

John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development

evaluation report

New Jersey Department of Education Personalized Student Learning Plan Pilot Program, 2011-2012 Evaluation Report

Executive Summary

The John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, has completed an extensive, three-year evaluation of the New Jersey Department of Education's (NJDOE) Personalized Student Learning Plan (PSLP) pilot program. This report summarizes the key findings and lessons learned following the program's third year of implementation, the 2011-2012 academic year.

In 2009, NJDOE launched a pilot program to identify promising PSLP formats, curricula, resource materials, and 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 in a competitive review process. Together, the schools are representative of New Jersey's schools and student population. The participating schools originally committed to a pilot program that ran from July 1, 2009 through June 30, 2011. NJDOE extended the Personalized Student Learning Plan pilot program to June 30, 2012. NJDOE lengthened the program in an effort to learn more about the important components for successful implementation and to examine student impact. Between the beginning of the pilot program and the final year, two schools opted

out of participating in the PSLP pilot program due to competing priorities. As a result, the Heldrich Center collected data from 14 pilot schools for this report.

The pilot was successful because it allowed for a thorough assessment of implementation strategies. The evaluation team was able to gain valuable information about what strategies worked well and which did not work well in helping schools implement personalized learning and PSLPs.

Evaluation Purpose and Methodology

The primary purpose of the Heldrich Center's evaluation was to assess the effectiveness of the PSLP initiative in relation to six research questions.

1. Are there any major changes across years in the processes that schools use to implement PSLP programs?
2. What are the primary challenges associated with implementing a PSLP program at a school across multiple grade levels?

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3. What were some of the promising practices to emerge from attempts to implement PSLPs across multiple grade levels?
4. To what extent have participating students increased their abilities to articulate specific personal, academic, and career-related short-term and long-term learning goals?
5. Does development of a personalized learning plan influence student behavior (e.g., improve attendance, reduce disciplinary action, and increase reported study time)?
6. Do students believe that they have benefited from participating in the program? If so, how? If not, why not?

The Heldrich Center engaged in a comprehensive data collection effort, using a variety of qualitative and quantitative methodologies, to evaluate the PSLP pilot program. The evaluators conducted 14 phone interviews with program coordinators, 5 focus groups with participating PSLP staff, 12 focus groups with students, and collected survey data from approximately 238 school staff members.

Description of PSLP Pilot Program Components

The purpose of the pilot program was to help NJDOE to identify the most promising strategies for implementing PSLP programs in New Jersey schools. NJDOE did not mandate how the schools were to implement PSLPs, but rather accorded them the flexibility to deliver PSLPs in the ways that would work best for their schools. NJDOE provided guidance on the goals of the PSLP, but ultimately left the program design to the individual schools themselves. The schools, therefore, used a variety of strategies to implement PSLPs. That said, the degree of variation in PSLP implementation was limited to the extent that a PSLP, almost by definition, requires schools

to take a common set of decisions and actions, such as developing a PSLP curriculum and deciding how much training to provide staff. The variation arose in how the schools implemented each of the six core components identified in the PSLP Year 2 evaluation research.

PSLP Web-based Guidance System. Throughout the three-year PSLP pilot program, the web-based guidance system was the focus of PSLP implementation at almost every school. Nearly all of the participating schools used a web-based guidance system as the primary tool for career and personal exploration.

PSLP Session Structure. Across years, the pilot schools have been responsible for determining their own structure for delivering PSLP sessions. Session structure refers to the student-teacher ratio in PSLP sessions and the degree to which students and adults interact to carry out PSLP activities. As in the previous two years, the Heldrich Center found that schools continued to implement PSLPs using three primary approaches in Year 3: small group approach, full-size class approach, and the hybrid approach.

PSLP Curriculum. NJDOE suggested that schools develop curriculum in three focus areas: academic development, career development, and personal development. Each year of the pilot, schools reported devoting most of their effort to the career and personal development focus areas, and this was also the case in Year 3.

To meet the needs of students across grade levels, several schools broadened their approaches to curriculum development in Year 3 by creating or diversifying curriculum development teams. During Year 3, through their curriculum development teams, schools sought to address four primary problems that they had encountered in developing PSLP curricula for multiple grade levels in Year 2: relevance, avoiding repetition, sequential presentation of topics, and the connection between PSLP and the core curriculum.

Adult Stakeholder Roles. In Year 3, the roles of the program coordinators, parents, teachers, and community members remained the same as in the previous two years. This year, program coordinators confronted additional challenges and time constraints as a result of having to coordinate the implementation of PSLPs across three or more grade levels. In one-on-one interviews with PSLP coordinators, the Heldrich Center evaluators learned that 9 of the 14 participating program coordinators felt that they already had many responsibilities and were unable to devote an extended amount of time implementing the PSLP program.

Staff Training. Throughout the course of the PSLP program, most schools provided staff introductory training that included information on the PSLP process and the web-based guidance system. The training was either facilitated by a representative from the organizations that developed the web-based guidance system or by a PSLP leader within the school.

Scheduling Decisions. As in the previous two years of this study, the Heldrich Center found in Year 3 that there is no “best” approach to scheduling. How a school schedules PSLP sessions is a function of its space and class scheduling constraints.

Findings

The Heldrich Center developed findings with respect to:

- Implementing PSLP Programs Across Multiple Grades
- Program Outcomes
- Overarching Findings
- Lessons Learned

Implementing PSLP Programs Across Multiple Grade Levels

Finding #1. Pilot schools approached implementation of the web-based guidance system, session structure, and scheduling the same way in Year 3 as they had in Years 1 and 2. In surveys and interviews with the program coordinators, the evaluation team learned that the schools typically maintained their approaches to implementing the web-based guidance system, session structure, and scheduling across all three years despite the number of grade levels served.

Finding #2. Several schools changed their approaches to implementing PSLPs by creating curriculum development teams comprised of teachers from all grade levels. In the first two years of the PSLP pilot, program coordinators typically created the curriculum by working with a small group of teachers who had pre-established interest in PSLPs. After the first year, it became clear that the curriculum development teams needed to develop curriculum that was broad enough to meet diverse needs, but specific enough to ensure that it offered grade-appropriate topics and activities. Though PSLP team members reported establishing some strategies to ensure curriculum relevance and appropriateness, it was in Year 3 that schools made concerted efforts to directly address these issues by diversifying their curriculum development teams in a systematic manner to include teachers from multiple grades in planning and creating their curricula and developing PSLP lesson plans.

Finding #3. Roles for most participating school staff generally stayed the same with respect to PSLP implementation, except for school counselors who became more involved at several schools. While the roles of administrators, teachers, parents, and community members stayed the same across all three years, counselors became more involved. Specifically, counselors used PSLP sessions and the web guidance systems to counsel students on course selections for

the following school year and for identifying colleges and scholarship opportunities for upper-level students.

Finding #4. In Year 3, schools provided less training for staff, and staff reported that PSLP training was less effective in Year 3 than in Year 2. Although the program coordinators did not report changes in the way that the training was administered in Year 3, the evaluation team noticed a significant difference in the staff reports of training frequency and effectiveness from Year 2 to Year 3.

Comparison of Program Outcomes Across Years

Finding #5. Across a range of different measures, school staff reported decreases in student impact in Year 3 compared to previous years. Each year, the Heldrich Center surveyed teachers and school staff involved with the pilot to ask them to rate the degree to which they thought the PSLP had influenced 14 student behaviors and attitudes. School staff reported decreases in student impact in Year 3 compared to previous years across a range of different measures. On 7 of the 14 items, the scores were lower in Year 3 than in either Year 1 or Year 2. (These indicators include student-teacher interaction, ability to set long-term career-related goals, help seeking, ability to set long-term academic goals, overall motivation to succeed in school, participation in class, and homework completion.) On only one item (understanding the importance of decision making) was the score in Year 3 higher than the scores in both Years 1 and 2.

Finding #6. Generally, students, program coordinators, teachers, and counselors reported that PSLPs did not affect student academic behaviors in Year 3. In each year, the Heldrich Center asked the staff to report on the degree to which they thought that PSLPs influenced these key academic behaviors. In the Year 2 evaluation report, the Heldrich Center presented data indicating that school

staff thought that PSLPs had limited impact on key academic behaviors. The data collected for the Year 3 evaluation echoes this finding. With respect to attendance in class, homework completion, and study time, a majority of respondents thought that PSLPs had either no impact or a negative impact on these student outcomes.

Finding #7. The reported effect of PSLPs on goal setting was lower in Year 3 than in either Year 1 or Year 2. In Year 3, the percentage of teachers reporting that the PSLPs had a positive effect on students' abilities to set short- and long-term career and academic goals decreased significantly from Year 2. These survey results indicating limited positive effects of PSLPs on goal setting are consistent with what the evaluators learned from focus groups with students and interviews with program coordinators: many schools did not implement formal goal-setting processes in Year 3.

Overarching Findings

Finding #8. Although the pilot schools worked very hard to implement exploration activities, they did not fully implement some of the elements in the PSLP process inherent in NJDOE's definition of a PSLP. The effects of PSLPs on students' attitudes and behaviors were likely limited because the elements that were not fully implemented were the ones that were the most critical to effecting substantive attitude and behavior change. Definitions of PSLPs, including the definition of PSLPs in the New Jersey State Administrative Code, include three basic elements: student goal setting, academic development, and personal support from adult mentors (teachers, counselors, parents) in goal setting. The pilot schools were unable to consistently focus on goal setting, academic development, or establishing formal processes to ensure that students interacted with adult mentors to set goals and monitor their progress over time. Unfortunately, these

are the elements of the PSLP process that are the most important for achieving substantive attitude and behavior change.

Finding #9. Although administrators and staff members think that personalized learning can improve student achievement, they, along with students, are unclear about how PSLPs increase student success. Nearly all educators whom the Heldrich Center surveyed or interviewed agreed that schools should implement strategies that make students feel part of a learning environment that engages them, motivates them to learn, and encourages them to work hard and achieve. Yet despite the consensus that personalized learning is valuable, PSLP program coordinators consistently reported that other teachers and administrators were hesitant to participate in PSLP programs. Program coordinators attributed the disconnect between the educators' belief that learning needs to be personalized and their reluctance to fully engage in PSLP implementation, in part, to the fact that educators did not understand how PSLPs could improve student success.

Finding #10. Students, program coordinators, teachers, and counselors generally indicated that the program was most beneficial to students who had not yet explored their career interests. Across the years, pilot program coordinators, participating PSLP staff, and students reported that PSLP was most helpful for students with undefined academic and career goals. Students who were not yet sure of their career goals were more likely to use the PSLP tools and resources to explore careers than students who had previously established plans.

Finding #11. Across all three years, a strong majority of those who completed the end-of-year staff survey recommended PSLPs for other schools in their districts. In the annual end-of-year staff survey, the Heldrich Center asked school staff involved in the PSLP process to indicate whether they would recommend PSLPs to other schools in their districts.

In all three years, more than 70% of survey respondents reported that they would recommend PSLPs to other schools in their districts.

Lessons Learned

Lesson #1. Provide a clear framework for staff members to help them understand the process by which the school's PSLP is designed to increase student success. As explained in Finding #9, although most pilot schools believed in the concept of PSLP as defined by NJDOE, they struggled to implement PSLPs because many staff members remained unsure as to how PSLP activities related to student success. Although PSLPs can have a significant effect on student outcomes, how they do so is not immediately obvious, even to educators, and requires some explanation to elicit buy-in. Schools implementing PSLPs should implement strategies to clearly explain how PSLP activities relate to student success.

Lesson #2. Ensure that staff members feel that they have received the training they need to be able to implement PSLPs effectively. In each of the three years of the evaluation, some school staff reported that they did not receive adequate training. Program coordinators at schools where staff reported that the training was relatively effective offered the following suggestions: Allocate several hours for training well in advance of implementation, have the staff role play as if they were students and share ideas on how to address problems, discuss both technical and non-technical components of facilitating PSLPs, set aside time throughout the academic year for follow-up training, and provide a forum for the discussion of different strategies teachers have used to make PSLPs work.

Lesson #3. When implementing a PSLP program across multiple grade levels, schools should consider incorporating teachers from each grade level to act as liaisons between the PSLP team and the staff serving each

grade. During phone interviews, coordinators indicated that schools should seek the input of teachers at each grade level to ensure that PSLP activities can be seamlessly integrated into curricula and lesson plans at all grade levels.

Lesson #4. Middle schools implementing PSLPs need to carefully select activities and topics to ensure that they are relevant to and appropriate for younger students. In surveys and interviews, staff and program coordinators at middle schools emphasized the importance of ensuring that the PSLP program is relevant for the middle grades by focusing primarily on personal development topics and a broad exposure to different career opportunities.

Lesson #5. Pilot program coordinators, teachers, and school staff recommended that schools interested in establishing a PSLP program should allocate adequate time and resources to developing the PSLP curriculum. Program coordinators expressed a need for time and resources to design curriculum that capitalizes on the strengths of teachers and meets the needs of students. Overall, many reported that the curriculum should be developed several months prior to the implementation of a PSLP program to allow for teacher input and revisions.

Lesson #6. PSLP teams have to seek continuous feedback to ensure that the processes associated with implementing the PSLP program support the establishment and development of meaningful relationships between students and adult stakeholders. In conducting this evaluation, the Heldrich Center learned that teachers thought that the strategies that the schools used to connect staff with students were not effective at allowing teachers to establish meaningful relationships with students, and teachers need to be purposefully matched to appropriate students with whom they can establish and foster relationships over time.

Lesson #7. Cultivate commitment among multiple leaders to support long-term sustainability. In order for PSLPs to become institutionalized, PSLP leadership teams need to be established to ensure continuity in the event that the program coordinator leaves the school or changes positions within the school.

Lesson #8. To reduce the pressure on staff to follow up with each student individually, coordinators and school staff recommended that schools use peer mentors or assign students into small groups to reinforce lessons learned in a PSLP session. Survey responses from the end-of-the-year staff survey revealed that several staff would encourage schools to use peer mentors or small groups to reinforce and have students reflect on lessons learned in PSLP sessions.

Introduction

Background

In 2009, NJDOE launched a pilot program to support 16 schools in implementing PSLPs. A personalized learning plan is a formal process by which students identify their interests, set short- and long-term goals, and receive personal support from adult stakeholders (e.g., teachers, school counselors) in working toward their goals. The purpose of the PSLP pilot was to identify the promising practices New Jersey schools developed in personalizing their learning environments by implementing PSLPs, and which strategies might be effective at helping schools overcome the challenges associated with implementing them.

To capitalize on the goal of learning about the effectiveness of different PSLP strategies, NJDOE contracted with the John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers University to evaluate the schools' implementation of their PSLP programs during the 2009-2010, 2010-2011, and 2011-2012 academic years. NJDOE and the Heldrich

Center structured the evaluation so that findings and promising practices uncovered in one year would be disseminated to schools so that they could improve their implementation of PSLPs in the following year. In Years 1 and 2, the Heldrich Center documented PSLP implementation, identified challenges to implementation, assessed the effectiveness of different PSLP strategies, and summarized lessons learned. The Year 3 evaluation addressed these issues and also studied program implementation across multiple grade levels and gathered feedback from students about the benefits of PSLPs.

The pilot project, as a whole, was successful because it generated a substantial body of information on the strategies schools could use to implement PSLPs and the challenges they may face along the way. This report presents the results of the final year of the PSLP evaluation in the context of the two prior years of the program. In addition to detailing the results of the Heldrich Center's evaluation, this report identifies challenges, findings, and promising practices that are actionable. Any school — whether it is currently implementing a PSLP program or may implement one in a future school year — can use the information contained in this report to shape the implementation of its PSLP to maximize its chances for success.

Overview of the NJDOE PSLP Pilot Program

NJDOE initiated the PSLP program by releasing an application that invited schools to apply for a two-year program from July 1, 2009 through June 30, 2011. Ninety schools from 66 school districts applied. NJDOE selected 16 schools to participate and provided each with \$7,500 per year to support the implementation of the PSLP program. These schools included middle schools and high schools that were roughly representative of New Jersey's diverse schools and student population. Although the PSLP program originally started with 16 schools, one school removed itself from the pilot program due to

a reduction in guidance staff after Year 1 and a second school participated very little in Year 2 and stopped participating at the end of Year 2. After the end of the second year of the pilot, NJDOE decided to extend the PSLP pilot program until June 30, 2012. The purpose of the extension was to provide NJDOE with an additional opportunity to identify elements needed for successful implementation and examine student impact. Year 3 began with the remaining 14 schools.

NJDOE instructed the pilot schools to implement PSLP programs in one grade level during the first year and in two grade levels during the second year. During the first year, students in sixth grade (middle schools) and ninth grade (high schools) participated in the PSLP. In the second year, incoming 6th- and 9th-grade students participated for the first time, while the students who participated in Year 1 participated for a second consecutive year in either the 7th or the 10th grade. In the final year of the pilot, the schools were required to implement PSLP programs across all grade levels, including 6th, 7th, and 8th grades for the participating middle schools, and 9th, 10th, 11th, and 12th grades for the high schools.

Throughout all three years of the PSLP pilot program, NJDOE provided financial support, distributed resources, and facilitated PSLP-related professional development sessions. In the first year, the workshops focused on providing guidance to schools to support their initial implementation and allowed schools to network and share concerns, strategies, and lessons learned. During the second and third years, NJDOE facilitated networking opportunities for the pilot schools, provided feedback based on findings from the Heldrich Center's evaluations, and offered support to schools to help them in their efforts to improve parental involvement. In Year 3, NJDOE also partnered with the Heldrich Center to develop a self-assessment tool to support schools already implementing PSLPs in using a multi-dimensional approach to monitoring their PSLP program processes over time.

Evaluation Purpose and Methodology

The main purpose of the evaluation was to assess the effectiveness of the PSLP initiative in relation to 10 research questions that NJDOE and the Heldrich Center identified at the start of the evaluation (see Appendix A for the full list of questions.) The Year 1 evaluation addressed eight of the research questions. During the second year of the evaluation, the Heldrich Center addressed the two remaining questions and revisited the questions for which the data had been inconclusive in the Year 1 evaluation.

This report examines 6 research questions, revisiting the 2 questions from the original 10 that relate to student impact and studying 4 new research questions that the Heldrich Center and NJDOE identified at the start of the Year 3 evaluation. Following is the list of six research questions that this report addresses.

Implementation of PSLP Across Multiple Grade Levels in Year 3

1. Are there any major changes across years in the processes that schools use to implement PSLP programs?
2. What are the primary challenges associated with implementing a PSLP program at a school across multiple grade levels?
3. What were some of the promising practices to emerge from attempts to implement PSLPs across multiple grade levels?

Comparison of Program Outcomes Across Years

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

5. Does development of a personalized learning plan influence student behavior (e.g., improve attendance, reduce disciplinary action, and increase reported study time)?
6. Do students believe that they have benefited from participating in the program? If so, how? If not, why not?

Data Collection Methodologies

The Heldrich Center engaged in a comprehensive data collection effort, using a variety of qualitative and quantitative methodologies to evaluate the PSLP pilot program. The evaluators conducted 14 phone interviews with program coordinators, 5 focus groups with participating PSLP staff, and 12 focus groups with students, and collected survey data from approximately 238 school staff members.

Online Questionnaires

At the end of the 2011-2012 school year, the Heldrich Center surveyed school staff members who participated in the PSLP. As in the previous two years, the evaluation team used the survey to collect information on teacher buy-in, belief in the personalized learning concept, teacher control of classroom implementation, training, administrator buy-in, school-community collaboration, student impact, teacher impact, and lessons learned. Unlike the previous two years, the Year 3 school staff survey also collected information about lessons learned from and challenges experienced in implementing PSLP programs in multiple grade levels. The evaluators developed customized items for the surveys, and included adapted items from Turnbull (2002). The reliabilities for the subscales ranged between .71 and .92, except for the belief in PSLP subscale, which yielded a lower reliability of .52 and so was excluded from the analyses.

Thirteen of the fourteen remaining schools fully participated in the online school staff questionnaire. The survey data from one school were excluded from the analysis because of a low response rate.

Program Coordinator Phone Interviews

In Year 3, as in the first two years of the evaluation, Heldrich Center researchers conducted an end-of-year telephone interview with the program coordinator at each of the participating schools. The purpose of the interviews was to gather in-depth information on the school's lessons learned across the three years of implementation, as well as to further clarify the implementation process at each school. The interviews typically ranged from 40 to 60 minutes in length.

Site Visits

In Year 3, the Heldrich Center and NJDOE identified five schools that would each receive a single, half-day site visit. The Heldrich Center conducted these visits between March and May 2012. The site visit schools included three high schools and two middle schools, representing various district factor groups (i.e., varying levels of socioeconomic status), levels of implementation, and student population sizes.

During the half-day site visits, Heldrich Center researchers conducted one forty-five minute focus group with staff members involved in implementing and developing the curriculum and up to three student focus groups, one for first-year PSLP participants, another for two-year participants, and a third for students who had participated in PSLPs for three years. Focus groups included between three and seven participants.

Program Description

Description of PSLP Pilot Program Components

The underlying purpose of the pilot program was to help NJDOE identify the promising practices New Jersey schools developed in personalizing their learning environments by implementing PSLPs, and which strategies might be effective at helping schools overcome the challenges associated with implementing them. Although NJDOE required participating schools to use a web-based guidance system; develop a PSLP leadership team; and participate in NJDOE PSLP meetings, workshops, and research activities, NJDOE did not mandate how the schools were to implement PSLPs. Rather, NJDOE allowed the pilot schools the flexibility to deliver PSLPs in the ways that would work best for their schools.

Accorded flexibility, the schools used a variety of different strategies to implement PSLPs. That said, the degree of variation in PSLP implementation was limited to the extent that a PSLP, almost by definition, requires schools to take a common set of decisions and actions, such as developing a PSLP curriculum and deciding how much training to provide staff. The variation arose in how the schools implemented each of six core components.

In Year 2, the Heldrich Center delineated the common components of PSLP programs and described how the schools in the pilot program implemented them. What follows is a brief description of the six core components and how they were implemented in the Year 3 PSLP pilot schools.

PSLP Web-based Guidance System

Throughout the three-year PSLP pilot program, the web-based guidance system was the focus of PSLP implementation at almost every school. Nearly all of the participating

schools used a web-based guidance system as the primary tool for career and personal exploration.

At the start of the program, NJDOE encouraged each school to choose the web-based guidance system best suited to its needs. In Year 3, pilot schools continued to use the three primary systems that were used in the previous two years: Career Cruising, Naviance, and Kuder. (NJDOE does not endorse any of the three web-based guidance systems.) This year, five schools used Career Cruising, five schools used Naviance, and four schools used Kuder. All three of these systems are web-based, provide career and college exploration resources, and provide self-assessment, résumé building, and goal planning tools. School staff used the web-based guidance system to facilitate PSLP sessions and expose students to different career research tools and resources. In addition, participating teachers and staff members also reported using the software system to access pre-packaged presentations and lessons, which they customized based on their class needs.

As in the previous year, the Heldrich Center found that students and staff thought that learning style inventories were the most useful tools in the web-based guidance systems. In focus groups, students reported that teachers encouraged them to apply knowledge of their learning styles to their coursework.

Each year, teachers with access to student profiles reported that both the teachers and students benefited when teachers reviewed student profiles. In the first two years, teachers who did not have access to student profiles expressed dissatisfaction with their lack of access to student information on the web-based guidance system, and in Year 3, this concern persisted. In surveys and interviews, teachers from several schools said that they wanted greater access to student profiles to learn more about their students' preferences, goals, strengths, weaknesses, and con-

cerns. Although the teachers understood that their access was limited to protect students' personal information, several thought that the schools should work to develop a reasonable solution that would protect students' personal information, while still allowing the teachers' access to student information that would permit them to better assist their students.

PSLP Session Structure

Across years, the pilot schools have been responsible for determining their own structure for delivering PSLP sessions. Session structure refers to the student-teacher ratio in PSLP sessions and the degree to which students and adults interact to carry out PSLP activities.

As in the previous two years, the Heldrich Center found that schools continued to implement PSLPs using three primary approaches in Year 3: small group approach, full-size class approach, and the hybrid approach. In the small group approach, a facilitator leads a lesson or activity with a small group of 1 to 10 students for all or nearly all PSLP activities. At the end of Year 1, the evaluation team found that PSLPs that used the **small group** approach had more significant impact on students than did PSLPs at schools that did not implement small group approaches. The full-size class approach describes a model whereby a facilitator introduces lessons according to a prepared curriculum and gives assignments to a full-size academic class (i.e., 19 students; New Jersey Department of Education, 2011) for all or nearly all PSLP activities. In the full-size class PSLP setting, students are asked to complete PSLP-related activities independently. In the third PSLP approach, the hybrid approach, schools combine some degree of the full-size class setting with the small group approach to facilitate their PSLP activities. Some schools, for example, combined a full-size class approach for grade-wide student development activities with a peer mentoring program to allow students more personalized interactions.

PSLP Curriculum

Curriculum Content. NJDOE suggested that schools develop curriculum in three focus areas: academic development, career development, and personal development. Academic development incorporates planning for academic goals, activities linked to statewide tests and curriculum standards, postsecondary transition planning, course selection, and other student learning opportunities. Career development incorporates planning for career goals, career exploration, and résumé development. The personal development focus area includes interest and skills assessments, learning style assessments, and portfolio development.

In Year 3, as was the case in Years 1 and 2 of the pilot, schools reported devoting most of their effort to the career and personal development focus areas. Teachers explained that the reason for the greater focus on personal and career development, than on academic development, was because activities related to career and personal development were more readily available through the web-based guidance systems and were easier to use in the classroom.

Teachers were less likely to either incorporate PSLP content in core academic classes or develop processes for academic goal setting. Some schools, however, began taking small steps toward infusing core curriculum classes with PSLP resources and information. One school, for example, used a language arts lesson on essay writing to have students write an essay about their career choices, work together in small groups to proofread them, and then present them orally to the class.

Curriculum Development. To meet the needs of students across grade levels, several schools broadened their approaches to curriculum development in Year 3 by creating or diversifying curriculum development teams. Year 2 was the first year in which schools implemented PSLPs in multiple grade levels, and as the year progressed many schools came to realize that they needed to dedicate

more personnel time to developing curricula for PSLPs to ensure that the topics were relevant and appropriate for each grade level. In Year 3, most schools revised their curricula to meet the needs of students across grade levels and eliminate repetition. At most schools, teachers and/or counselors from various grade levels worked together to adapt the curriculum, though in a few instances, the program coordinators revised and distributed the curriculum on their own. During Year 3, through their curriculum development teams, schools sought to address four primary problems that they had encountered in developing PSLP curricula for multiple grade levels in Year 2: relevance, avoiding repetition, sequential presentation of topics, and the connection between PSLP and the core curriculum.

- **Relevance.** In focus groups, students and staff reported that in Year 2, the activities presented during PSLP sessions were not always appropriate to the grade level or the student population. Staff responsible for incorporating PSLP into special education classes, for example, found that students had a difficult time understanding the material. Several other staff members reported similar difficulties when adapting high school PSLP lessons to facilitate sessions with middle school students. In Year 3, program coordinators reported that they were generally more prepared to identify relevant curriculum topics for the various grade levels.
- **Avoiding Repetition.** In Year 2, staff and students reported that students participating in PSLPs for the second year had already completed many of the assignments in the web-based career guidance system in their first year of participation. Several teachers reported that they first learned that students had already completed an assignment during a PSLP session when they saw that the fields for some exercises were already populated. For Year 3, program coordinators and staff sought to communicate across grades more effectively, and spend more time to

plan and coordinate the activities across years. In addition, many of the schools decided to maintain some repetition across grades to encourage students to review their responses from the previous year, re-evaluate their priorities, and assess whether and how they may have changed over time.

- **Sequential Presentation of PSLP Topics.** As educators, staff participating in PSLPs understand the importance of introducing topics sequentially across grade levels. Sequential curricula help students build upon prior knowledge and support students in applying what they have learned to their daily decision making and planning. In Year 2, several staff members suggested that the curriculum developers needed to carefully select topics and establish activities to support students in applying PSLP lessons over time. In Year 3, the diverse teams worked to identify the most appropriate topics and sequence the introduction of topics to maximize PSLP effectiveness across grade levels.
- **Connection Between the PSLP Content and the School's Curriculum.** In Year 2, teachers and staff reiterated the need for a PSLP curriculum that aligned with a school's curriculum. Program coordinators, students, and teachers thought that integrating the PSLP curriculum into the school's curriculum would strengthen teacher and student buy-in. In phone interviews, program coordinators went on to explain that many teachers do not prioritize initiatives that do not have substantive connections to the curriculum. Teachers often view a program that they perceive to be not directly related to curriculum as a distraction that wastes valuable class time. In Year 3, the curriculum development teams considered the existing academic curriculum for each grade level when they selected PSLP topics for each grade level. Some schools used that exercise to help them brainstorm ideas and identify core subject area

teachers who would be willing to incorporate PSLP topics in their courses. However, several teachers explained that they lacked resources (e.g., time) to effectively connect PSLP to their subject areas.

Adult Stakeholder Roles

Each PSLP pilot program required support and active participation from five adult stakeholders.

- **Teachers** primarily participated in planning and facilitated PSLP sessions.
- **School counselors** facilitated PSLP sessions and used the web-based guidance system to help students select courses for the upcoming year and prepare students for the transition from middle school to high school. In Year 3, the school counselors also reported using information gleaned from the PSLP process to help upper-level students identify potential colleges and scholarships.
- **Parents** typically played a very limited role in the PSLP process. However, schools introduced parents to the PSLP program and asked them to engage in conversations with their children to encourage follow-up discussions about the PSLP session topics.
- **Principals** provided ancillary support by speaking to staff, worked with the program coordinator to make scheduling changes, and provided resources and training.
- **Program coordinators** coordinated professional development for school staff, oversaw the development and delivery of the curriculum, and communicated with school administrators, teachers, counseling staff, students, and the community.

In Year 3, the roles of the program coordinators, parents, and community members remained the same as in the previous two years. This year, program coordinators confronted additional challenges and time constraints as a result of having to coordinate the implementation of PSLPs across three or more grade levels. In one-on-one interviews with PSLP coordinators, the Heldrich Center learned that 9 of the 14 participating program coordinators felt that they already had many responsibilities and were thus unable to devote an extended amount of time implementing the PSLP program. Only five of those nine also indicated that they relied on the collaboration and commitment from various stakeholders to plan and carry out the everyday activities needed to support the PSLP program. The remaining program coordinators reported that they found ways to plan and carry out the everyday activities needed to support the program almost all on their own.

Staff Training

Throughout the course of the PSLP program, most schools provided staff introductory training that included information on the PSLP process and the web-based guidance system. The training was either facilitated by a representative from the organizations that developed the web-based guidance system or by a PSLP leader within the school.

Some schools provided additional training throughout the school year to support staff members on an as-needed basis. In interviews with program coordinators, 9 of the 14 program coordinators reported that their schools provided only the introductory training session to staff, while 5 schools reported that they also provided training sessions on an as-needed basis in Year 3. School staff reported similar results, with 44% indicating that their schools provided ongoing training related to PSLPs. The Heldrich Center evaluators compared staff reports across years and found that staff reports of receiving ongoing

training dropped by almost nine percentage points from Year 2 to Year 3 (i.e., from 53% to 44%).

The training content addressed both technical and non-technical topics. Technical training content focused directly on using the web-based guidance system. Non-technical training content supported staff in facilitating PSLP sessions (e.g., facilitating small groups) and conveying the PSLP curriculum. In Year 3, five schools provided training only related to the web-based guidance system, three schools provided training that primarily focused on non-technical content areas, and six schools provided training that addressed both technical and non-technical aspects of facilitating PSLP sessions.

Scheduling Decisions

As in the previous two years of this study, the Heldrich Center found in Year 3 that there is no “best” approach to scheduling. How a school schedules PSLP sessions is a function of its space and class scheduling constraints. These differ greatly from one school to the next, and so there is no one-size-fits-all strategy. PSLP sessions often require access to computers. As a result, PSLP sessions need to be scheduled in computer labs, libraries, or classrooms with computer access. Survey responses from participating staff indicated that administrators and staff continue to face challenges related to scheduling classes to use computer labs, identifying spaces needed to facilitate small group sessions, and finding common flexible time periods in student and staff schedules.

During each year of the evaluation, the Heldrich Center found that schools generally held PSLP sessions during one of the three following class-period types:

- A previously scheduled period of time when everyone in the school was doing the same thing (e.g., a homeroom, study hall, 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 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.

Challenges Associated with Implementing Across Grade Levels in Year 3

The greatest value of any pilot program is the lessons learned and strategies for overcoming challenges that emerge from program implementation during the pilot. Although challenges require a lot of time and attention to address during the pilot, they provide invaluable information for those who implement similar programs after the pilot.

The Heldrich Center's Year 1 evaluation report identified six main challenges that schools faced during the first year of New Jersey's PSLP pilot program implementation: scheduling, the availability of physical space in which to hold PSLP sessions, accessibility for all students, consistent, high-quality implementation throughout the school, teacher buy-in, and parental involvement. In Year 2, many schools saw improvements in the first four areas listed above. However, the evaluators found that teacher buy-in remained a consistent and significant challenge to implementation. The evaluators also found that parental involvement remained limited across years despite the efforts of the pilot schools. During the third year, the evaluators focused on identifying challenges associated with implementing PSLPs across multiple grades. PSLP implementation across all grades required planning for training additional staff members, identifying strategies to

track PSLPs for every student, and motivating more staff to engage in PSLP implementation. The schools described challenges associated with each of these tasks.

Challenge #1. Most schools were unable to carry out effective processes for training and engaging staff. Across all three years of the pilot, school administrators and teachers recognized the importance of providing adequate and ongoing training to staff participating in the PSLP program. Reports from teachers in all three years suggested that training needed to:

- Be customized to the trainee needs,
- Be provided throughout the year,
- Be conducted well in advance of PSLP program rollout,
- Include substantial time for practice and interacting with the system, and
- Address teacher concerns about session facilitation.

In Years 1 and 2, school staff reported that the training was insufficient to prepare them to effectively lead PSLP sessions and implement the PSLP program at their schools. In Year 3, a significant number of participating staff continued to indicate that their training needs were not being met. In interviews and survey responses, school staff expressed that they felt unprepared to facilitate PSLP sessions at the start of the year because they were not familiar with the key elements and processes of their schools' PSLP. Only 40% of the staff members reported that the training was effective in preparing them to deliver PSLPs.

Challenge #2. Several participating teachers and school staff from pilot schools reported that it became increasingly difficult to keep track of students' personalized learning plans after the schools implemented the program across multiple grade levels. Survey

responses from most teachers and staff from the pilot schools indicated that staff found it challenging to keep track of the students they were working with throughout the school. Many reported that incorporating PSLPs in multiple grade levels was challenging because it required teachers to become familiar with students with whom they did not regularly interact. In addition, staff indicated that the influx of students participating in the program at their schools made it difficult for teachers to effectively work with them. Several participating teachers explained, for example, that it was difficult to get new students to the PSLP program to open up quickly and discuss personal and career interests when they did not have the flexibility in their schedules or the time to establish meaningful relationships with students. Many added that they were unable to follow up on students' progress or find opportunities in which they could guide students toward their personal, academic, and career goals throughout the year. This particular challenge ultimately affected each school's ability to infuse the personalized learning approach across grades.

Challenge #3. Several schools found it difficult to maintain staff commitment from Year 2 to Year 3. Weakened staff morale, limited opportunities for staff input in PSLPs, and an official decision not to mandate PSLPs at the conclusion of the pilot made it difficult for pilot schools to maintain their commitment to the program from Year 2 to Year 3.

- Most school staff members did not interpret PSLPs as being good for school morale in Year 3. The Heldrich Center asked school staff to report the degree to which they believed that PSLPs were positive for morale. The percentage of staff reporting the PSLPs had a positive impact on school morale decreased from Year 2 to Year 3 by 13 percentage points. In Year 3, less than a quarter (23.8%) of teachers and staff indicated that the PSLP program was good for staff morale.

- Many school staff members reported feeling that they were forced to implement PSLPs without being given the opportunity to provide their input. Moreover, teachers and staff reported that they were not actively engaged throughout the implementation of the program. For example, many indicated that although teachers expressed concerns about and were aware of challenges related to implementing their school's PSLP program, most schools did not establish a mechanism by which teachers could easily and effectively communicate these challenges and concerns to school officials. Many felt that, overall, their feedback and input were not actively sought throughout implementation.
- Schools reported that many staff members became less engaged in PSLP implementation during Year 3 after learning that the PSLP program would not become a mandatory requirement for schools across the state. In interviews, school staff explained that they initially applied for the program, in part, because they thought that participating in the pilot would give them a head start on implementing an initiative that would eventually become mandatory for all schools. The evaluation team did not systematically measure the impact of the program being mandated versus not mandated as part of this study. However, program coordinators and other school staff members voluntarily explained that staff motivation to implement PSLPs diminished after they learned that PSLPs would not become mandatory across the state. The evaluation team heard this sentiment repeated in program coordinator phone interviews, staff surveys, and site visits. The program coordinators reported that the change in policy diminished the pilot schools' motivation to implement PSLPs because, in many schools, non-mandatory initiatives are often not given the same priority as mandatory initiatives.

Findings

This section presents the Heldrich Center's findings in the following areas:

- Implementing PSLP Programs Across Multiple Grades
- Program Outcomes
- Overarching Findings
- Lessons Learned

Implementing PSLP Programs Across Multiple Grade Levels

The Heldrich Center studied the implementation of all six core components of PSLP programs (web-based guidance system, session structure, curriculum, adult mentors, staff training, and scheduling) to learn whether and to what extent each component was implemented the same way in Year 3 as it had been implemented in Years 1 and 2. Heldrich Center researchers were interested in learning the extent to which including different grade levels complicated implementation or forced changes in how schools implemented PSLPs.

Finding #1. Pilot schools approached implementation of the web-based guidance system, session structure, and scheduling the same way in Year 3 as they had in Years 1 and 2. In surveys and interviews with the program coordinators, the evaluation team learned that the schools typically maintained their approaches to implementing the web-based guidance system, session structure, and scheduling across all three years despite the number of grade levels served. Many schools continued to use the same web-based guidance system and used them in the same manner as they did in the first two years. Again in Year 3, the web-based guidance systems were the focus of PSLP implementation and the teachers used them primarily to have the students complete exploratory exercises to

identify their interests. Although school staff thought that PSLPs would be more effective if implemented in small groups, half of all schools continued to use the full-class size approach to PSLP implementation. Though some schools scheduled PSLP sessions in different ways than others, almost every school took the same approach to scheduling PSLP sessions as it had in the first two years.

Finding #2. Several schools changed their approach to implementing PSLPs by creating curriculum development teams comprised of teachers from all grade levels. In the first two years of the PSLP pilot, program coordinators typically created the curriculum by working with a small group of volunteer teachers, and then they disseminated it to the rest of the teachers. In the evaluations of the first two years of the pilot, the Heldrich Center learned that the curriculum was not always as relevant as it needed to be for each grade level, that there was repetition in curriculum across grades, that the topics sometimes were not presented in a sequential or logical fashion across grades, and that the connection between PSLP and the core curriculum was not as strong as it could have been. In Year 3, some schools made concerted efforts to directly address these issues by diversifying their curriculum development teams in a systematic manner to include teachers from multiple grades in planning and creating their curricula and developing PSLP lesson plans.

Finding #3. Roles for most participating school staff generally stayed the same with respect to PSLP implementation, except for school counselors who became more involved at several schools. The roles of administrators, teachers, parents, and community members stayed the same across all three years. Although the student counselor roles still varied from school to school, more school counselors reported using PSLP in their counseling sessions this year. In Year 2, in the end-of-year staff survey and interviews, few school counselors reported using PSLP in their counseling sessions. In the end-of-year survey in Year 3, more than half (68.2%) of the school counselors reported that they

systematically incorporated PSLP information and concepts in counseling sessions. In addition, 8 of 14 program coordinators reported that school counselors used the PSLP software system to advise students.

Finding #4. In Year 3, schools provided less training for staff, and staff reported that PSLP training was less effective in Year 3 than in Year 2. Although the program coordinators did not report changes in the way that the training was administered in Year 3, the evaluation team noticed a significant difference in the staff reports of training frequency and effectiveness from Year 2 to Year 3. In each year, the Heldrich Center asked the staff to report on the degree to which training was effective in preparing them to deliver the PSLP curriculum, using a five-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”. The staff who responded to the survey reported that, overall, the training was significantly less effective in Year 3 ($M = 3.21$ $SD = .45$) than it was in Year 2 ($M = 3.37$ $SD = .41$; $t = -2.32$, $df = 12$, $p = .04$).

Comparison of Program Outcomes Across Years

Finding #5. Across a range of different measures, school staff reported decreases in student impact in Year 3 compared to previous years. Each year, the Heldrich Center surveyed teachers and school staff involved with the pilot to ask them to rate the degree to which they thought the PSLP had influenced 14 student behaviors and attitudes. For each item, survey respondents indicated the degree 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 middle option. Thus, average ratings of 1 would indicate very negative impact, 2 would indicate negative impact, 3 would indicate no impact, 4 would indicate positive impact, and 5 would indicate a very positive impact.

The average rating across all 14 items in Years 1 and 2 was identical at approximately 3.77. In Year 3, the average combined rating for all 14 items decreased to 3.42. Heldrich Center researchers conducted a paired t-test to determine if the reported student impact differed significantly from the second year ($M=3.76$, $SD = .21$) to the third year ($M = 3.42$, $SD = .32$) and found a significant decrease in student impact from Year 2 to Year 3; $t(12) = 3.04$, $p = .01$.

Table 1 presents the percentages of staff who reported positive responses for each indicator in each year.

Table 1 shows that school staff reported decreases in student impact in Year 3 compared to previous years across a range of different measures. On 7 of the 14 items, the scores were lower in Year 3 than in either Year 1 or Year 2. (These indicators include student-teacher interaction, ability to set long-term career-related goals, help seeking, ability to set long-term academic goals, overall motivation to succeed in school, participation in class, and homework completion.) Only one item (understanding the importance of decision making) had a score in Year 3 that was higher than the scores in both Years 1 and 2.

In Year 1, the evaluation team established a “strong majority” standard for reporting impact of each indicator. The evaluators only drew conclusions about the indicators in which a strong majority (i.e., at least 70%) of the staff reported either positive or very positive impact. In Year 3, the only item to which a strong majority of respondents thought that PSLP had a positive or very positive effect on students was understanding the importance of decision making. These responses contrast sharply with the Year 1 and Year 2 surveys, in which a strong majority of respondents thought that the PSLP had positive effects on 8 of the 14 items.

Finding #6. Generally, students, program coordinators, teachers, and counselors reported that PSLPs did not affect student academic behaviors in Year 3. Behavioral

Personalized Student Learning Plan Pilot Program, 2011-2012 Evaluation Report

Table 1. Comparison of Indicators of Success Across Years

Survey Item	Year 1		Year 2		Year 3	
	Positive or Very Positive	N	Positive or Very Positive	N	Positive or Very Positive	N
Student-teacher interaction	74.5%	251	79.2%	221	67.3%	199
Ability to set long-term career-related goals	73.3%	239	80.0%	225	63.9%	191
Help seeking	72.2%	239	66.1%	224	64.5%	203
Participation in clubs	71.7%	224	53.8%	210	54.9%	193
Ability to set long-term academic goals	71.3%	240	78.7%	221	64.8%	196
Overall motivation to succeed in school	70.7%	243	71.4%	224	63.3%	199
Participation in class	70.6%	240	64.4%	208	55.1%	196
Understanding the importance of decision making	70.0%	235	73.8%	225	74.8%	206
Ability to set short-term career-related goals	65.7%	237	78.3%	226	66.5%	200
Understanding the academic expectations and requirements of their school	62.1%	235	73.9%	222	69.5%	210
Attendance in class	59.8%	234	43.3%	203	47.9%	192
Study time	54.3%	228	48.3%	203	49.7%	199
Ability to set short-term academic goals	53.9%	245	77.2%	219	68.2%	201
Homework completion	52.4%	231	48.8%	205	44.2%	199

student engagement exists when students invest effort in completing their school work and following school rules (Finlay, 2006). Academic behaviors that have been found to be important factors in student success include class attendance, help seeking, study time, and homework completion (Salamonson, Andrew, & Everett, 2009). In each year of the evaluation, the Heldrich Center asked the staff to report on the degree to which they thought that PSLPs influenced these key academic behaviors. In the Year 2 evaluation report, the Heldrich Center presented data indicating that school staff thought that PSLPs had limited impact on key academic behaviors. The data collected for the Year 3 evaluation echoes this finding. With respect to attendance in class, homework completion, and study time, a majority of respondents thought that PSLPs had either no impact or a negative impact on these student outcomes (see Table 2). Although a majority of respondents thought that PSLPs had a positive effect on help seeking, it was not a strong majority and the percentage of respondents who thought PSLPs had a positive effect was lower in Year 3 than in either Year 1 or Year 2.

Supporting the data obtained through surveys of school staff, in focus groups with the evaluation team, students suggested that PSLPs did not have a significant effect on their behaviors. In addition, in interviews, most of the program coordinators reported that they did not see changes in academic behaviors in Year 3. Students and staff both explained to the evaluation team that, while some students understood the relevance of the PSLP, many

did not understand how the PSLP related to helping them do well in school.

Finding #7. The reported effect of PSLPs on goal setting was lower in Year 3 than in either Year 1 or Year 2. In Year 3, the percentage of teachers reporting that the PSLPs had a positive effect on students’ abilities to set short- and long-term career and academic goals decreased significantly from Year 2 (see Table 3). The percentage of staff reporting that student participation in PSLPs had a positive effect on short-term academic goals decreased from Year 2, but remained higher than Year 1. The percentage reporting positive impact on short-term career goal setting, long-term academic goal setting, and long-term career goal setting decreased from Year 2 and were either equivalent or lower than Year 1.

These survey results indicating limited positive effects of PSLPs on goal setting are consistent with what the evaluators learned from focus groups with students and interviews with program coordinators: many schools did not implement formal goal-setting processes in Year 3. Although students reported engaging in general discussions about the importance of goals and being encouraged by the school staff to think more about their career and academic goals, most students reported that they did not set formal goals as part of the PSLP program this year. The lower positive impact scores on the staff survey are likely a function of this change in implementation.

Table 2. Reported Impact on Academic Behaviors - Year 3

	Negative Impact	No Impact	Positive Impact	N
Attendance in class	1.6%	50.5%	47.9%	192
Help seeking	1.5%	34.0%	64.5%	203
Homework completion	2.5%	53.3%	44.2%	199
Study time	2.5%	47.7%	49.7%	199

Table 3. Comparison of Staff-Reported PSLP Impact on Goal-Setting Indicators

	Year 1		Year 2		Year 3	
	Positive or Very Positive	N	Positive or Very Positive	N	Positive or Very Positive	N
Ability to set long-term career-related goals	73.3%	239	80.0%	225	63.9%	191
Ability to set long-term academic goals	71.3%	240	78.7%	221	64.8%	196
Ability to set short-term career-related goals	65.7%	237	78.3%	226	66.5%	200
Ability to set short-term academic goals	53.9%	245	77.2%	219	68.2%	201

Overarching Findings

Finding #8. Although the pilot schools worked very hard to implement exploration activities, they did not fully implement some of the elements in the PSLP process inherent in NJDOE’s definition of PSLP. The effects of PSLP on students’ attitudes and behaviors were likely limited because the elements that were not fully implemented were the ones that were the most critical to effecting substantive attitude and behavior change. Definitions of PSLPs, including the definition of PSLPs in the New Jersey State Administrative Code, include three basic elements: student goal setting, academic development, and personal support from adult mentors (teachers, counselors, parents) in goal setting. The pilot schools were unable to consistently focus on goal setting, academic development, or establishing formal processes to ensure that students interacted with adult mentors to set goals and monitor their progress over time. Unfortunately, these are the elements of the PSLP process that are the most important for achieving substantive attitude and behavior change.

- As described in Finding #7, most schools did not establish a formal goal-setting process as part of the PSLP. In an ideal formal PSLP goal-setting process, adult mentors support students in identifying clear short- and long-term academic goals. The process of interacting to set goals helps students and adult mentors establish meaningful relationships. These relationships are at the core of the PSLP process because they promote positive academic attitudes (e.g., school connectedness) that have been associated with student success. These relationships are the **personalized** in personalized student learning plans.
- Most schools admitted they did not focus heavily on academic exploration and development as defined by NJDOE. In staff surveys and interviews, school staff explained that many of their colleagues interpreted the lack of focus on academic development as an indication that the PSLP program was not directly related to the core academic mission of each of their schools. As a result, few were either willing or did not see the need to work to establish a stronger focus on academic exploration and goal setting. This is unfortunate because the school environ-

ment provides a wealth of opportunities for students to set short-term academic goals, experience immediate successes, and, eventually, become motivated to engage in additional positive academic behaviors.

- Most schools did not establish a process to support ongoing feedback from adult mentors. In the ideal PSLP process, feedback-focused interactions with adult mentors remind students that someone is paying attention. Students may be more likely to engage in positive academic behaviors related to their goals when they know that their adult mentors are holding them responsible for completing the tasks associated with their goals.

Finding #9. Although administrators and staff members think that personalized learning can improve student achievement, they, along with students, are unclear about how PSLPs increase student success. Nearly all educators whom the Heldrich Center surveyed or interviewed agreed that schools should implement strategies that make students feel part of a learning environment that engages them, motivates them to learn, and encourages them to work hard and achieve. Yet despite the consensus that personalized learning is valuable, coordinators consistently reported that other teachers and administrators resisted participating in PSLP programs.

Program coordinators attributed the disconnect between the educators' belief that learning needs to be personalized and their reluctance to fully engage in PSLP implementation, in part, to the fact that educators did not understand how PSLPs could improve student success. Because the PSLPs were focused so heavily on personal and career exploration activities associated with the web-based guidance systems, teachers came to regard PSLPs as consisting primarily, if not exclusively, of these activities. As a result, they did not see the connection between exploration and student achievement. In fact, in interviews and surveys, teachers themselves directly

said that they did not understand how these PSLP activities enhanced student learning. The connection of exploration activities, on their own, and student achievement is tenuous at best, which is why definitions of PSLPs emphasize student goal setting, academic development, and personal support from adult mentors. Although exploration and interest identification are not mentioned in most definitions, they are nonetheless important, prior steps in the PSLP process. But for PSLPs to be effective at increasing student success, they need to not only assist students in exploring and identifying their interests, strengths, and weaknesses, but also provide opportunities for students to work with adult mentors to set formal goals and then receive feedback on their progress in achieving those goals. Without these latter two steps, improvements in student success are unlikely.

Lacking a full understanding of the process by which PSLPs can improve student achievement, teachers provided limited support for PSLP implementation and did not recognize the full value of PSLPs for students. In short, a lack of understanding of how PSLPs increase student achievement impaired PSLP implementation.

Finding #10. Consistent with the disproportionate focus on exploration activities in PSLP implementation, students, program coordinators, teachers, and counselors generally indicated that the program was most beneficial to students who had not yet explored their career interests. Across the years, pilot program coordinators, participating PSLP staff, and students reported that student attitudes about planning for the future benefited from the PSLP program. In one-on-one interviews with program coordinators and focus groups with students and staff in Year 3, many indicated that the degree to which students perceived this benefit varied by student. Students explained that the students who were not yet sure of their career goals were more likely to use the web-based guidance systems and PSLP resources to explore careers than students who had previously established plans.

Table 4. Percentage of Staff-Recommended PSLP Programs in Schools in their Districts

Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	
All Schools in District	All Schools in District	All High Schools in District	All Middle Schools in District
73.0%	85.0%	75.7%	71.2%

Finding #11. Across all three years, a strong majority of those who completed the end-of-year staff survey recommended PSLPs for other schools in their districts. In the annual end-of-year staff survey, the Heldrich Center asked school staff involved in the PSLP process to indicate whether they would recommend PSLP to other schools in their districts. In all three years, a strong majority of survey respondents (i.e., at least 70%) reported that they would recommend PSLP to all schools in their districts (see Table 4). In Year 3, 238 staff members representing teachers across the pilot sites completed the PSLP pilot program end-of-year survey. Approximately 62% provided responses to the items related to recommending PSLPs. Of those, approximately 76% reported that they would recommend PSLPs to all of the high schools in their districts and 71% would recommend PSLPs to the middle schools in their districts.

Lessons Learned

Lesson #1. Provide a clear framework for staff members to help them understand the process by which the school’s PSLP is designed to increase student success. As explained in Finding #9, although most pilot schools believed in the concept of PSLP as defined by NJDOE, they struggled to implement PSLPs because many staff members remained unsure as to how PSLP activities related to student success.

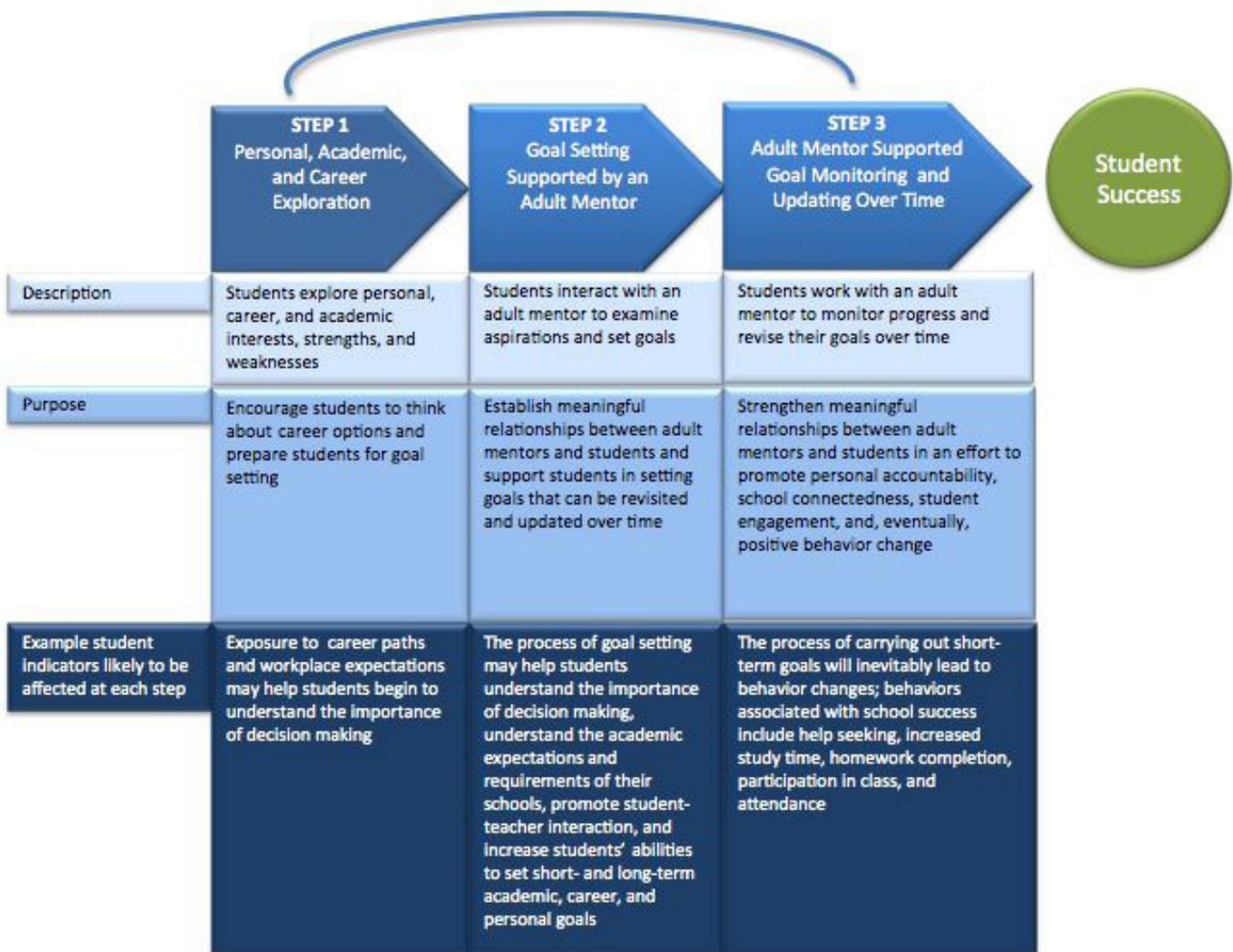
Although PSLPs can have a significant effect on student outcomes, how they do so is not immediately obvious, even to educators, and requires some explanation to elicit buy-in. Schools implementing PSLPs should implement strategies to clearly explain how PSLP activities relate to student success. Drawn from three years of Heldrich Center

research on PSLPs, Figure 1 offers just such an explanation. It provides a simple illustration of how PSLPs improve student success. It highlights important steps and provides a generic framework for how the steps in the PSLP process lead to student success. Each step is described below.

Step #1. Personal, Academic, and Career Exploration. In the first step, students spend time on their own exploring their personal, career, and academic interests; strengths; and weaknesses so that they will be able to begin to identify potential short- and long-term goals. For example, a student may discover that she is interested in health care careers after completing several career assessments and exploration activities.

Step #2. Goal Setting Supported by an Adult Mentor. During this step, adult mentors encourage students to identify areas for growth. Further, the adult mentors guide students in finding strategies for exploring new interests (e.g., joining a club, researching a career topic) and applying what they have learned from their PSLP sessions to their everyday lives (e.g., learning styles, study strategies, interacting with others, seeking help from a teacher). To make this more concrete, consider a student who has a long-term goal of entering a health care occupation. An adult mentor might explain how math and science skills are critical to success in such occupations. In a discussion with the adult mentor, the student might admit that she is struggling in science, but has not asked the teacher for help. The adult mentor would likely take this opportunity to help the student outline a plan related to seeking help and interacting with the science teacher on a regular basis.

Figure 1. Example PSLP Process



This example incorporates formal goal setting and results in articulated goals that can be revisited and updated over time. In the case of the student interested in health care, the adult mentor might help the student establish a clear and specific short-term academic goal related to help seeking (e.g., prepare two questions and seek help from the science teacher weekly) and a mid-term academic goal related to improving her grade in science (e.g., improve at least one letter grade on the next test).

Step #3. Monitoring Student Goals. In this step, a student works with an adult mentor to revise the plan over time and monitor progress in completing the plan. The process of receiving guidance and feedback from a concerned adult motivates the student to engage in positive academic behaviors. In the example discussed above, the adult mentor checks in with the student to monitor her progress in both help seeking and science-related academic achievement. The student knows that the adult mentor will be paying attention and is motivated to carry out the plan.

Lesson #2. Ensure that staff members feel that they have received the training they need to be able to implement PSLPs effectively. In each of the three years of the evaluation, school staff reported that they did not receive adequate training. Program coordinators at schools where staff reported that the training was relatively effective offered the following suggestions:

- Allocate several hours for training well in advance of implementation,
- Have the staff role play as if they were students and share ideas on how to address problems,
- Discuss both technical and non-technical components of facilitating PSLPs, and
- Set aside time throughout the academic year for follow-up training and provide a forum for the discussion of different strat-

egies teachers have used to make PSLPs work.

Lesson #3. When implementing a PSLP program across multiple grade levels, schools should consider incorporating teachers from each grade level to act as liaisons between the PSLP team and the staff serving each grade. During phone interviews with program coordinators, many indicated that schools should seek the input of teachers at each grade level to ensure that PSLP activities can be seamlessly integrated into curricula and lesson plans at all grade levels. A representative member from each grade level can help the PSLP team identify staff concerns and implement strategies to overcome them.

Lesson #4. Middle schools implementing PSLPs need to carefully select activities and topics to ensure that they are relevant to and appropriate for younger students. In surveys and interviews, middle school staff and the program coordinators of middle school PSLPs emphasized the importance of ensuring that the PSLP program is relevant for the middle grades. Overall, coordinators and staff indicated that PSLP programs that are targeted toward middle school students should incorporate elements and concepts that focus on personal development topics and broad exposure to a wide range of careers.

Lesson #5. Pilot program coordinators, teachers, and school staff recommended that schools interested in establishing a PSLP program should allocate adequate time and resources to developing the PSLP curriculum. In interviews conducted in all three years, program coordinators expressed a need for time and resources to design curricula that capitalize on the strengths of teachers and meet the needs of students. Overall, many reported that the curriculum should be developed several months prior to the implementation of a PSLP program to allow for teacher input and revisions. In addition, several teachers and staff expressed that this time was necessary to allow teachers to become familiar with and prepare to deliver the PSLP curriculum.

Lesson #6. PSLP teams have to seek continuous feedback to ensure that the processes associated with implementing the PSLP program support the establishment and development of meaningful relationships between students and adult stakeholders. In conducting this evaluation, the Heldrich Center learned that teachers thought that the strategies that the schools used to connect staff with students were not effective at allowing teachers to establish meaningful relationships with students. Although these concerns were greatest at the schools that delivered PSLPs via full-size classes, teachers at schools that used the small group and hybrid approaches voiced the same concerns.

In the case of schools that implemented full-size class models, teachers reported that they struggled to track all of the students and that they had been unable to establish deeper relationships with their students. In the future, schools that implement PSLPs using the full-size class approach may need to consider establishing co-leads or using team teaching for the sessions to balance staff work load and allow greater opportunity for personal student-staff interaction.

Staff at schools that implemented small group or hybrid approaches also expressed concerns about establishing and maintaining relationships with the students who were assigned to them. Some staff said they would have preferred to have been assigned to students whom they already knew and with whom they had already established some sort of a relationship. Others said that they were interested in working with the same students as they matriculated from year to year. Program administrators should seek input from their staff about how they would prefer to be assigned to students. After considering the feedback and developing a strategy, the program administrators should be sure to publicize the process so that all staff members will be aware that the staff had input on the process.

Lesson #7. Cultivate commitment among multiple leaders to support long-term sustainability. In many instances, the program coordinator who started with the program was committed, energetic, and willing to work hard to implement the PSLP program. Across all three years of the pilot, the pilot schools faced significant turnover in school staff as well as reassignments of roles and responsibilities. In some instances, program coordinators were called to implement additional programs or pass the coordinator role on to someone else completely. In many instances, these personnel changes also led to changes in the momentum of the program. The program coordinators should identify opportunities to cultivate additional PSLP team leaders by, for example, training counselors and lead teachers for each grade.

Lesson #8. To reduce the pressure on staff to follow up with each student individually, coordinators and school staff recommended that schools use peer mentors or assign students into small groups to reinforce lessons learned in a PSLP session. Survey responses from the end-of-year staff survey revealed that several staff would encourage schools to use peer mentors or small groups to reinforce and have students reflect on lessons learned in PSLP sessions. Many teachers and staff thought that this was an effective way to foster personalized peer interactions between students and to encourage discussion on PSLP-related topics outside of the classroom. Two of the pilot schools that formally incorporated peer mentoring into their PSLP programs reported that students enjoyed the one-on-one interaction and that students felt free to discuss topics that they may not have normally felt comfortable discussing with teachers (e.g., bullying, stress management). For peer mentors to be most effective, they require training in PSLPs, including the purpose of PSLPs, how they can improve student academic achievement, and strategies for working with peers.

Next Steps

The NJDOE pilot program successfully identified strategies and program model components that increase PSLP program effectiveness. The study of the successes and challenges of the implementation process and lessons learned by the pilot schools have provided a wealth of information that can and should be used by schools that are interested in implementing personalized learning strategies. In an effort to support schools throughout New Jersey, NJDOE contracted with the Heldrich Center to develop the content for a guide to provide practical guidance to school administrators and staff looking to learn more about how to implement an effective PSLP program. The guide provides detailed information and serves as a reference tool for administrators, teachers, and counselors who are beginning to establish PSLP programs at their schools.

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Appendix A: Initial 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. 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

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 counselors?

Appendix B. 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 Table B-1.

The evaluators computed an overall student impact score and an overall teacher impact score for each school by averaging the associated impact items. Finally, the program coordinator data were reviewed to ensure consistency.

Table B-1. Perceived Impact of PSLP on Students

	Total Negative Impact	No Impact	Total Positive Impact	N
Understanding the importance of decision making	0.0%	25.2%	74.8%	206
Understanding the academic expectations and requirements of their school	1.9%	28.6%	69.5%	210
Ability to set short-term academic goals	0.5%	31.3%	68.2%	201
Student-teacher interaction	0.5%	32.2%	67.3%	199
Ability to set short-term career-related goals	1.0%	32.5%	66.5%	200
Ability to set long-term academic goals	1.0%	34.2%	64.8%	196
Help seeking	1.5%	34.0%	64.5%	203
Ability to set long-term career-related goals	1.0%	35.1%	63.9%	191
Overall motivation to succeed in school	1.0%	35.7%	63.3%	199
Participation in class	1.5%	43.4%	55.1%	196
Participation in clubs	2.1%	43.0%	54.9%	193
Study time	2.5%	47.7%	49.7%	199
Attendance in class	1.6%	50.5%	47.9%	192
Homework completion	2.5%	53.3%	44.2%	199