



Conditions and Considerations for Effective Development and Implementation of

Personal Opportunity Plans

by the Commonwealth, Districts, and Schools

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Executive Summary

Introduction

“Conditions and Considerations for Effective Development and Implementation of Personal Opportunity Plans by the Commonwealth, Districts, and Schools” contributes to the movement to shift from standards-based to supports-based reform that provides necessary resources so that every student has the opportunity to learn, succeed in school, and craft a productive future with the support of counselors, teachers, and personal advocates. (For the full paper, see bit.ly/popsreport.) Personal Opportunity Plans (referred to here as POPs) create a set of systems and structures for supporting students at every step along their path toward a satisfying and successful future.

There is strong evidence that POPs in conjunction with personalized, student-centered learning and effective and timely academic, behavioral, and mental health supports and interventions results in increases in school attendance, grades, graduation rates, and postsecondary program enrollment and completion.

A profound gap exists between asserting the value and benefits of POPs and ensuring that schools have the vision, resources, capacity, and commitment to implement Personal Opportunity

Plans with integrity and fidelity. This paper aims to support the adoption of POPs in conjunction with districts’ and schools’ efforts to bridge the gap between advocacy and implementation.

We believe it is critical to provide personalized support for young people’s academic, social, and emotional development at every step along their educational path. Activities that are aligned with and support the goals of Personal Opportunity Plans can be introduced at a young age. A more formal Personal Opportunity Plans process and compilation of documents should take place in grades 6-12 and this paper focuses on those grades.

What Is a Personal Opportunity Plan?

A POP is an ongoing, student-centered, student-directed process aligned with a set of documents that maximizes students’ academic, personal, and college and career development and fosters success in school and life. The essential components of a POP are academic advising; personal development; intensive career and college exploration, planning, and preparation; and developmental postsecondary readiness skills and mindsets.



POPs support students' learning and opportunity planning, self-assessment of their academic progress and personal development, and process of making the best match with the right postsecondary opportunity. POPs support student and parent understanding of students' school data. They also document students' accomplishments and track students' behavior and physical, social, and emotional well-being.

By qualifying the student planning process with the words "personal" and "opportunity," POPs have the potential to become meaningful and empowering experiences for the entire range of learners. POPs encompass experiences both within and beyond the regular school day and regular school year, require an inclusive perspective about students' aspirations, imply more than an academic plan, and place an equal focus on present and future experiences.

Beliefs that Support Personal Opportunity Plans

There are several important philosophical, pedagogical, instructional, and curricular beliefs that support POPs.

A broad and balanced set of goals and purposes for schooling supports POPs

Meaningful alignment between a school's mission and the POPs process may require many schools to consider adopting a broader set of goals that aim to foster personal and social development and self-directed learning, as well as prepare students for responsible citizenship and postsecondary pathways.

Personalized, student-centered learning supports POPs

The primary educational aim of personalized, student-centered learning is learning for personal meaning, mastery, and excellence vs. achieving proficiency on standardized tests. Personalized learning practices enable teachers to "meet learners where they are" in terms of their capabilities, interests, attitudes, and other intrinsic motivations.

A commitment to strengthen students' academic college and career readiness skills and mindsets supports POPs

The skillsets that help students become academically college- and career-ready include proficiency in reading; fluent writing; problem solving; critical reasoning; analysis and interpretation; argumentation and proof; creative thinking; inquiry, investigation, and research; organizing and constructing work products and performances; and monitoring, revising, correcting, and editing.

Academic mindsets empower a student to identify as a learner, a career planner, and a college-goer.

Principles of youth development support POPs

The POPs process and POPs activities reflect a youth development orientation and a commitment to build an equitable and comprehensive educational program that enables all students to experience multiple "hits" of the same opportunity over time and multiple opportunities to practice and demonstrate the same skills and competencies over time.

A commitment to strengthen students' developmental college and career readiness skills supports POPs

The work of supporting students' development of study skills, self-assessment of mastery and understanding, time management, self-direction, and persistence results in much greater success for students in finding and staying in jobs and getting into and staying in college.

Personal Opportunity Plans Implementation

There are several critical components of a successful implementation of POPs in secondary schools that require significant shifts in structures and systems.

A flexible personnel structure to deliver POPs

Schools must commit to providing adequate staffing and adequate time allocations for all staff members who support students' development and completion of POPs. It is essential to have a POPs coach – a personal advocate and supportive guide who serves as the primary contact and point person – for every student.

Formats, activities, documents, and data that drive the POPs process

Formats for POPs delivery include workshops or advisory sessions, personal conferences, independent work sessions, presentations, quick check-ins between students and the POPs coach, and extended coaching for students who need more support. The ideal POPs process includes a sequence of specific major activities scheduled during the school year. Typical documents and data for the POPs process include learning goals, self-assessments, transcripts, report cards, test scores, attendance and behavior data, recognitions, family input, leadership opportunities, and more. Collection and dissemination of data and documentation is not a straightforward or easy task and must be carefully considered.

Scheduling accommodations to deliver POPs sessions during the school day

For many schools, advisory may be the most viable delivery option for POPs, but there are alternatives such as grade-level seminars or POPs periods built into the schedule.

Timely communication between POPs coaches and the early intervention/case management team

This ensures that POPs coaches learn quickly of any issues that become barriers to student wellness and success at school and provides coaches information on interventions and action plans.

Effective professional learning to support POPs implementation

Successful schoolwide POPs implementation requires ongoing and consistent learning and practice for administrators, counselors, and POPs coaches.

Assessment and accountability for POPs

Monitoring progress is necessary in order to sustain the initiative over time and to build credibility and acceptance. Accountability for implementation of POPs ensures that students are supported and on track.

Definition of roles for principal, administrative cabinet, teachers, parents, and community partners

Successful implementation of POPs is the result of collective ownership of the program by multiple constituents.

More modest POPs initiatives can be designed for schools that are constrained by factors that prevent the fully realized implementation; however, these may be less effective or equitable.

Personal Opportunity Plans Require Genuine Postsecondary Exploration and Learning Choices

Schools that focus most of their planning activities on students’ efforts to “get into college” without an equal emphasis on exploring viable career options that match a student’s personal learning profile, strengths, and interests do so at considerable risk. Opportunities that might ignite a student’s motivation and commitment to continue learning might be missed altogether.

If students experience an abject lack of choice or a severely limited range of learning experiences, the completion of a POP can turn into an inauthentic task bereft of the kind of learning and life experiences that help students discover their strengths, talents, interests, hopes, and aspirations. POPs will not be personal if the vast majority of a student’s learning experiences are coercive, adult-driven, or restricted to a narrow regime of required core academics.

Considerations

The POP’s process is built upon a schools’ commitment to educational equity and the belief that all young people can learn and deserve a high-quality education. Equitable schools are dedicated to fairness, create access, and close gaps. They hold high expectations and provide high supports. In this context, schools that focus most of their planning activities on students’ efforts to “get into college” without an equal emphasis on exploring viable career options that match a student’s personal learning profile, strengths, and interests do so at considerable risk. Opportunities that might ignite a student’s motivation and commitment to continue learning might be missed altogether. The combination of pushing all students to plan for and enroll in post-secondary education, combined with facilitating exploration of meaningful choices that match aspirations, enhances life opportunities for each and every student.

Conclusion

The research fields of college access and career development are awash with heartbreaking stories about students who make poor or uninformed choices that derail their trajectories toward a good life before they reach their desired destinations or even begin their journeys.

The well-being of our next generation and the economic and social health of our nation are at risk when students are not supported to seek out and secure the opportunities that will empower them to own their futures.

POPs are not a cure-all for what’s wrong with the current approach of standards-based reform. However, they — along with the conditions that support them — can help students achieve high standards while closing the gap between students’ aspirations and the achievement of realistic and challenging goals that match their strengths, qualifications, and interests with the right postsecondary opportunities. This process has the power to inspire and transform the lives of young people.

The development and implementation of POPs can become a turning point for all school staff members to make a collective commitment to support the healthy development and future aspirations of young people. It is a critical opportunity and requires that the members of a school community believe that every student deserves this experience. With effective leadership, vision, and strategic planning, schools have the power to guide students on their journey. Our young people deserve no less than our best efforts to put Personal Opportunity Plans in place for every student.