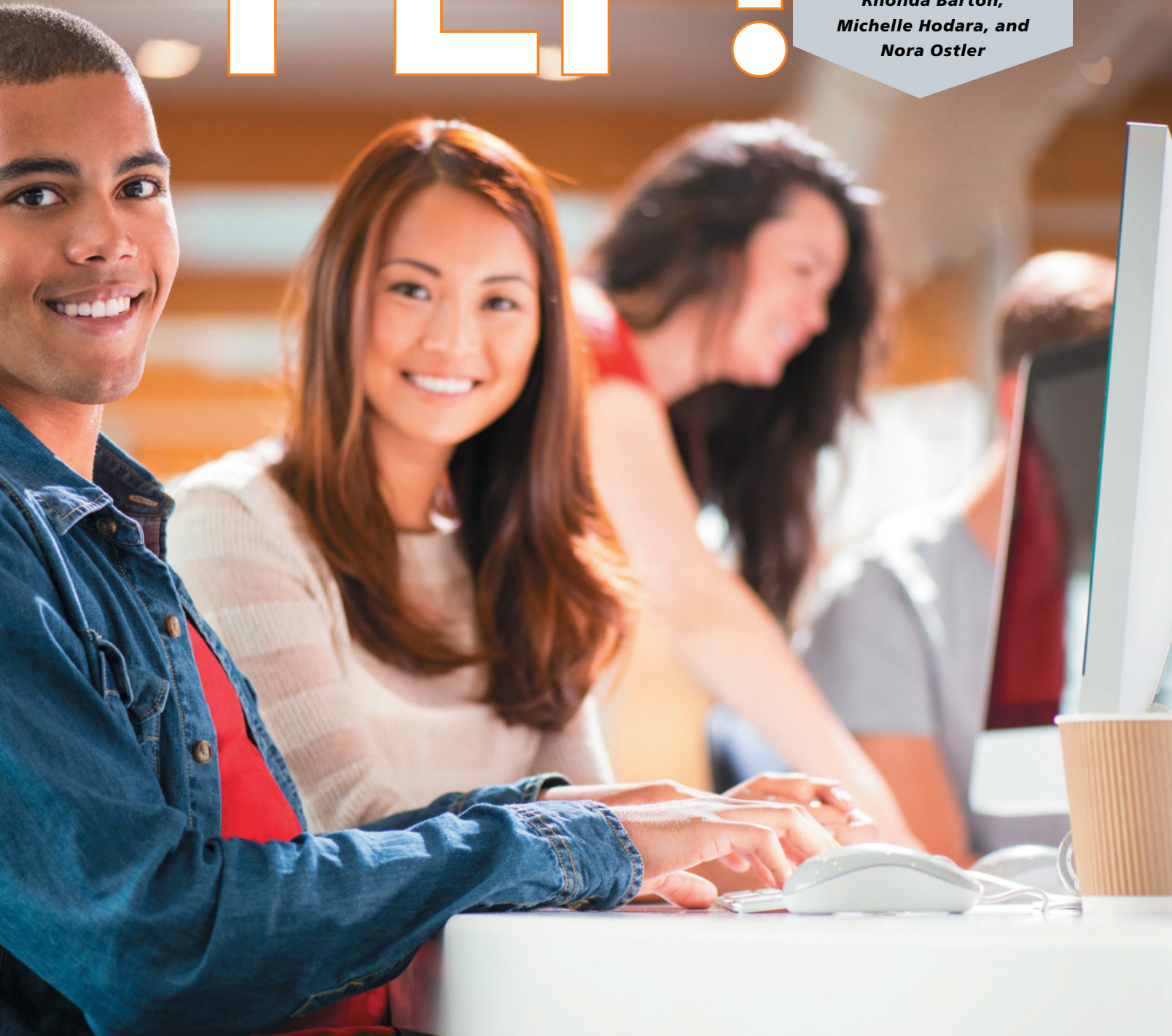


# OREGON STUDENTS HAVE PEP!

Helping  
students  
plan through  
personalized  
learning

*Rhonda Barton,  
Michelle Hodara, and  
Nora Ostler*



**D**ressed in Portland Trailblazer basketball gear, Blaine has the easy manner and self-assuredness of a senior who knows where he's headed after graduation. "I want to do something mechanical," he says, "so I looked up the steps I need to get there, like experience and training." He shared his plan with his parents and is counting on his dad, who works in a car dealership, to help him take the first steps on his career path as he earns credits at a nearby community college.

As a student at McNary High School in Keizer, OR, Blaine began creating an online Personal Education Plan (PEP) in his freshman year and has revisited it throughout high school. The PEP is part of a process of personalized learning, an Oregon graduation requirement that asks students to examine their personal skills, learn about career clusters, and research educational requirements for the fields in which they have interest. At McNary, the PEP is stored in the national Career Information System (CIS) website where students also track their activities, achievements, and standards met.

Each high school in Oregon—even within the same district—approaches personalized learning differently. At McNary, all freshmen are introduced to the PEP on the day the PSAT is administered. They then devote three class periods during the time slot for grade nine health or physical education classes to working on their plans. As a follow-up, students have two opportunities in grade 10, along with one or two class periods in grade 11, to update their PEPs. Seniors review and complete their plans in the last two months of school.

While McNary Assistant Principal Justin Lieuallen and College Readiness Specialist Cathy McInnis, who works for the Salem-Keizer School District, both think the PEP is a valuable tool in helping students prepare for postsecondary education and careers, both feel the system needs more meat to be truly effective.

"There has to be support and training for those responsible for implementing the plan," notes McInnis. In addition to staff training from an expert, Lieuallen says "there should be consistency [across schools and districts] and accommodations" so students who transfer in their senior year can use a portfolio or other options to fulfill the graduation requirement. Lieuallen lists other steps to make personalized learning more robust: hooking students early; providing regular access to the system (e.g., once a week or more); ensuring everyone does a job shadow; and requiring teachers to offer feedback on students' career plans (or lack thereof).

Identifying the key components of the personalized learning process and how to implement them effectively is a dilemma facing many states. Currently 26 of the 50 states and the District of Columbia mandate a personalized

learning plan for all students, and one state has legislation pending (U.S. Department of Labor, 2013). Of the remaining 24 states that do not require plans for all students, Kansas, New York, and North Carolina require learning plans for certain subsets, including gifted and talented students, English language learners, students considered to be academically "off-track," and those in career and technical education programs.

### Building a Plan

While states have various names for the plans and approach implementation differently, most personalized learning includes these common elements:

- **Goal setting.** Personalized learning involves setting three types of goals: personal, academic, and career. Usually these are crafted in collaboration with school staff and parents or guardians. The goals—and how students plan to reach them—should be updated regularly to ensure they remain relevant to students' changing interests.
- **Career development.** In the first stage of personalized learning, students build self-awareness, learn about career opportunities, and start to think about their

## Things to Consider in Personalized Learning

Research and best practices suggest three ways to increase the effectiveness of personalized learning:

1. **Make it a student-driven, schoolwide effort.** While adults should be involved, students need to be central in the process, with dedicated time in class or advisory periods to work on their plans. Administrators should provide strong leadership and clear articulation of goals, along with professional development for teachers (often led by counseling staff).
2. **Offer online tools.** Making plans and resources available online improves accessibility, facilitates updating, and allows students to share their plans with others. It also encourages students to use the system after graduation.
3. **Recognize that personalized learning is a long-term process.** Students' interests and goals change over time. While there should be short-term benchmarks built into personalized learning, plans should be regularly updated throughout the student's secondary career.

## A Different Approach to Personalized Learning

At Hood River Valley High School in Hood River, OR, as part of their graduation requirements, students must complete an extended application project that is judged by a panel of community volunteers. Projects run the gamut and are connected to students' future goals, such as a student interested in:

- Airplane mechanics (the student built a cockpit with a working control panel)
- Recording engineering (the student created a CD with rap beats)
- Teaching (the student taught a class of fifth-graders a lesson about analogies)
- Welding (the student built a hall tree using recycled materials)

One volunteer judge commented, "In this community, employers are looking for creative thinkers and these projects are examples of what the kids are capable of when they are thinking outside the box."

favorite career cluster. After selecting a cluster (i.e., a group of careers with common themes and similar skill sets), students plan courses and experiences that are aligned with their career aspirations. This leads to a transition phase where students prepare to move from high school to college and careers.

- **Assessments and portfolios/profiles.** Assessments of interests and skills help students understand their strengths, decide what they might like to study after high school, and identify careers that are a good match. Developing a portfolio helps students organize their plans and acts as a record of personal accomplishments and experiences. These archives can come in handy when it's time to apply for college or build a résumé.

### Successful Implementation

Research and best practices nationwide show that personalized learning must reflect students' current interests and goals in order to help them select the right courses, choose relevant career learning experiences, and plan for the future. This calls for a flexible and iterative process to accommodate students' changing interests. One state—Vermont—envisions the

personalized learning process as a continuous cycle of identifying goals, planning, doing, assessing, reflecting, revising, and adjusting the student profile (Vermont Agency of Education, 2014).

Another lesson is that students need support and guidance from an adviser and others—including parents—to successfully complete their plans. Research suggests that a whole-school approach works best with counselors training teachers to act as advisers. Many schools also have found that integrating personalized learning activities into student-led parent/teacher conferences helps encourage reviews and updates to plans. Holding frequent advisory periods in which students can work on their plans is another strategy for increasing the plans' usefulness and relevancy. Likewise, providing online access to plans and other web-based tools such as the CIS and Naviance are important in making the personalized learning plan a living document.

### Measuring Impact

Although research on the impact of personalized learning is limited, there are a number of studies that report what people think about this process. Qualitative studies show that students, teachers, and parents

believe that personalized learning improves nonacademic skills such as communication and goal setting, long-term planning, motivation, and self-confidence (Budge, Solberg, Phelps, Haakenson, & Durham, 2010; Bullock & Wikeley, 1999; Fox, 2014; Phelps, Durham, & Wills, 2011; Rennie Center, 2011; Solberg, Gresham, & Huang, 2010; Solberg, Phelps, Haakenson, Durham, & Timmons, 2012; Wilkerson, 2010). Other benefits reported include:

- Better understanding of postsecondary and career options
- Greater awareness of how high school courses apply to career goals
- Improved relationships with school staff
- Increased self-awareness of personal, academic, and career interests and strengths or weaknesses
- More engagement in extracurricular activities and more challenging coursework

While students are the main beneficiaries of personalized learning, teachers and parents also report benefits. At McNary, parent Becky Russell has seen the pay-off for her children, as well as for other students. As a volunteer in the school's career center, Russell uses the PEP and CIS website as tools to help students explore colleges they might apply to and investigate course requirements. "When I used the plan with my son who graduated last year, we looked at how much you make in different careers, what courses you need to take in college, and what the prospects are for finding a job in those fields," she recalls. "We also used it to look at how much colleges cost and [all that information] influenced his decisions."

As for the other students she works with, Russell finds the

personalized learning process to be a motivator. “I had so many kids bring up their grades on the computer and see they couldn’t do what they wanted to do with the grades they currently had,” she says. “So, it made a difference in motivating them to improve their grades and take different courses.”

Blaine agrees with Russell’s endorsement of the process: “I’m pretty much done with my plan and it’s helped me look at what I could do and realize I could choose this or that. I can look back and see what I’ve learned and how I’ve changed. That’s why it’s helpful.” **PL**

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**Rhonda Barton** (*Rhonda.Barton@educationnorthwest.org*) is the communications services manager at Education Northwest, a Portland, OR-based nonprofit that provides applied research, evaluation, and technical assistance services. Her work has appeared in *Principal Leadership* and other popular and peer-reviewed publications and she is currently co-editing an issue of the *Peabody Journal of Education*.

**Michelle Hodara, PhD** (*Michelle.Hodara@educationnorthwest.org*) is a senior researcher at Education Northwest, where she leads a research-practice partnership focusing on college and career readiness. Her research, particularly on the topic of developmental education, has been widely published.

**Nora Ostler** (*Nora.Ostler@educationnorthwest.org*) is a research associate and data analyst at Education Northwest. Her work centers on conducting statistical and qualitative analyses and designing surveys.

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