

N.J. students to develop personal learning plans in pilot program at 16 schools

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Sixth- and ninth-grade students in 16 New Jersey schools will begin developing personal learning plans this year -- examining their interests, strengths and goals -- as part of a two-year statewide pilot program to get kids looking toward their futures.

The Personalized Student Learning Plan Program is part of new graduation standards, adopted by the state Board of Education in June, that aim to make high school more rigorous. After the two-year pilot, the state DOE will review the learning plan program and decide how to continue it.



Vic Yepello/The Star-Ledger

Exterior of the Thomas R. Grover Middle School in West Windsor Township in this 2000 file photo. The school is among 16 schools that is implementing a personalized personal learning program for sixth- and ninth-grade students.

Twenty states and the District of Columbia require learning plans for all students. Another five states encourage their use, according to the New Jersey Department of Education.

Too often some students reach their senior year in high school and discover they should have taken different courses or worked harder to achieve their academic goals, educators say. The aim of the learning plan program is to help students set scholastic, career and personal goals and develop a path to reach them, officials said.

"Sometimes they realize too late that my freshman grades did count or I need more math classes because I want to go in to this field," said Fran Schlenoff, a school counselor at Sparta Middle School, one of the pilots. "It helps them to understand that the choices early on are important."

As part of the learning plan program, students will be surveyed on their personalities, interests and learning styles.

For sixth graders, many of whom are beginning middle school, that may mean understanding how they best learn: visually, by listening or by doing hands-on work, for example. Throughout the year, they may explore career areas that mesh with their interests and learning styles.

("It's) not pigeon-holing someone in one career," said Dennis Lepold, principal of Thomas R. Grover Middle School in Mercer County, one of the pilots. "You can look at some (career) clusters that might be something they hadn't thought about."

For ninth graders, the learning plan program will help teens select courses during high school that are related to their interests and college and/or career goals. It also may assist them in finding internships or other independent learning opportunities.

Sixth graders and ninth graders in the pilot schools will begin using the program this year. Next school year, those same students will continue with the program as seventh and 10th graders, and incoming students in the lower grades will also start the learning plans.

As part of the effort at Sparta Middle School, all 380 sixth graders will take a course in skills needed to be a successful student, such as organization and study strategies.

They also will put together a portfolio of their work, and they will use an online program to help determine their learning styles, strengths and interests, Schlenoff said.

Sparta sixth graders also will work with a faculty adviser in groups of about 15 to discuss goal-setting and other issues that surface in middle school, such as bullying and getting along with peers.

"Even though we don't expect sixth graders to know what their major will be, what they want to do, it gives them the opportunity to explore what's out there," Schlenoff said.

At Bloomfield High School, all ninth graders will be assigned a faculty adviser, in addition to a guidance counselor, who will work with them on goal-setting. They also will use an online system that will help them explore career options and the education required, said Cyndie Schirm, assistant principal. They, too, will look at how they learn to adjust their study habits, organizational skills and better manage their time, she said.

North Brunswick is one of just three districts in the state with sixth and ninth graders participating in the program.

Students in both grades will explore their interests and compatible career paths using an online system, similar to the other districts. And they will begin assembling a portfolio with grades, attendance records, test scores, and information on their extracurricular activities, in school and outside. The portfolio will follow them as they continue into upper grades.

North Brunswick parent Ann Kingsley, who served on the district committee implementing the program, said she, her 10th grade son and eighth grade daughter have tried the online portfolio program with good results.

"I really liked it as a parent," said Kingsley, "It's a place to organize ideas and to give you information on things that might be of interest, to get things started."

Participating districts piloting the program will be eligible for up to \$7,500 each year from the state to help with costs, including curriculum materials and Web-based programs.



Jim Pathe/The Star-Ledger

Linwood Middle School in the North Brunswick school district, in this 2008 file photo. The middle school will participate in the Personalized Student Learning Plan Program.

With most districts getting their programs underway this month, many parents and students are still learning about the plans.

At Grover Middle School, sixth graders piloting the program are exploring how they learn, using a computer program that asks questions about how they approach their school work.

"I learned I'm mostly technical, I'm creative and I think outside the box," said sixth grader Erica Anderson, 11. "I do better on a poster assignment than an essay."

She said she learned that if an assignment requires a precise answer she might need to work a little harder, but "if I wanted to make a graph or build something, I could be very good at it."

Parent Lisa Chiariello, who has a fourth and ninth grader in Sparta schools, said she welcomes the learning plan program for high school students. But she questions how well it will work for sixth graders, who may be dealing with biological and social changes as well as academics as they start middle school.

"There is so much that is new to a sixth grader that it's too much to take in and disseminate. There's so much that's going on that's out of their control," Chiariello said. "(They are) growing physically and emotionally. You're a very different person down the line than you are as a sixth grader."

Personalized Student Learning Plan program

The state Department of Education has selected 16 New Jersey schools to participate in the Personalized Student Learning Plan trial program, which is being launched this fall. The plans aim to help students begin thinking about their futures. The middle and high schools will pilot the program with sixth and ninth graders for the next two years.

Bergen

Emerson

- Villano Elementary
- Emerson Jr./Sr. High School

Burlington

Northern Burlington County Regional

- Northern Burlington County Regional High School

Camden

Camden County Technical Schools

- Camden County Technical Schools

Essex

Bloomfield

- Bloomfield High School

Gloucester

Delsea Regional

- Delsea Regional High School

Hudson

North Bergen

- Horace Mann School
- North Bergen High School

Mercer

West Windsor-Plainsboro Regional

- Thomas R. Grover Middle School

Middlesex

North Brunswick

- Linwood Middle School
- North Brunswick Township High School

Greater Brunswick Charter School

- Greater Brunswick Charter School

Monmouth

Asbury Park

- Asbury Park High School

Passaic

Passaic City

- Passaic High School

Sussex

Sparta

- Sparta Middle School

Union

Roselle Borough

- Abraham Clark High School