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In Middle School, Charting Their Course to College and Beyond

By WINNIE HU

Public schools have long offered their students the same basic academic program, with little real choice aside from foreign languages or an occasional elective in what was a one-size-fits-all approach that drove many families to seek private and [charter schools](#).

But this year, all 428 sixth graders at Linwood Middle School in North Brunswick, N.J., are charting their own academic path with personalized student learning plans — electronic portfolios containing information about their learning styles, interests, skills, career goals and extracurricular activities.

These new learning plans will follow each sixth grader through high school, and are intended to help the students assess their own strengths and weaknesses as well as provide their parents and teachers with a more complete profile beyond grades and test scores.

In New Jersey and elsewhere, middle schools and high schools are experimenting with individualized learning plans that were once used primarily to ensure that special education students received services. Along with differentiated instruction and specialized career academies, it is yet another way that public schools, under pressure to raise test scores and graduation rates, are trying to reach more students.

Many educators and parents say that creating learning plans for everyone can better prepare students for college, and motivate even low achievers to work harder by showing them that what they want matters, too.

“If you don’t know yourself and think you want to be a biologist, you may realize in your sophomore year in college you don’t like science,” said Mercedes Arias, a Linwood language arts coordinator who is helping develop the learning plans. “You should have really figured that out sooner.”

In a Linwood social studies class recently, 21 sixth graders were taking an online quiz called Matchmaker.

How would you like a career that includes working with children?

Working outdoors in any weather?

Rossanny Rodriguez, 10, answered “likes very much” for 38 of the 39 questions, all except one about operating machines because she said she gets confused connecting cables to a computer. “I want to learn new things,” she said. “I don’t want to stay an old lady just doing the same things.”

Her No. 1 job, according to Matchmaker: principal.

“Here’s the walkie-talkie,” Pete Clark, the Linwood principal, told Rossanny as he passed by the classroom. “I’m going home.”

The learning plans have also eased the burden on school guidance departments, which traditionally provided such academic and career support but now struggle with large caseloads resulting from budget cuts. For instance, Linwood’s three counselors advise 1,350 students in three grades, or a 1-to-450 ratio, which is slightly better than the national average.

“Principals like it because it’s low cost,” said Dick Flanary, a senior director with the National Association of Secondary School Principals. “It doesn’t require a huge outlay of money and resources to produce a change in the school culture.”

In New Jersey, 16 schools including Linwood and nearby [North Brunswick Township High School](#) were selected from 90 applicants for a \$240,000 state pilot program to develop the learning plans. Each school will receive up to \$15,000 in grants over the next two years to cover expenses like technology, training and faculty stipends.

Nationally, 24 states and the District of Columbia have adopted policies to develop individualized learning plans for students as early as sixth grade, according to the Education Commission of the States. While the requirements vary, the learning plans are generally developed jointly by school staff, students and parents, and include suggestions for specific coursework and sometimes extracurricular activities.

Penelope Lattimer, assistant director of the [Rutgers University](#) Institute for Improving Student Achievement, said that as a high school principal in New Brunswick in the 1970s, she introduced “student learning contracts” that were essentially personalized learning plans. She said that the contracts connected classroom learning to concrete career goals, and that some students changed career goals five or more times before settling on the right one.

“I think it’s a good idea,” she said. “The more that you can personalize the academic route that students are exploring, the more they are likely to do their best work.”

At [Abraham Clark High School](#) in Roselle, where math and language arts test scores are well below the state average, only one in two students go on to four-year college, according to state data. This year, all 267 ninth graders are creating online student learning plans in collaboration with teachers

and staff.

The school is handing out flash drives as incentives for completing a 200-some question career quiz that is part of the learning plan. Daniella Martins, 14, a ninth grader who aspires to be a singer or actress, said she spent an hour taking the career quiz. “Nobody likes to take quizzes and tests,” she said. “When you’re taking it, you’re in agony.”

But she was pleased with the results, which listed her top career field as the arts, followed by education and human services. Finance was at the bottom.

“Yes, definitely, I’m not a fan of math,” she said. “It just shows you the opportunities you can have if one doesn’t work out.”

At Linwood Middle School, which has above-average test scores, Rossanny and the other sixth graders have been filling out their online learning plans once a month in school. They can also log in at home as often as they want.

Mr. Clark, the principal, said the learning plans were another way to personalize the school experience, along with dividing the student body into three houses that each serve as a school within a school and assigning teachers to be mentors. “It’s about making connections — making kids feel connected to their school,” he said.

John Apostolakis, 11, whose father manages construction projects and owns a pizzeria, said that he was learning what he needed to study to follow in his father’s footsteps. According to Matchmaker, his top three jobs were renovator, chef and baker.

His father, Constantine, said that he could have used a personalized learning plan himself because it was not until his junior year in college that he chose his major, civil engineering, mainly because he did not want to be stuck in an office. “I remember I felt lost and the focus wasn’t there because I didn’t know what I wanted,” he said.