WHAT'S THE PLAN?

WHAT IF EVERY STUDENT HAD THEIR OWN EDUCATION PLAN? THE EDUCATION REDESIGN LAB’S NEW SUCCESS PLANS ARE LIKE IEPs, BUT FOR ALL STUDENTS.

STORY BY LORY HOUGH
ILLUSTRATION BY HARRY CAMPBELL
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When **Stefan Lallinger** was teaching in a middle school in New Orleans, he saw firsthand the impact that the outside world was having on his students. It was just a few years after Hurricane Katrina had devastated the city, and the effects of that devastation were still being felt, particularly with families.

“A lot of the issues we were dealing with were related to all of the things happening to students outside of school,” says Lallinger, now in the Ed School’s Ed.L.D. Program. “Students who couldn’t get to school, students who couldn’t pay for uniforms anymore or get them washed, homelessness. There was also a huge rate of post-traumatic stress from Katrina.”

And violence, unfortunately, was also endemic in New Orleans at the time.

“Many of our students’ lives were touched by violence, whether it was close family members or acquaintances who were shot or shot and killed,” he says. “The trauma of this level of violence on children is hard to describe, but for some of my students who experienced such tragedies, focusing on school and academic work felt trivial in comparison to what they were going through outside of school. I would also add that it is not just murder — all types of violence can be traumatic, and many neighborhoods simply weren’t safe after Katrina.” Even regular activities, such as walking to the store or catching the bus, required you to “have your guard up,” he says.

Lallinger had worked hard to build strong relationships with his students, and so he sometimes knew what was affecting them before they even set foot in his classroom. But not always. And that made it hard to teach and hard to know why a student was zoning out or struggling with homework.

“There are likely dozens of cases of critical life events or circumstances that we did not know about, and for some students, being able to connect the dots with what few resources did exist in the city, or refer them to our school psychologist or counselor...could have made a huge difference in their lives,” he says.

Unfortunately, most schools don’t have a clear, planned way to connect those dots. Some teachers, like Lallinger, go deeper with their students, but this is piecemeal — a student here, a student there.

Schools also know, at least to some extent, what’s going on with students who are on IEPs or 504s or flagged as at risk or needing extra help.

“Often, schools say, ‘We’ll give help to the kids who are posing the biggest challenges.’ But what about the rest of the students?” says Mary Walsh, a professor at Boston College and founder of City Connects, a Boston-based nonprofit that helps schools connect with local resources. “The quiet student who can’t see the board? We could have made a big difference for that child if we had discovered this earlier.”

For the majority of students, these discoveries never happen.

“We’re not doing good school when we don’t address these other things,” says Ellen Wingard, director of student support in Salem [Massachusetts] Public Schools. “We need a clear system to organize the work.”

This is exactly what the Education Redesign Lab’s By All Means (BAM) initiative is exploring, along with a core group of eight cities and towns, through something called Success Plans. They’re something like IEPs, but for all students, not just those receiving special education, and encompassing a lot more. These individual, personalized learning plans take into account the barriers students are facing, such as not getting enough sleep or parents going through a divorce, as well as positive-thinking information about a student such as goals, summer plans, and favorite activities. This information, gathered at the beginning of the school year from teachers, families, and directly from students (depending on the age), is combined with the typical academic data schools already collect — grades, reading level, and absenteeism records, for example. Together, the combined academic and non-academic information helps create a full picture of every student, who is then matched — and this is key — with services and opportunities not only in
**10 COMPONENTS FOR AN EFFECTIVE SUCCESS PLAN**

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<th>Component</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<td><strong>01 PERSONALIZED</strong></td>
<td>Support should be different and targeted to each student’s unique needs.</td>
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<td><strong>02 COMPREHENSIVE</strong></td>
<td>Plans should address holistic needs such as nutrition, mental health, and/or physical supports as well as academics, and should be frequently updated as kids grow and mature.</td>
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<td><strong>03 STUDENT-CENTERED</strong></td>
<td>Students and their families should be at the center of all conversations. They can help drive these plans, including setting goals large and small, both academic and nonacademic.</td>
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<td><strong>04 EQUITABLE</strong></td>
<td>Moving away from the one-size-fits-all factory model of schooling, plans should make sure disadvantaged students receive access to services their more privileged peers might already have.</td>
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<td><strong>05 ACTIONABLE</strong></td>
<td>Plans should lay out what supports are needed and how families can help their children access them.</td>
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<td><strong>06 RELATIONSHIP-DRIVEN</strong></td>
<td>Hire staff to help centralize planning and build relationships with students and families.</td>
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<td><strong>07 CROSS-SECTOR</strong></td>
<td>This work involves partnering with a large swath of organizations, from schools to mental health centers to afterschool programs to summer meal services.</td>
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<td><strong>08 INFORMATION-DRIVEN</strong></td>
<td>Use data to assess how the services are working and monitor what supports children could need.</td>
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<td><strong>09 SECURE</strong></td>
<td>Security of student information should be a top priority on all digital platforms that are used to hold and share data.</td>
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<td><strong>10 SUSTAINABLE</strong></td>
<td>This system needs ongoing financial and staffing support.</td>
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school, but in the wider community: social service groups, health organizations, sports and art organizations, tutoring services, and mental health groups, to name a few.

But first, says Lynne Saks, associate director of programs and research at the Education Redesign Lab, we must see every student as an individual.

“We need to meet each and every kid where they are,” she said at a recent convening of city and town leaders involved with the Success Plans initiative. “In order to do this, we need to know more about kids,” and it can’t be just providing broad support.

What does this actually look like in schools? For starters, during phase one, each By All Means city and town (see sidebar) is approaching its Success Plans initiative in a different way. Some are partnering with outside groups to collect student data and create plans; others are doing it all in-house. Some are starting small with students in one grade in one school while others are targeting larger groups across a district. Funding for some is coming from their district, for others from philanthropists and community organizations.

“There is huge variation among our eight sites,” says DANIELA LEWY, ED.L.D.’16, who helps BAM coordinate all of the sites. “Louisville has nearly 100,000 students and is the largest district in Kentucky. Unity Point [in Illinois] is tiny, with about 710. We have scrappy to corporate in taking these Success Plans and making them successful.”

In Salem, where Wingard works, phase one includes creating Success Plans for all pre-K–8 students in the district. The district got a jump start before the Success Plans initiative officially began when it partnered two years ago with City Connects, which has been doing similar individualized learning plan work and wraparound support in other districts since 2001, including Boston. The organization trains a leader in each school to collect and coordinate the data.

“In the fall, we meet with the teacher and talk about every child for about an hour and a half. Behavior, health, family, social-emotional, and tell me what you think are the strengths,” says City Connects’ Walsh. “A teacher usually has a plan for each child academically. We do the same for the nonacademics. You put those things together and you have a success plan.” The coordinator then figures out what resources are needed for students and families — the latter something that already-strapped counselors, teachers, and principals have traditionally had to manage on their own.

In Carbondale, Illinois, in the Unity Point School District, Superintendent Lori James-Gross and her team of teachers and counselors are starting phase one with all eighth graders in an effort to help students as they transition to high school. As a small district in a rural part of the state, they are collecting data on their own. When they discover that a family is struggling to buy groceries or a student is looking for a part-time job, they rely heavily on the connections staff members have made in the community. Funding is in-kind, through the district.

Providence, Rhode Island, where Lallinger is the site coordinator, is starting with students in three pre-K classes in one school. Similar to Salem, the city is partnering with an outside organization to collect and oversee data. Because they wanted to make families a huge priority in the process — they actually refer to them as Family Success Plans — Providence leaders chose to partner with Lifespan Community Health Institute, a nonprofit that had already been screening families in hospitals and clinics throughout the state and had a robust data collection system in place.

Louisville needed to “do something totally different,” Lewy says. They didn’t want to just go into a school and pick one class or grade. Instead, they are going to focus during phase one on a few thousand second to fifth graders already involved in a summer enrichment program. Not only will certified teachers teach reading and math “in a more fun way,” says Lewy, but at the same time, “they’ll also see what wraparound services they can give to those same kids.”

Phase one in the Chattanooga-Hamilton School District in Tennessee includes K–8 students in eight schools and a partnership with City Connects, and grew out of an existing initiative launched in 2016 called Chattanooga 2.0, which was meant to address education and workplace challenges in the region.

“We had been working on these issues for a couple of years when we joined the By All Means initiative,” says KERI RANDOLPH, a current Ed.L.D. student who serves as the Chattanooga site coordinator. Prior, she was an assistant superintendent for innovation in the district. “It’s a call that started with our business community. We had workforce needs we couldn’t fill while also wanting to do what was needed for kids.” At the same time, she says, poverty was an issue. In 2017, according to the U.S. Census, 21.4% of people 18 and under in the country lived in poverty, exceeding the U.S. average for that age range of 17.5%. This, at a time when “the social safety net in some communities has eroded,” she says. As a result, the district was seeing kids with more needs and a growing recognition that schools alone couldn’t help them. “Kids are in school 20% of their time. It’s what happens in that other 80% that makes a huge difference. As good as we make schools, that can only go so far.”
alize education and we needed to do it for all students, not just some. “All means all,” he has said many times, and to do that, we must “meet every child where he or she is.”

And just as importantly, he also recognized and stressed what districts like Chattanooga and the others involved in the BAM initiative realized: Schools alone can’t “fix” schools. We shouldn’t expect teachers and principals to shoulder the full burden of making change, Reville says. They are already overwhelmed, plus they may not have the expertise or the authority.

“If we’re going to get all kids ready for success,” he says (and writes about in his new book, Broader, Bolder, Better), “it’s going to take a broader community effort.” Mayors, business leaders, philanthropists, social service groups, parents, students, city rec departments, arts organizations, the police, and health care providers need to be invested and involved in the lives of young people in every community. And these groups — often seen as peripheral to schools — need to be at the table with the superintendent, principals, teachers, and counselors. We need to, as Lewy says, “break down silos.”

This isn’t, of course, a totally new way of thinking — it’s just one that has been slow to take hold in a large-scale way and bumps up against the traditional way our municipalities organize and think of themselves. Activist Jane Addams tried in 1889 when she started Hull House in Chicago. The first settlement house in the country, Hull House provided health and educational services to poor families in immigrant neighborhoods. A few decades later, Leonard Covello, a principal in New York City, turned Benjamin Franklin High in East Harlem into a combined school and community center for the neighborhood, spawning a movement called “community-centered schooling.” Over time, community schools and organizations like the Harlem Children’s Zone (founded by GEORGE CANADA, ED.M.'75) would integrate students, families, community groups, and service providers together in schools in a coordinated way. (Oakland, California, one of the cities participating in the Success Plans initiative, began transitioning to community schools in 2011.)

Terms like wraparound, integrated student supports, and full-service schools started finding their way into education work.

Individualized learning plans also started being used, led by organizations like Big Picture Learning (1995) and City Connects (2001), but not quite in the same way the BAM’s Success Plans are organized. Plans from those organizations were holistic and bold and took into account outside factors in a student’s life, but, as Walsh says, many of these early plans were and still are focused mostly on academics and skill building.

“Some schools have had similar plans, but it al-
most never included the whole child,” she says. “It focused on the academics pretty narrowly. We’re saying the rest of the child matters, too.”

At Unity Point in Illinois, even school bus drivers and custodians are part of the Success Plan process, says James-Gross.

It starts with every eighth grader choosing an adviser — any adult in the school whom they feel comfortable with, including bus drivers and custodians. Each student meets with their adviser in the fall and talks about everything from grades and benchmarking assessments to how they like to learn to favorite subjects to what they want to achieve in life. As James-Gross points out, every kid, even the high-achiever, needs something.

“For example, many of our high-achieving students experience a lot of stress,” she says, but don’t know how to talk about it. The Success Plan meetings offer this option.

All of the sites involved in Success Plans emphasize, however, that the plans aren’t only focused on the stressors in a student’s life, like feeling overwhelmed or a parent losing a job. They also tap into the forward-looking parts of a student’s life.

James-Gross says, “We also connect them to opportunities in the community,” including sports, internships, and summer jobs.

For many kids, simply having an adult who isn’t a parent or caregiver who will fully listen to them can go a long way.

“They have one foot in little kids’ world, but they’re talking about what they should major in once they get to college,” James-Gross says of her middle schoolers. “The conversations are telling. When they get an opportunity to really talk, they break down. Ultimately, our goal is for all students to be able to voice their strengths and interests and what he or she needs to be successful.”

In Providence, where they are starting to use Success Plans with younger students, data comes from families. At the beginning of the school year, families fill out the standard pre-entry information packet, which is then coupled with interviews by social workers stationed at the school who ask questions such as: In the last 12 months, have any of your utilities been shut off? Are you worried about housing? Have you had to go without health care because you had trouble getting to a provider? There is also existing data, previously collected on many families, already in the LifeSpan system — a huge plus for the district, says Carrie Bridges, director of LifeSpan’s community health initiatives.

“The benefit is that we’re starting with a system that is already in place, very human-driven, that can be adapted to the schools,” she says. “We already have hundreds of resources in the database and years of trend data that our families have already expressed a need for.” Resources are even GIS-enabled, so if a student’s family is looking for a food bank, for example, but doesn’t have a car, the system can identify food banks near public transportation. “We can also look across all clients in the system and see trends. For example, over the past six months, maybe we’ve seen an increase in requests for housing in a certain part of the city.”

This existing information, plus new information collected in school, is shared with school psychologists, nurses, counselors, and teachers, and turned into a tailored Success Plan.

SUCCESS PLANS ARE INTENDED TO HELP students. But in districts where a dedicated site coordinator is tasked with overseeing the plans, there’s also another big benefit for teachers, counselors, and families: The coordinators often have deeper Rolodexes when it comes to resources, making it easier to find free eye glasses for a family or a tutor for a struggling student.

Walsh has seen the need for this in the communities she has worked in.

“Our communities are service-rich, but schools don’t always have capacities to take advantage of them,” she says. Neither do families. “There are many services and activities for kids that are beneficial that the parents or the students may not know about,” she says. “My parents were immigrants. They didn’t know about services. One day, we saw a Girl Scout troop. They were dressed in green. My mother had the good sense to ask one of the adults why she was wearing a green dress. My mother learned. For me, it was terrific. I joined the Girl Scouts. As a result, I got confidence in myself.”

Looking ahead, the goal for each of the By All Means cities and towns involved in piloting Success Plans is to eventually extend the initiative to every student in their district. Walsh, who has been involved in this kind of work for decades, says she can definitely imagine a day when this happens across the country in every school.

“It’s like early childhood. There was a time when quality early childhood was available for some kids but not all, and now it’s become the norm,” she says. “Schools are hungry for a systematic approach to helping the whole child. When we talk to them, they say, ‘Oh yeah, that’s exactly what we need.’ The idea is ripe and right for children.”