

Vermont State-Led Topical Conversation

Topic: Vermont’s Act 77: The Flexible Pathways Initiative and Work-Based Learning as Part of Students’ Personalized Learning Plans

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Act 77: Flexible Pathways Initiative

In July 2013, the Vermont General Assembly enacted Act 77, the Flexible Pathways Initiative, for three primary goals: (a) to encourage and support the creativity of districts in developing and expanding quality educational experiences within an evolving 21st century classroom; (b) to promote opportunities that facilitate students’ postsecondary readiness through high-quality educational experiences that acknowledge individualized goals, learning styles, and abilities; and (c) to increase graduation rates and postsecondary continuation among Vermont students. To achieve these goals, Act 77 requires that students engage in a Personalized Learning Plan (PLP) process and have access to Flexible Pathway opportunities.¹

The Vermont Agency of Education embedded Act 77 into its Education Quality Standards, which requires that schools implement proficiency-based learning systems that align graduation requirements with the Vermont State Board of Education’s adopted standards.² The implementation of proficiency-based learning systems allows for Flexible Pathway opportunities to be valuable for students. Students receive credit for participating in opportunities related to potential academic and career interests, thus attaining transferable skills necessary for postsecondary success.

Personalized Learning Plans

Act 77 states that every student in Grades 7–12 will participate in a PLP process and develop a PLP with the guidance of a school representative. The ongoing PLP process should

- identify the student’s emerging abilities, aptitude, and disposition;
- include the participation of families and other engaged adults;
- guide decisions about course offerings and other high-quality educational experiences; and
- be documented in the form of a PLP.

¹ Flexible Pathway opportunities are defined as “any combination of high-quality academic and experiential components leading to secondary school completion and postsecondary readiness, which may also include assessments that allow the students to apply his or her knowledge and skills to tasks that are of interest to that student” (Introduction to Act 77, p. 2).

² Language requiring the implementation of proficiency-based learning systems is in sections 2120.5 Curriculum Content, 2120.6 Curriculum Coordination, and 2120.8 Local Graduation Requirements within Vermont’s Education Quality Standards.

Although a PLP process is mandated by Act 77, how schools and districts implement the process is up to them. To further support implementation of a PLP process, the Vermont Agency of Education developed guiding resources, such as the [Conceptual Framework for Students](#), the [Conceptual Framework for Adults](#), the [Critical Elements of a PLP](#), the [Personalized Learning Equity Crosswalk](#), and self-paced [Personalized Learning](#) modules. The Agency of Education is currently working on constructing PLP exemplars to support PLP development. The agency also hosts regional meetings to gather feedback from the field about how it can further support PLP implementation, maintenance, and processes.

Flexible Pathway Opportunities

Act 77 also requires that all secondary students in Vermont have access to [Flexible Pathways](#) opportunities that lead to secondary school completion. These opportunities in Vermont include the following:

- [Work-based learning \(WBL\) opportunities](#)
- [Career and technical education \(CTE\)](#)
- [Virtual learning and blended learning](#)
- [Dual enrollment](#)
- [Early College](#)
- [High school completion programs](#)

Work-Based Learning

[WBL](#) experiences are included within the Flexible Pathway opportunities. WBL in Vermont is defined as follows:

An educational program or experience involving student interactions with industry or community professionals in real, virtual, online, or simulated work environments that exposes learners to postsecondary options, provides opportunities for skill development and proficiency attainment, and allows students to reinforce and deepen their school-based learning. ([What Are Flexible Pathways](#), p. 2)

As part of Act 77, all secondary students should have access to WBL opportunities, not just students who are enrolled in specialized programs, such as CTE programs. WBL Coordinators often are responsible for ensuring that these opportunities are safe, legal, meaningful, sustainable, and—now—accessible to all students. To further support WBL opportunities, the Agency of Education revised the WBL Coordinator endorsement to include guidelines for schools and districts to use when determining the need for a WBL Coordinator. Because of these efforts, the number of WBL Coordinators has increased by 32% in the past

2 years. Vermont is still working toward implementing a formal system to prepare candidates for obtaining the WBL Coordinator endorsement.

To support the implementation of quality WBL experiences for all secondary students, the Agency of Education has

- devoted grant funds to scaling WBL and career advising programs;
- integrated the Every Student Succeeds Act’s evidence criteria into state-funded grants;
- updated the Vermont WBL Manual, tools, and resources;
- developed guidelines to support local education agencies’ decision-making processes related to WBL opportunities and investments; and
- Created the WBL Collaborative to support educators as they build, strengthen, and expand WBL programs. The collaborative hosted a student panel and discussion to discuss the current impact of WBL experiences in schools.

Reorganization of the Vermont Agency of Education

As part of the implementation of Act 77 in 2013, the Agency of Education created a working group of educators across the state to convene and conduct research on personalized learning, PLPs, and PLP processes; however, that work ended in 2014. In July 2016, the Agency of Education restructured its organization to ensure that teams, such as the Personalized Learning Team, represent the components of Act 77 and support and supervise its initiatives across the state. Another reorganization effort began in October 2018 and is still underway. One result of this reorganization is that multiple teams are under the umbrella of the Student Pathways Division, which supports a more cohesive and consistent approach to the implementation of Act 77 while assisting schools across Vermont.

Data Collection

The Personalized Learning Team realized that there was no formal data collection on whether schools were implementing a PLP process for students in Grades 7–12 and which Flexible Pathway opportunities students had access to within schools across the state. To address this issue, the team embarked on a listening tour of 11 schools across the state that were strategically identified to ensure that all demographics were included. The decision to revise the WBL Coordinator endorsement resulted from this project.

In addition, the Agency of Education partnered with the New England Secondary School Consortium in 2009 to create the Common Data Project, which allows Vermont to track students’ progress since the enactment of Act 77. The Common Data Project shows that there has been an increase in graduation rates and a decrease in high school dropout rates since the enactment of Act 77.

Work Ahead

Vermont allows districts to define proficiency-based education requirements, which causes contending sets of graduation requirements among CTE centers and schools/programs serving general student populations. In addition, districts in Vermont are in various stages of implementation with regard to awarding credit for Flexible Pathway opportunities. To address these issues, the Agency of Education is working toward revising its Local Comprehensive Assessment System guide and developing a portrait of a graduate for schools to use as they identify the competencies that students should be able to demonstrate upon graduation.

The Agency of Education also is constantly striving to close opportunity gaps,³ achievement gaps,⁴ and learning gaps⁵ for all Vermont students. The state's continued efforts aim to prepare all students for postsecondary success.

Q&A With Veronica Newton

QUESTION: Could you tell us more about the guidance that was created for districts to determine if/when to utilize a WBL Coordinator?

ANSWER: The WBL within the Career Development Progression document contains a chart divided into four parts: career awareness, career exploration, career preparation, and career training. One column in the chart indicates whether a WBL Coordinator is recommended for the type of career development. Act 77 does not mandate WBL Coordinators, but the Agency of Education highly recommends such positions within schools to manage the more intensive WBL opportunities and ensure that these opportunities are successful. In the end, it is up to the district superintendent whether to incorporate a WBL Coordinator into the district system.

QUESTION: How exactly do you define WBL in Vermont in terms of the goal that it is available to all secondary students? Is it internships only or the progression from career awareness to career training?

ANSWER: Vermont wants to ensure that students have access to all types of WBL and career exploration, which involves the progression from career awareness to career training. However, career training opportunities are usually embedded into CTE centers, especially pre-apprenticeship work, which is

³ Opportunity gaps are defined by the Agency of Education as “the unequal or inequitable distribution of resources and opportunities.”

⁴ Achievement gaps are defined by the Agency of Education as “the unequal or inequitable distribution of educational results and benefits.”

⁵ Learning gaps are defined by the Agency of Education and refer to “the relative performance of individual students—i.e., the disparity between what a student has actually learned and what students are expected to learn at a particular age or grade level.”

in line with state board rules. However, Vermont is currently working to ensure coherence in its state workforce development to make opportunities available for all students, not just students in CTE Centers, to gain and earn credit through pre-apprenticeship training opportunities.

QUESTION: Could you describe how students with disabilities have been included in the personalized learning work? Also, could you explain how transition coordinators and vocational rehabilitation were incorporated?

ANSWER: Vermont's Personalized Learning Equity Crosswalk explores what accessibility to PLP processes for all students looks like. Vermont has strongly emphasized that no matter how the system is set up within each district and school, the PLP process is one that all students should engage in. The Agency of Education also developed a Case Study Project that touches on the PLP process for students with disabilities. There also is a Personalized Learning Module about the PLP process and transition planning for students with disabilities. Within the Agency of Human Services in Vermont are the Vocational Rehabilitation Division and transition coordinators. These coordinators are assigned to districts across the state and then assigned to specific high schools or education centers. Students with disabilities work with the transition coordinators, who then connect them with youth employment specialists and provide job coaching and training. Because this process requires a close relationship with the Agency of Human Services, the Agency of Education was intentional in coordinating the WBL experience across agencies through the WBL Collaborative.

QUESTION: Can you talk a little bit more about the WBL Collaborative and how it supports teachers in implementing WBL? In some states, teachers are challenged to understand what WBL is and how to incorporate it into their classrooms.

ANSWER: This is Vermont's second year of the WBL Collaborative. The Agency of Education created the collaborative based on needs within the field and its members. Last year, the WBL Collaborative worked by networking and building relationships with employers and other organizations that provide WBL opportunities because many districts were at the beginning stages of implementation and employer outreach. The WBL Collaborative has worked to increase employer and organization networking opportunities through various efforts, such as partnering with the Vermont Business Roundtable. This year, the WBL Collaborative has continued its work with employer and organization outreach, but it also is working with the Vermont State Colleges System because there have been many questions about how WBL experiences translate into transcripts and acknowledgment of students' participation when applying to colleges. Regarding teacher preparation, some teachers are ready to implement WBL in their classrooms, whereas other teachers are more hesitant. Many times, implementing WBL into core content becomes a contractual issue. Thus, some schools have taken a percentage of core content teachers' time and allocated it to Flexible Pathway opportunity assessments. For example, a school may require that 20% of a core English teacher's time would now be working with students engaged in a journalism internship

and working with those students on assessing the outcomes of their WBL experience. This contractual model works but has not yet been implemented statewide.

QUESTION: Who runs the WBL Collaborative? What is the structure of appointing who is on the collaborative and who can participate?

ANSWER: I began the program and oversee the WBL Collaborative for the state. The Agency of Education partnered with the Vermont Professional Learning Network to help with logistics, registration, and costs. I developed a Listserv as part of the 2016 reorganization so that educators and administrators could sign up to participate in the WBL Collaborative. A weekly field memo is used to recruit all interested parties to participate in the collaborative.

QUESTION: How do you think the implementation of PLP exemplars will resolve inconsistencies in students' PLPs and PLP processes?

ANSWER: Each piece will contain all the elements of a PLP and will be based on the Critical Elements of a PLP, tying together the academic and postsecondary planning components. Again, although a PLP process is mandated by Act 77, how districts or schools choose to format or implement the process is ultimately up to them. However, with the creation of these exemplars that will be available statewide, the hope is to get districts and schools on the same page and provide quality and streamlined guidance. Vermont has more work to do but hopes to begin collecting data on personalized learning with a school climate survey. Until hard data are collected, conversations about best practices to support the transferability of PLPs and implement the common elements of PLPs will continue.

QUESTION: What kind of engagements have there been for students and teachers within districts in creating PLPs and the PLP process?

ANSWER: The Personalized Learning Course, an in-person training, invites both students and educators to participate. In addition, during the Personalized Learning Team's listening tour, the group found that schools that included students at the table to discuss personalized learning processes and participate in revisions resulted in the best schoolwide involvement and benefits all parties involved. Students serve as effective spokespeople for other students to demonstrate the importance of creating a PLP. The Agency of Education also ensures that student and educator voices are heard through forums and focus groups when creating documents and guidance for districts statewide.

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