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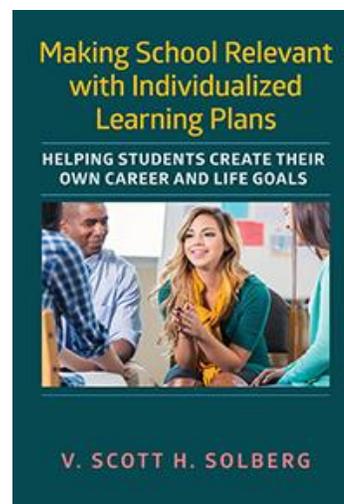
Solberg, V. S. H. (2019). *Making school relevant with individualized learning plans: Helping students create their own career and life goals*. Harvard Education Press.

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V. Scott H. Solberg does not mince words when diagnosing the problem that inspired *Making School Relevant with Individualized Learning Plans*: “The reason many schools fail to demonstrate improvement in academic outcomes and test scores is because their students fail to see how their academic courses are relevant or beneficial to their future quality of life” (p. 4). This harsh diagnosis likely resonates with educators who have struggled to connect with students in the classroom, or who have witnessed students struggle to connect classroom learning with the rest of their lives. Instead of casting blame on students or educators, Solberg highlights how individualized learning plans (ILPs) serve as a practical, integrative, results-oriented path forward. He posits that ILPs have shown evidence of helping students identify personal and professional goals by examining their emerging talents and strengths and connecting each to the world of work.



Solberg clearly tells the story of how individualized learning plans (ILPs) gained a foothold in formal education shortly after the passing of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001. ILPs were originally meant to assist schools, youth, and families in creating academic plans that reflected the new standards set by NCLB that aimed to better prepare students for higher education and the workforce. The purpose of ILPs shifted gradually as states increased college and career readiness efforts to graduate more youth with skills needed to enter high-demand careers ranging from advanced manufacturing to cutting edge healthcare services. Today, many states have unique ILP programs that combine academic and career-oriented planning processes. For example, in Colorado and Oklahoma, “individual career and academic plans” are generated, whereas in

Arizona, “education and career action plans” are compiled. Solberg stops short of detailing the nuances of each state-run program, although he frequently spotlights Wisconsin’s efforts, which is where his research transpired. Solberg argues that despite what ILPs are called, or by whom they are administered, the parameters of a successful ILP share commonalities that shrink the perceived gap between what a student is doing in the classroom and how it relates to their life and career goals.

Broadly speaking, Solberg posits that there are two essential components to an individualized learning plan. The first component is a *product*, namely a digital creative space or e-portfolio that “serves as an interactive repository that stores assessment results, career preferences, statements on career goals” and artifacts from various career development and work-based learning activities (p. 52). An emphasis on e-portfolios is a growing trend both in schools and workplaces; over time portfolios have grown in popularity for post-secondary admissions and the interview process in a number of industries. However, Solberg minimally discusses the practical or technical aspects of an e-portfolio. He leaves readers to pursue an e-portfolio platform that suits the requirements and resources of their districts, schools, or classrooms after naming digital storage, school access, and student privacy as primary concerns. Thankfully, the *product* of ILPs is not the primary focus of Solberg’s research or the text itself. By focusing on the *process* of creating ILP *programs* and ILP *products*, Solberg weaves a compelling narrative that makes very clear that a well-structured ILP program can transform the ways teachers teach and the relevance of what students learn.

Solberg’s ILP research spanned from 2007 to 2018, starting as a mixed methods research project funded by the U.S. Department of Labor’s Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP). Working closely with 14 schools in four states, Solberg’s team conducted qualitative and quantitative surveys with more than 600 youth and facilitated over 50 focus groups with educators, parents, and youth to determine whether ILPs were having an impact on career readiness, academic performance, and social emotional learning skills. According to the author, the following qualities of a promising ILP program:

- it begins no later than middle school and continues throughout high school;
- it engages students *and* their families;
- it incorporates skill development and work-based learning opportunities;
- it occurs as at regularly scheduled intervals; and
- it is facilitated by an invested adult who guides the same group of students throughout their ILP experience.

In the preface, Solberg reports that as of 2019, “forty-two states have either mandated or strongly encouraged the adoption of ILPs” (p. ix). He points to a variety of outcomes that are useful markers of success in existing programs, including anecdotes where students describe their soaring confidence and parents describe a deeper connection with their children and their children’s performance in school. One student offers a detailed explanation about how excited they were that a friend established life and career goals through the

school's culinary arts career pathway program and was ultimately accepted into a post-secondary culinary arts program. One parent beamed that, as a result of their school's ILP program, when she sits down with her daughter, "we talk about [her daughter's] career goals and we'll talk about her grades now and we also talk about alternate careers...there are other avenues she can think of, like a vet assistant" (p. 48). Any educator knows that when a parent and student are on the same page, so much more can be accomplished!

Beyond outlining the parameters and potential outcomes of an ideal ILP program, Solberg lays bare what he calls an "all means all" emphasis, which requires ILP programs be designed for *all* youth, regardless of difference in ability, language barriers, or station in life. He is especially wary of half-executed programs that prioritize only job preparation, which often result in students choosing between only the options known to them. Instead, a well-executed program should expose all students to opportunities that may otherwise be unknown or minimized due to social expectations or inequities based on race, disability, income, or gender. To further his "all means all" emphasis, Solberg is adamant that *all* educators should be involved as ILP mentors. His research shows that being an ILP mentor "helps educators connect to their students' life stories, dreams, and challenges in caring and encouraging ways that empower youth to believe themselves capable of achieving their career and life ambitions" (p. 2).

Making School Relevant with Individualized Learning Plans will be a valuable reference to educators in settings of all types, although the primary focus and evidence is rooted in public K-12 education. It could be used as theoretical text in an educational leadership classroom, or, as in my context, a practical guide for a professional learning community (PLC). Solberg's work here is immensely helpful for educational leaders looking to build a full-fledged ILP program but might be less encouraging to those who wish to only co-opt bits and pieces of his comprehensive plan. As someone who used this book to inspire a career exploration program for high school students, it was clear when building our program that we truly needed every component that Solberg brought into focus for our program to best serve our students. The density of the text's descriptions, case studies, and anecdotes, combined with suggested resources make this text a top-tier primer for anyone interested in ILPs or wishing to start or improve an existing ILP program.

About the Reviewer

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