Leveraging the State's Role in Student Success Planning: A Call to Action for State Policymakers

By Daniel Curtis, Lynne Sacks, and Julie Allen

Every child has unique abilities, needs, and interests, yet a one-size-fits-all approach is all too common in U.S. school systems and social service organizations. This leaves many children, especially those affected by poverty and racism, struggling academically, feeling disconnected, and lacking clear pathways to important services and opportunities necessary to succeed in school and in life. By understanding and supporting each child as an individual with interests, talents, and goals, as well as needs for tailored supports, all children can thrive.

In many communities across the country, education and community leaders are addressing this challenge by collectively harnessing a personalized, relationship-based approach—what the EdRedesign Lab calls Success Planning—to expand opportunity for all children. This strategy involves pairing each child with an adult navigator to capture their full range of strengths and needs and connect them to supports and opportunities available in their community (e.g., tutoring, health and mental health services, sports programs, music and art classes, and other enrichment and social service programs).
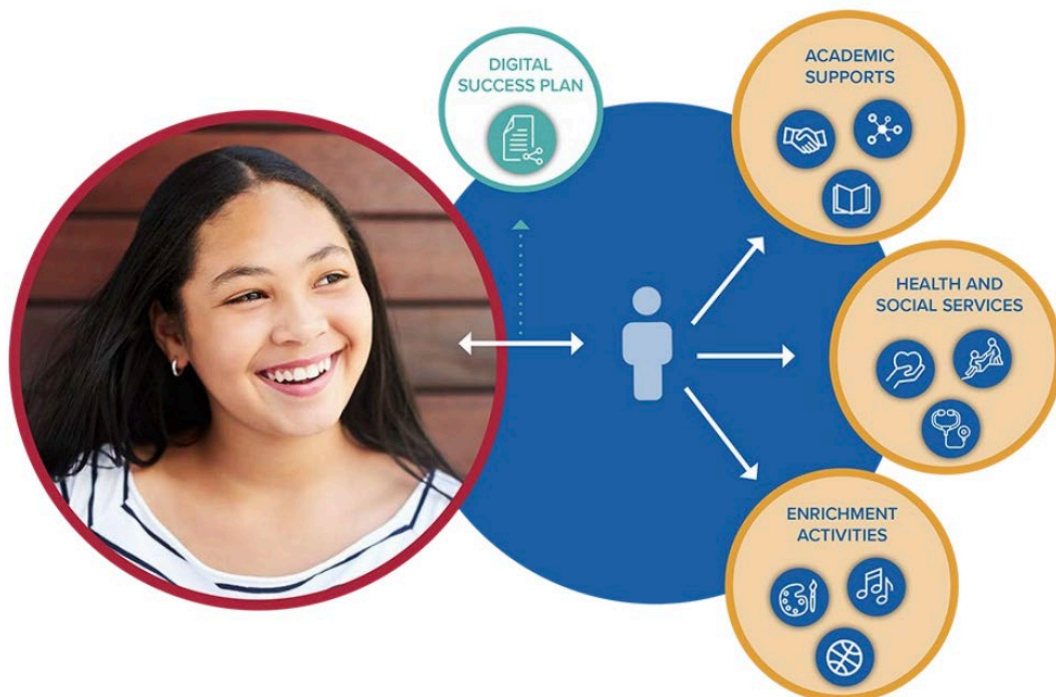
Personalization is not a new concept in education and child development, but the practice of supporting children individually is still the exception rather than the norm. Individual Education Plans (IEPs) for students with disabilities and Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) both offer conceptual frameworks for personalization that are already embedded within schools. Organizations such as Communities In Schools, Community Schools, City Connects, BARR, City Year, and other collaborative action backbone organizations have developed and implemented models for personalized support. Most of these models fit

under the umbrella of Integrated Student Supports (ISS), an approach that addresses students' academic and non-academic needs, including mental and physical health, food assistance, and tutoring, among others. According to a review of ISS models, results are promising, suggesting improved attendance, grades, test scores, and graduation rates.[1] Importantly, for every dollar invested, studies show that return on investments range from at least $3 to up to $15.[2]

Success Planning is typically implemented at the local level with school districts, nonprofit organizations, and municipal government agencies providing services and interfacing with children, youth, and families. However, state governments can also play an important role in facilitating and accelerating Success Planning initiatives to ensure that all children have clear and accessible pathways to well-being, educational attainment, and upward mobility.

States can:

- Use their funding powers, now augmented by significant federal relief funds, to fund districts and facilitate state grants to nonprofits to support Success Planning.
- Remove legal and policy obstacles to allow districts to implement Success Planning best practices.
- Ensure equitable execution of Success Planning initiatives. Provide training and information resources to support school districts and local communities in Success Planning.

There are four core components of a comprehensive system of Success Planning. These are:

- **Navigator**—an adult who forms an individual relationship with a child and, ideally, their family, and develops an understanding of the child's talents, interests, goals, and needs
- **Plan for action** and a process for enacting it
- **Coordinated system of supports and opportunities**
- **Data platform** to capture information over time

Different communities conceptualize these components in a variety of ways, designing the approach that best fits their needs, capacity, and goals, and use different names for their Success Planning initiatives. Regardless of the variations in local design, state policymakers can play an important role in fostering the implementation and development of Success Planning programs.

FUND STUDENT SUCCESS PLANNING

Success Planning costs include staffing and training navigators, developing, and maintaining a data platform, and providing the services and supports to which navigators connect children via their Success Plans. These costs are incurred both in the short term to design and initiate Success Planning and over the long term to sustain Success Planning. These costs can be a disincentive for some districts and an insurmountable barrier for others.

In response to the increased academic, developmental, and socioemotional needs of students caused by the COVID pandemic, the federal government made $125 billion in K-12 education dollars available under the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA), in addition to expanding funding available to schools through the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations (CRRSA) Act.[3] These funds generally pass from the federal government to the states, which then distribute them to school districts and other Local Education Agencies (LEAs). These sizeable one-time federal investments can help communities pay for Success Planning startup costs like purchasing technology for

students or building a data platform. However, without a clear funding strategy to sustain Success Planning programs, districts may be wary of using these short-term funds.

Create state grants that provide districts with sustained funding for Success Planning

Ohio's recent statewide investment in student wellness offers an example of how states can support LEAs in both making the upfront investment to build out Success Planning and creating the long-term funding stream to sustain it. During fiscal years 2020 and 2021, The Ohio Student Wellness and Success Fund (OSWF) allocated $675 million to LEAs for holistic, wraparound services for students. The fund was distributed from the state to LEAs on a per pupil basis and scaled based on the poverty rate. LEAs were permitted to then deploy these funds towards eleven allowable uses. Programming by City Connects, a nonprofit that works with districts to build integrated student support systems, was listed as one of those permitted uses. The criteria for allowable expenses of this per-pupil grant mirrors those included in the 2019 OSWF.[4] Ohio did not stop at providing districts with support over the two-year period of the initial grant. The state revised its annual district funding formula to include in its base grant a component that dedicates funding to student wellness. The criteria for allowable expenses of this per-pupil grant mirrors those included in the 2019 OSWF.[5]

Massachusetts provides funding for local participation in Success Planning through its Supporting SEL and Mental Health Grant, an annual competitive grant of approximately $3 million instituted by the state in 2020 to "assist schools with addressing non-academic barriers to student success."[6] Most of the six criteria considered in distributing the grant pertain to an LEA's need for support as measured by state accountability scores, access to mental health services, or percentage of economically disadvantaged students. However, priority is also given to districts building systems for integrated student supports (ISS). There are two categories of grants made available to districts through the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. Category A grants, which can be up to $100,000, are distributed to LEAs for the design and creation of ISS systems. Category B grants, which can be up to $10,000, are provided to deliver ongoing professional development to support their implementation.[7]

Success Planning requires long-term implementation to fulfill its potential. By providing annual support year after year for Success Planning and other ISS initiatives, Ohio and Massachusetts have provided the sustained funding necessary to achieve that potential.

Facilitate state grants to nonprofits that are key to Success Planning systems of supports

Nonprofits play an important role in implementing Success Planning in a community, whether serving as the backbone organization coordinating a network of integrated student supports or providing direct services to children in the community. The services that these non-profits provide are often funded through state government contracts and

grants. Historically, government policies and processes have made these funding relationships complex and difficult to implement.

States can help facilitate the inclusion of nonprofits in a Success Planning initiative by adopting the recommendations set forth in an [Urban Institute report](#) for state governments to facilitate contracting with, and grant funding of, nonprofits, including:

- Create a general application that nonprofits can use to apply for multiple funding streams at one agency
- Provide online informational tools and resources that explain and guide nonprofits through application processes
- Increase technical assistance to applicants by answering questions, reviewing applications, and providing feedback before submission
- Revamp the application process to present the guidelines and goals of the contract or grant up front, allowing nonprofits to understand and agree to the expectations before submitting their application.[8]

REMOVE LEGAL AND POLICY OBSTACLES

To afford localities the latitude to implement best practices in Success Planning, states should examine their laws and policies related to instructional time and data collection in order to clear legal obstacles to Success Planning.

Make laws and policies governing instructional time flexible to accommodate Success Planning

Each state has its own laws regarding the amount of instructional time students must receive over the course of the school year. However, definitions of instructional time and amounts of instructional time required [vary widely](#).[9] By taking a more flexible approach to instructional time, states can enable opportunities for Navigators to meet with students and families as part of Success Planning.

Flexible instructional time [legislation in the State of Illinois](#), for example, allows local boards of education to apply for state permission to establish "experimental education programs" that are exempt from specific traditional instructional time requirements.[10] Leveraging this exemption, in 2020 Unity Point School District in rural southern Illinois provided staff with necessary time for Success Planning by pushing its school year start date back. Navigators, including teachers, support staff, and administrators, were able to use this extended time to meet with students and families to design individual Success Plans for all students, addressing academic success and social-emotional well-being.[11] With permission from the Regional Office of Education, the district continues to utilize the flexible start date to provide time for teachers to conduct Success Planning meetings with

families and students. The schedule allows teachers to flex their time to meet the varying needs of Unity Point families.

Passing legislation extending or otherwise affecting instructional time will require the support of teachers and school administrators and their unions. Therefore, it is critical that states that are rethinking instructional time toward the goal of implementing Success Planning clearly communicate the purpose and potential of these approaches to educators. This will allow states to earn their support in passing this legislation and foster buy-in at the implementation phase from the many teachers and administrators that will play instrumental roles in administering Success Planning.

Match laws and policies governing data collection with the requirements of Success Planning

Success Planning requires the collection, maintenance, and sharing of sensitive student data that must be handled confidentially and securely. The federal government regulates student data privacy through the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), but many states have instituted their own laws to further promote and protect student data collection.[12] State boards of education aiming to promote Success Planning should ensure that their data laws permit communities to utilize relevant data while also assuring families that their children's information is safe.

Success Plans are fueled by data across academic and non-academic indicators, so states should ensure that their data laws allow for collection of data in each of these relevant areas. For example, recent Oklahoma legislation passed in 2016 and 2017 allowed districts to include in students' permanent records not only their academic information, like classes taken and grade point average, but also extracurricular activities, honors and awards received, and behavior records.[13] In addition, the 2017 revision allows districts to store this information electronically instead of in paper format, clearing the way for districts to share and analyze it more easily.[14]

Some districts may be slow to implement Success Planning out of concern that sensitive student data will be mishandled or vulnerable to data leaks. To address these concerns and in turn encourage the adoption of Success Planning, states can institute laws further securing student data. Colorado laws regarding student data transparency and security passed in 2014 and 2016 do just that. The legislation requires data collectors to publish an index of utilized data elements as well as privacy policies describing accessibility to the data and student and parent rights.[15] The law also stipulates that data collectors must create a detailed security plan for protecting the confidentiality of all Colorado student data.[16] While these measures may require additional steps on the part of local and state officials as they gather new data for Success Planning, the additional time spent securing student data to build the trust of stakeholders is vital for ensuring the long-term success of these initiatives.

Success Planning has the potential to mitigate disparities across race, learning difference, language proficiency level, and economic status by ensuring each child has a personalized plan for support. However, all students must be able to fully access the full range of supports and opportunities in their community for Success Planning to realize its equity-inducing effects. By centering the work of state agencies serving children and youth around equity and ensuring universal access to the resources needed to implement Success Planning, states can play an important role in facilitating equitable implementation of these programs.

Develop statewide Children's Cabinets and center equity in their work

Children's Cabinets are policy-coordinating bodies that bring together key leaders, government agencies, and community-based organizations serving children and youth. By connecting silos and driving collaborative action, these cabinets can align resources, close programming gaps, increase efficiency, and provide all children and youth with clear and accessible pathways to grow and thrive from birth to adulthood.

Children's cabinets have become popular not only at the local level, but also at the state level. Twenty-seven states have developed child and youth policy bodies that draw members from across traditionally siloed agencies working on the full range of child welfare issues.[17] States that have yet to form these cross-agency bodies should consider leveraging their state-wide cross-sector jurisdiction to take a comprehensive approach to the distribution of child welfare resources and outcomes across the state.

Creating state-level Children's Cabinets alone will not guarantee more equitable outcomes. Children's Cabinets must be intentional about imbuing equity into the fabric of their work. However, as stated by the Forum for Youth Investment, "putting 'equity' into action can be amorphous".[18]

To help keep equity at the center of all its decision-making, the Indiana state children's cabinet, the Commission on Improving the Status of Children (CISC), created the Guide for Equity Consideration "to address the unintended consequences of implicit bias that may influence the development and application of policies, practices, and decisions [of CISC] on disparate populations."[19] In doing so, Indiana will ensure that its statewide network of child welfare agencies is aligned on the mission of prioritizing service to those populations that have been historically marginalized.

Even states that have already established Children's Cabinets can continue to improve the ways in which these cabinets ensure equitable access to supports and opportunities. One example of a state initiative making progress toward this goal is the Connecticut Committee on Women, Children, and Seniors' RBA Children's Report Card Project, which compiles statewide data across measurements of child welfare, ranging from student

absenteeism to food insecurity to feelings of being loved and supported, among others. The report card provides disaggregated analysis of each of these metrics, identifying key demographic trends that might be otherwise obscured within the statewide data.

Equity-focused statewide Children's Cabinets both strengthen and are strengthened by Success Planning.[20] By identifying statewide priorities, providing longitudinal data, and coordinating across state services, Children's Cabinets can help communities better identify and serve the needs of their children. Meanwhile, Success Planning can support state efforts to measure data by providing Children's Cabinets with data on student needs aggregated from Success Plans—such as those included in the Connecticut report card—into one data source for easy collection.

Provide equitable access to broadband

Even before the pandemic, education was moving online. The switch to remote schooling over the last two years has accelerated this trend and forced LEAs and communities to upgrade their digital infrastructure. Digital resources are powerful tools for Success Planning, as they provide navigators and children with increased access to community resources and new ways of collecting, analyzing, and sharing data. For use of these tools to be equitable, access to broadband must be universal. However, according to a recent survey, just under a quarter of Americans do not have high-speed broadband access. The two most common reasons respondents cited for their lack of high-speed broadband access were that it was unaffordable or unavailable in their area.[21]

In response to the heightened awareness of the need for broadband access brought on by the pandemic, the federal government has increased its investment in building broadband infrastructure and access. The federally administered Affordable Connectivity Program, launched in 2021, takes important steps to tackle the problem of broadband affordability by making broadband subsidies available to households with incomes below 200% of the federal poverty line.[22] The federal government has also developed a plan for building access to broadband in those areas where it is unavailable, but state and local governments will be chiefly responsible for implementing it.

The federal Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) grant will provide $42.5 billion to be disbursed to states to fund projects that build access to broadband in unserved or underserved areas.[23] Thus, state implementation will drive effective delivery of reliable broadband to the people that currently lack access. Establishing a competitive grant process for funding broadband projects is paramount to these efforts.

States that established broadband offices and grant programs pre-pandemic, like North Carolina, can serve as exemplars for those states establishing them to administer federal BEAD grants. In 2019, North Carolina created the [Growing Rural Economies with Access to Technology (GREAT) Grant](#), a competitive grant program that awards funding to

private sector broadband providers to deploy last-mile broadband infrastructure to unserved areas of North Carolina. Since the passage of the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA), the state has supplemented the GREAT Grant with $350 million in federal funds.[24] The state has also created the Completing Access to Broadband (CAB) Grant that appropriates $400 million in ARPA funds directly to North Carolina counties for projects aimed at deploying broadband in unserved communities not covered by the GREAT Grant.[25]

By granting companies and counties the funds they need to spread access to broadband to previously unserved areas, the state of North Carolina is taking steps to connect communities that were previously left behind. In North Carolina and other states with similarly robust grant programs, broadband expansion will help navigators better connect to children and to the stakeholders, data, and services that drive Success Planning.

PROVIDE TRAINING AND INFORMATIONAL RESOURCES

Success Planning requires people across levels of planning and implementation to learn new skills, systems, and technologies. To provide communities with the knowledge they need to effectively implement Success Planning, states can make a variety of supports and informational resources available.

Provide communities with training and support

For most communities, Success Planning is a new approach to supporting children and youth. Some communities have implemented one or more of the components of Success Planning, but not all. As such, local initiatives would benefit from guidance as they navigate the adoption, implementation, and scaling of Success Planning.

While the details of Success Planning initiatives vary by community, the skills needed to execute these initiatives will be broadly applicable, and state governments are well-positioned to deliver the support needed across communities. Moreover, providing these supports at the state level increases efficiency, lowering the cost burden on under-resourced communities.

The Commonwealth of Massachusetts has taken a hands-on approach to preparing LEAs to implement Success Planning systems by offering a comprehensive support program, the Systemic Student Support Academy (S3 Academy), in which LEAs can enroll.[26] The state-funded program is a collaborative effort between the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, Boston College Lynch School of Education, and the Rennie Center, a local education nonprofit.[27] The three-year program provides school-based teams with capacity-building support from academy staff and opportunities for collaboration with other district participants. The program supports communities in fortifying student support structures, developing success planning processes, and ensuring equitable implementation of support practices.

Share best practices

States can help communities build strong Success Planning initiatives by sharing best practices. States around the country are already making resources available to districts and highlighting optimal strategies across all facets of Success Planning with the aim of making best-in-class the statewide norm.

The creation of a plan aligned to the specific needs of a child begins with taking an assessment of that child's starting point across the relevant developmental domains. Getting an accurate gauge of a student's baseline is essential to setting appropriate goals and identifying the appropriate supports to reach them, so states should ensure their districts have access to the resources and information necessary to develop and administer high-quality Success Planning assessments. The state of Washington, which requires that a needs assessment be performed for all at-risk students, has issued seven points of guidance for districts developing assessments.[28]

On its state website, Connecticut has released a variety of resources to assist in developing and implementing Student Success Plans, including a flow chart mapping the suggested process for the development of a Success Planning system; frameworks, templates, and exemplars to assist navigators in creating individual student Success Plans; and information on how to align Success Planning with disability planning systems, like IEPs and 504 plans.[29]

Map community resources

Ideally, navigators create Success Plans that connect students to the particular resources they need to meet their academic, social-emotional, well-being, and career goals. Therefore, mapping available resources is a crucial element in a successful Success Planning initiative. According to a recent policy brief by the Boston College Center for Thriving Children, the state has an important role to play in charting resources:

> Certain information about available resources is best identified and organized at the state level…For example, in many jurisdictions the state divisions of early childhood, Health and Human Services, and Elementary and Secondary Education make available different services through different regional entities serving different geographic areas, and it can be almost impossible for someone in a local program to know which service providers are available to their families.[30]

While states may be best positioned to map many of the services needed for Success Planning, not all have experience in identifying these resources or sharing them with local communities in a clear, accessible manner. For support, states like Maryland have turned to the 211 service of the United Way, an organization with a long history of connecting people in need to community resources.

[211 Maryland](#) provides a statewide network of call centers and a searchable resource database connecting residents to services across the state. This partnership between the United Way and the state of Maryland provides users access in 150+ languages to 7,000+ agencies and programs, ranging across issue areas including food, housing, mental health, addiction, healthcare, employment, and domestic violence, among others.[31]

By making such information readily accessible to communities engaging with Success Planning, states around the country could ensure that districts have a full view of the resources available to them and avoid redundant work for local officials in the process.

CONCLUSION

Governments at all levels have an interest in fostering the promising benefits of Success Planning. While Success Planning systems are administered primarily at the local level, states can play a vital role in encouraging, facilitating, and supporting the implementation of these systems. States should use their funding, legislative and policymaking, equity, and training and information resources to spur the growth of Success Planning and seize the opportunity it provides for all children and youth to thrive from cradle to career.

ABOUT THE EDREDESIGN LAB

EdRedesign champions a broad, holistic model of developmental and educational opportunity for all children and youth, especially those affected by racism and poverty. We serve as a catalyst, through research, advocacy, and collaborative action, advancing the cradle-to-career field by promoting cross-sector community-based systems of support and opportunity to provide all children clear and accessible pathways to well-being, educational attainment, and upward mobility. We strive for a society characterized by racial, economic, and social justice.

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ENDNOTES

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