

## **Employability, School Funding, the Individual Learning Plan, and You**

by Ellen Kaskie

Here's the situation in a nutshell: U.S. employers say that our public schools are turning out students who are inadequate to the workplace; government, which supplies most of public school funding via taxpayer dollars, has demanded mandatory demonstration of basic competencies through tests and measurements; teachers say they can't be expected to educate students when they are forced to get them to keep passing standardized tests; and parents, long told by educators to just get out of the way, feel betrayed and fearful for their children's futures. Can something as simple as an Individual Learning Plan make a difference?

Where did our public schools go wrong? What is to be done about it? For all of the outcry against mandatory standardized testing and its classroom equivalent "teaching to the test", this situation did not happen in a vacuum. At the very least, our public schools are expected to turn out students who can read, write and do sums. Surely we should be able to ask them to do it on command. Such students may then go on directly to the work force where they will build on this basic foundation with specialized training and daily application. Or they may continue on to college where they will further strengthen and refine this foundation . . . before going on to the work force where, like their non-college peers, they will build on it with specialized training and daily application.

If the foundation is weak, the house will fall. Employers have found the foundation very weak indeed: it has been estimated that only 15% of our students leave school with the basic skills necessary to participate competitively in the workforce. If the public schools were a business, they would have gone under in the late 1980s or early 1990s.

Well, public schools are not a business. They belong to us – to all of us, parents, students, teachers, employers – and we pay dearly for them. Neither are public schools a magic door through which we may send our children at age six and receive them back, well-nourished and fully formed, twelve years later. We, as a community, all bear the responsibility of forming and educating our children. If "teaching to the test" is not the best way to produce a literate workforce with a strong foundation capable of supporting lifelong learning, what is? What should we try?

We have already tried, in the last thirty years or so, making students (and teachers) feel good about themselves, regardless of their ability write a complete sentence or do algebra, or teach one to do such. Baseless self-esteem alone will not fill out a bill of lading or design a useful solution or move an army. If mandatory testing, the logical opposite, which forces every student to the same (minimum) standard, is too extreme, is there a middle ground?

Today's situation is perilous. Parents no longer trust the schools to teach – bravo! Employers no longer trust the schools to provide them with competent workers – bravo! Now that the light has finally come on, get involved. "Education" is not some mysterious wand that teachers wave. The schools themselves have slowly begun to come to terms with that as well.

The federal government will not drop the mandatory minimum outcomes, nor should it. Here, then, is a brief word about public school funding. Every state, every town, every district, does it differently, so you need to be familiar with how it is done in your state, town, school district, etc. But the short answer to how public school funding happens is "taxes." Locally, that tax is often related to property value or purchases made. However, "when the public perceived a failure of the education system to meet the increasing

demands placed on it, with test scores falling or flat . . . a major shift in education funding resulted in the second half of the twentieth century, with state and federal governments playing an increasingly larger role in support of schooling."

(<http://social.jrank.org/pages/965/Trends-in-Educational-Funding-Public-Schools-Where-Does-Money-Come-From.html>) By the year 2000, over 40 states had filed lawsuits regarding school funding and every student's constitutional right to an "equal" education. Thus, the government's obsession with testing.

Back to employability and getting involved. Given that our public schools receive a great deal of their funding from local, state and federal governments that in turn need to be able to quantify the results – what else can your local schools do *but* teach to those darn tests?

This brings us to the Individual Learning Plan, or ILP (some places refer to it as an Individual Education Plan). It is what it sounds like, "individual": one per student. In the state of Kentucky, every public school student in grades 6 through 12 now has an ILP (starting with the graduating class of 2012).

"Features include access to: career explanations and needed courses; assessment results; state test scores; goals and plans; educational goals; financial planning; career planning; experiences; etc. *All information is available to parents as well as the students.* It is also a forecasting tool for administrators to see how many students are interested in particular fields and offer courses and develop programs accordingly. Additionally, *postsecondary agencies will be able to identify potential students and provide appropriate information.*" (KY III P-16 121216 - 092006 MinutesFinal.doc) [The italics are my own.]

Input to these ILPs is sought from the student's parents and/or mentors and the resulting plan and its progress are available to those parties on the web *at all times*. The ILP may be changed as the student learns, grows, reveals aptitudes, and so on. Not only does each student now have an ILP, but there is an exploratory course in the middle school to introduce students to a broad range of career opportunities. "Units of instruction focus on three areas... employability skills, career awareness, and education/career planning." There are curricula for all middle school grade levels, in units of six to 18 weeks. And, ". . . opportunities are provided for the career planning component *to be correlated with the Individual Learning Plan (ILP).*" (<http://www.kde.state.ky.us/KDE/>)

This leads me straight to the Kentucky Scholars Program, encouraging students to take the types of courses that will prepare them for . . .

". . . today's higher education and work environments. The Scholars Program is typically introduced in the classroom *by the very business and community representatives who will be making tomorrow's hiring decisions. By joining business and education in the classroom, students have the best chance to know what is expected after graduation.*" [Yes, these italics are mine, too!]

Need I remind you that parents are part of this ILP from its inception through graduation, and may check on their own child's plan at any time of day or night? A child whose family relocates takes his or her ILP to the new school.

Kentucky's public schools are not alone. The state of Rhode Island has introduced web-based ILPs as well in its public school system. To quote state policy, "All schools will support each student's creation of an Individual Learning Plan. . . . An Individual Learning Plan (ILP) is primarily authored by students themselves, with guidance *from their school advisors, parents, and community contacts – such as a business or arts mentor, when applicable.*" (<http://www.rischoolcounselor.org/Toolkits/Toolkit8> )

Perhaps your state has such a program or is considering one. Whether you are an employer or a parent or both, look into ILPs. If you like what you see, lobby for them. Participate in them. Make sure that our students and their teachers have some direction for learning beyond test-taking.

Individual Learning Plans in our public schools (including charter schools) may well be a significant step in building the strong basic educational foundation our students need to become productive citizens and lifelong learners. ILPs didn't come out of nowhere – they are the result of parents, teachers and employers working with government to provide an education that is both measurable and meaningful. Together we just may make a difference.