center Researchers Developed the Composite Scores to Rank Schools on the Quality of their Implementation of PSLPs

One of the ways the Heldrich Center measured implementation effectiveness was by developing a composite profile score for each school. The composite profile score for each school was only used to identify broad implementation trends and patterns across schools, not to definitely prove one school was directly more effective than the school ranked immediately below it and less effective than the one ranked immediately above it. To compute the composite score for each school, evaluators incorporated the following factors: overall student impact, overall teacher impact, teacher buy-in, belief in the PSLP concept, training effectiveness, administrator buy-in, and perceived school support. The evaluators conducted an extensive literature review, reviewed baseline and end-of-the-year interview notes, and identified clear patterns in survey data to determine the factors that were included in the profiles.

Evaluators identified the distribution of scores for each factor (e.g., student impact, teacher buy-in) and broke the distribution down into quartiles. Each quartile was assigned a relative score. The evaluators summed up the relative scores across all factors to determine a composite profile score for each school. The evaluators then ranked the schools according to their composite profile scores. The schools with the lowest composite scores were classified as less effective and schools with the highest scores were classified as more effective. The schools that scored toward the center of the distribution were classified as moderately effective.

Heldrich Center researchers developed confidence in the broad trends that the composite scores suggest because there was clear separation between high-performing and lower-performing schools. Schools with the highest composite scores also happened to have high scores on most of the individual components of the composite score. Similarly, the schools with low composite scores generally scored low on most of the component measures. The value of these scores was not in allowing, for example, one to say that School A did a better job implementing PSLP than School B because its composite score was one point higher than School B's composite score. Rather, the conclusions that the evaluators drew from the data were based on the schools with the highest and the lowest composite scores. In other words, the evaluators concluded that School C, which had one of the highest scores, succeeded more in PSLP implementation than School D, a school with one of the lowest scores, because its composite score was double School D's composite score.

After the composite profile scores had been assigned and the schools ranked, Heldrich Center researchers then looked at the factors that were associated with the schools that had the highest and the lowest composite scores. The evaluators reviewed the extensive data that had been collected on key explanatory variables, including past PSLP experience, location of the school, school grade level, district factor group ranking, size of the school, PSLP software vendor, class facilitation approach, program coordinator reports, roles of the participants, parental involvement, community relations, school counselor involvement, key barriers and challenges, strategies for overcoming challenges, and whether participants said that they would recommend the PSLP model to other educators to see whether any of these variables were related to the rankings. The question that the evaluators sought to answer through

this analysis was whether there were any dif-
ferences in PSLP implementation that were
associated with higher or lower composite
rankings. Taken together with the composite
profile scores, this review was used to inform
key impact and implementation findings.