

## *When Learning Matters*

### Using Learning Plans to Educate One Student at a Time

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One hundred years ago in *Atlantic Monthly*, William James wrote, “In children we observe a ripening of impulses and interests in a certain determinate order. Creeping, walking, climbing, imitating, vocal sounds, constructing, drawing, calculating, possess the child in succession. Of course, the proper pedagogic moment to work in skill and to clinch the useful habit is when the native impulse is most acutely present. Crowd on the athletic opportunities, the mental arithmetic, the verse-learning, the drawing, the botany, or what not, the moment you have reason to think the hour is ripe.”

James’ thoughts make me believe that when learning matters, schools are student-centered. They are places that encourage, generate, and sustain the abilities and talents of every child. Our schools need to be places where learning matters, but instead most of the time they are places where only what is being taught matters. From early on the content starts to matter more than learning it. This includes at what grade material is taught, rather than what students are learning.

Ian Kelly, a first grade student living in Ireland, recently presented me with a telling riddle to ponder that went like this:

*Question: Who’s still talking when everyone has stopped listening?*

*Answer: The teacher.*

This riddle lets us in on the secret that every child knows—that in school, teaching matters more than learning.

This chapter will focus on the importance of creating student-centered learning environments using Personalized Learning Plans (PLPs) to engage students in their own learning experiences. I discuss my own experience with the difference between the PLPs used at the Met and the Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) that are commonly used for students with special needs. The importance of creating a supportive link between the student, their family, advisor, and mentors in creating a challenging and personalized educational plan for every student is crucial, and examples of how the process works at the Met are presented here. By allowing students the opportunity to learn using hands-on experience they are able to demonstrate proficiency through a variety of nontraditional methods. In the end, we have found that students with PLPs are able to utilize the experience they've gained to determine their future goals for college and beyond.

## THE MET

The Metropolitan Regional Career and Technical Center (the Met) is a six-year-old Rhode Island public high school with a mission to rethink and revamp the entire delivery of secondary school education. As researcher Adria Steinberg puts it, the Met “turns education on its head” by starting with the student instead of with a preset curriculum and classroom structured learning. The Met is a school that uses real-world experiences to build skills and knowledge, one student at a time. By engaging its students in real projects with working adults, the Met prepares them for college, work, and citizenship. It demonstrates how effective a school can be when the entire community is a resource for education.

All Met students have their own Personalized Learning Plan based on their particular interests, which are continually updated by the student and her teacher, parents, and mentors. Met students are intrinsically motivated to learn, because they have a say in choosing the work they do.

To carry out their learning plans, Met students establish a unique intern relationship called Learning Through Internship (LTI) with a mentor in the community. The LTI is based on the premise that adoles-

cents need to learn in real-world settings and interact effectively with adults. The primary function of the school is to provide the infrastructure that supports experimental learning. The student works on learning goals and develops a portfolio of work as evidence of achieving those goals. The mentor is a role model, content expert, and learning resource.

Over the years, we have enhanced our work around learning plans so they have changed and evolved as we have changed. We have connected them and acculturated them into the Met as we grew from using them with incoming ninth graders to translating learning plans into a driving force for our students' entry into Senior Institute in the eleventh grade and as a resource for our innovative college transcript. The Met's evolution of the learning plan is a statement of what educators can do to make a community accountable for learning and engage families in learning if educators have students and families in mind.

All schools are mandated to use learning plans for children with special needs, but does this ensure that learning is personalized? Mandates do not ensure that learning plans are student-centered and that learning really matters. A student-centered environment is key to the success of learning plans that allow for accountability, flexibility, and family engagement.

### **MICHAEL'S STORY: IEP VERSUS PLP**

The following story is my own account of my son Michael's Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meeting from a school he attended. Here I'm in the role of parent.

In his middle grades my son Michael was diagnosed with a language/reading disability. I will share here what transpired at a learning plan (Individualized Education Plan) meeting at his middle school. These meetings are mandatory for any child who is diagnosed as Special Needs.

As I went into the room you could see some of the testers talking with each other but keeping their distance from me. There were eight or ten people assembled in a circle. The group included the guidance counselor, special education teacher, school psychologist, two school testers, the assistant principal, and two of Michael's teachers. There

were eight staff members from the school, and myself as a parent. It was quite intimidating.

The guidance counselor started the meeting. She introduced everyone and then asked the school psychologist to present and analyze the results of their test and observational data. It seems that their data showed Michael was easily distracted, tended to daydream, did a lot of drawing but was not a discipline problem. One tester said he fit into the average range of intelligence, showing some deficits and confusion when it came to putting details together. Another said his issues in learning to write are that his fine motor coordination is below par. One by one, each person talked about Michael through their data either from formalized tests or his grades in school. As the meeting went on one or two more of his teachers came in late and joined us around the circle. Each one pointed out Michael's deficits. It was a very uncomfortable feeling for everyone sitting around the table. I didn't know anyone there.

As they presented their evaluations and remediations, it was also clear that some were uncomfortable talking, some even broke out in hives, and others were displaying their discomfort through their body language.

From my perspective, it was uncomfortable as a parent to hear qualified educational experts talk about my child using test data and a smattering of observations. The intent is to somehow use scientific instruments that give a profile of a child but nothing can be further from the truth. I can't believe the original intent of any law was to mandate testing over really knowing a child well.

All the while I sat there listening, and I must confess I was doodling a bit to deal with my uneasiness. Finally, the guidance counselor said in summation, "So it seems everything is going along well. Michael is receiving some extra support in reading and language development. We are working on his writing. Thanks for coming. Do you have any questions?"

Now, no one in the room knew me, and they only learned that I was a principal because I told them that during our introductions. I said, "I have some things to say. First, all of you talked about Michael through your findings but do you really know my son? Do any of you know he is a protégé jazz guitarist who practices three hours a night? Do you

realize the tremendous intellectual focus, concentration and dexterity it takes to play an instrument at that level? Do you know that athletically he is the fastest student in the school? (So much for his fine or gross motor coordination issues.) And do you know that he is well liked and respected by other students and seems to get along well with all the teachers in the building? People on both sides of his family have been musicians and artists for generations. This may account for his doodling but maybe not. Maybe he is not connected to what he is doing in school. You said, he is easily distracted, and doodles. Do his doodles look anything like this?" I turned the paper I was doodling on around so all could see. I smiled and everyone was a bit relieved. I did this in a way that was not casting blame but opening up a conversation about looking at the strengths and weaknesses. As my friend Bill Ayers from Chicago says, "our primary responsibility as teachers is to give hope."

After my comments we really started talking about Michael. It was apparent that these folks really do care about children, but there is no way in this system for people to really care. There was no way for these educators to really look at the whole child, their strengths and weaknesses, and build learning environments that will use strengths to get at a weakness.

Like most systems there is a distrust of parents as part of the educational planning, where they could be used as a resource. The work of student learning is relegated to what has been mandated either as remedial plans or standards-based reform. These mandates take all the craft, art, and in many cases, even the technical components out of teaching and learning. It is exactly the idea Dewey warned us about when he stated, "All reforms which rest simply upon the enactment of law, or the threatening of certain penalties, or upon changes in mechanical or outward arrangements, are transitory or futile."

Michael is now in his junior year at the Met. It is the third year he has had a learning plan where he, his parents, advisors/teachers and mentors have been involved in his learning, and we all know one another well. Everyone is encouraged to sit in on his learning plan meetings. His learning has evolved over the years to a place where things in Michael's life make sense for the person he is, where he wants to go, and what he wants to learn.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

My voice is that of a parent and an educator when I agree with Cremin's (1975) statement "the real message of the Coleman and Jencks studies of equal educational opportunities: not that the school is powerless but that the family is powerful." Family engagement at the Met is very different than most schools, and our learning plan meetings are a major part of the difference. The average family comes to the Met to learning plan meetings and exhibitions seven times a year. In the past, these families rarely went into their children's schools. In my own experience, I went to my son's school only for parent night, one or two events, and an IEP meeting. It was not that I didn't want to go to the school; it was that there was nothing for me to go to. As a matter of fact, one time I wanted to see the principal and the secretary told me I would have to wait three weeks for an appointment. The tipping point that gets families engaged at the Met is that families are used as a resource at learning plan meetings and are an important part of the learning process.

Families are not only participants in learning plans but at times are the topic of a project. A Met graduate who is now attending college in Rhode Island did a project on fibromyalgia, a condition with which her mom was diagnosed. This project illustrates the depth of the work that can be accomplished through an LTI, and how Met learning goals are woven into the academic needs of a student and agreed on at a learning plan meeting.

When Priscilla Santana came back to school in the fall of tenth grade, she had a new interest. Her mother had had carpal tunnel surgery over the summer and was doing physical therapy as part of her recovery. Priscilla's interest was awakened to physical therapy, and she decided that she wanted to learn more, both for herself and to help her mother. After searching, interviewing, and job shadowing, she started an LTI with a mentor in a physical therapy clinic. At a learning plan meeting, Priscilla, her mentor, her parents, and her advisor, Rachel, identified a product that the clinic needed, and it became Priscilla's responsibility and the basis for her project.

The following is an excerpt from Priscilla's learning plan on the project proposal:

**Product:**

An informational pamphlet for patients recently diagnosed with the condition fibromyalgia.

**Investigation:**

First try: Why do there seem to be more cases of fibromyalgia diagnosed in Rhode Island than in Florida as my mentor thinks from talking to another physical therapist down there? Is it doctor diagnosis and referral to physical therapy? Is it weather-related? Are there more retirees in Florida and therefore it's work-related? What accounts for the difference?

Second try: A thorough understanding of fibromyalgia, its causes, manifestations and various treatment options. Learn the "tender points" used to diagnose patients. Understand the physics of torque for biomechanics and how this translates to lifting objects.

**Reflection:**

(Synopsis of student's journal writing and student narrative.)

The first investigation didn't work because fibromyalgia is a recently developed diagnosis and even the Center for Disease Control had no information. I planned to survey doctors but when I tried to set up an interview with a doctor to look at my survey, he didn't respond. I had no idea that this kind of information might not be available yet and that it would be so hard to get doctors. This was frustrating and made me nervous because I was worried my project wouldn't be good. But then Rachel (my advisor) helped me see that it just meant sometimes projects don't go the way you plan and you have to be on top of it and make a change when you need to. So that's when we changed to the second investigation and I did all the research.

I was so surprised that I could read a lot of the medical journals and get the information I needed. My mentor also helped me by answering my questions to understand what I was reading about. I learned a lot of new terms like pressure points and bone names and what it meant that there might be a disease. I was also surprised to learn about how torque is measured in lifting objects. And when I had to put it all together, I learned how to use PageMaker to put it on a computer layout.

I learned so much in this project, not just about this syndrome, but also about myself and how I learn and how I do a project.

The concept of LTIs goes hand in hand with developing learning plans and portfolios for post–high school goals, whether it’s college, vocational school, and apprenticeships or directly to work. From working on their learning plans, each student will have a portfolio that allows him or her to customize all of their experiences for application to each college or work situation.

Throughout this project Priscilla’s parents, her mentor, and her teacher were all in agreement about her learning. Priscilla is now pursuing a college education. Her parents have been part of her education at the Met from her beginning enrollment. They have watched her develop interests in writing, poetry, and nursing. They have questioned her on her learning journey as well as got to know her teacher, Rachel; her mentors; and her principals. The learning plan meeting is one of the key places where this forum takes place and everyone can be accountable.

## **LEARNING PLANS AND ACCOUNTABILITY**

The notion of high stakes accountability has been thrust on schools from the many varied constituencies that want schools to show what children are learning, and to be more precise, to see if what is being taught is being learned, and why it is not. Being accountable is one of those ideas that everyone agrees on, for surely students, schools, teachers, and parents must account for learning. For the most part, accountability has been measured by whether a child achieves a given content or skill standard by passing a test on a certain amount of information.

On the other hand, learning plans offer a way to account for student learning one student at a time, by literally bringing everyone to the table to agree upon what the goals for learning are in a given amount of time, and over an extended period of time. This is what happens at the Met. Our students demonstrate proficiency in what they have learned during student exhibitions that are held at least four times per year. Each student presents work and evidence of learning before a public panel of teachers, parents, mentors, students, and other community members who know him well or bring relevant field expertise. Panelists evaluate the student’s work and presentation skills against cri-

teria predetermined by the teacher and student, and against the standards of their own field. Through these exhibitions, students demonstrate mastery of skills and knowledge. Because a student's work at the Met is not quantified by the use of traditional courses or credits, other methods are needed to document what is accomplished. One of these methods is the creation of a portfolio, a comprehensive collection of artifacts of student work. The contents vary among students, but they typically include final papers and drafts, photos of products, notes, videotape of exhibitions, artwork, narrative reports and other assessments, and a student-authored journal. In the end, Met students prove what they learned through a comprehensive demonstration of skills, not just by fielding questions on a standardized test.

A learning plan meeting is not always easy to facilitate or to participate in. Parents, students, and teachers may disagree, but in order to connect everyone to learning, our teachers learn to facilitate and negotiate learning plans starting from student interest and the skills and knowledge a student has. Then, they develop a way to bring that student toward reaching his/her goals. Learning plans have become part of our culture at the Met. Our accountability to our students, their families, and ourselves is to ensure that our students graduate and are prepared to move on to forms of higher education and the workforce. After four years of learning plan meetings and LTIs, the Met's first graduating class had every student accepted to a postsecondary institute. Students, their families, their mentors, and teachers were involved through learning plan meetings every step of the way where education was planned one student at a time.

## **HOW LTIs HELP STUDENTS SHAPE THEIR OWN FUTURE**

We have students such as John who have amassed experiences in a wide variety of LTI situations. For the Met, John's family, and for John, this is fine. John was born in New York City and came to Providence while he was in middle school. When he came to the Met in ninth grade, at his first learning plan meeting he expressed an interest in animation. His first year LTI was at a local graphic design studio, a start-

up organization that is contracted by other businesses to do animation and multimedia presentations. He worked alongside programmers and business managers alike and developed a flipbook of cartoons and a Claymation video. Simultaneously, he took a short acting class at a local theatre company and discovered he had an interest in theater. His interest led him to a summer job as the sound manager for a local theater group's production of "Fame."

When John returned to school in the fall of his tenth grade year, he found out about internship opportunities with the state judicial system. Just a little over a year before, he had been involved with the legislative hearings for the opening of the Met and had testified before the House Finance Committee. This new opportunity interested him. At his tenth grade learning plan meeting everyone agreed on an LTI at the Supreme and Superior Court of Rhode Island, where he honed in on the juvenile justice system and conducted an opinion survey of people in the court system about why juveniles commit crimes. At the end of tenth grade, John earned a Summer Search scholarship and spent six weeks in Colorado in a wilderness-training course and was certified as a lifeguard as well as a CPR instructor. This New York-born teen, in his own words, had trouble getting his feet back on city ground when he returned to Providence.

In eleventh grade, John had an LTI with a dance choreographer/educator in the dance department in a local middle school. He worked on the technical aspects of performance and was the stage manager for a production of "Milan." Simultaneously, he, another student, and a Met teacher rehearsed for a three-person play written by a local playwright entitled "Slow Dance on the Killing Ground," scheduled to go on stage in the spring.

John already had a Summer Search scholarship lined up for the end of his eleventh grade year, and had to decide between a performing arts program in London or a language program in Spain to help him develop better literacy in his family's first language, Spanish. The sum of all these experiences was a prelude to his senior year, when he began the process of selecting colleges.

John now attends a college near Worcester, Massachusetts, is majoring in criminal justice, and is still performing in school productions. He was recently on a TV show talking about his first year of college

and how an innovative high school prepared him for his college experience.

There have been a few movies made in recent years about learning. One movie, *Billy Elliot*, is the story of a boy with an amazing gift as a dancer. The school he attended never recognized or cared about his interests and passions. In *October Sky*, another student has a passion for rockets and one teacher supports his interests in the face of family and school obstacles. What would it have been like for these children to have had learning plans that allowed them to pursue their interests at their schools? I think we all know the answer. It is too scary to think, what if they don't?

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## CHAPTER 1 APPENDIX

### **Los Latidos de mi Corazón: The Metropolitan Regional Career and Technical Center by Priscilla Santana**

I was ready to go to Alan Shawn Feinstein High School when my best friend at the time, told me that she had changed her mind. She found a better school to go to, one with no textbooks or classes where you could learn what you wanted. I had already gone to the required summer workshop at Feinstein and was only two days away from the first day of school when she informed me of her decision. In a way I felt betrayed because we had already planned to go to the same school and do everything together. But I knew there had to be a way to fix that whole mess. Even before I started racking my brain for a solution, she invited me to the opening night of this friend-splitting so-called, Met School to see if the principal would take me in as a new student. I went. After the white-bearded man wearing a funny hat finished giving his speech about the kind of education and learning environment kids need my friend and I approached him. She said to him, "This is my friend Priscilla, she just found out about this school, she really likes it and was wondering if she could be a student here." I was certain he was going to say no, since school started the very next day and they had already exceeded their limit of 50 students. But instead of saying no, he asked, "Why do you want to come to this school?" All I was able to say was, "I was impressed by

what you said up there.” Then he told me something that shocked me. “I’ll tell you what, if you can come tomorrow morning ready for school at 8:00 a.m. and be interviewed, then we will see what we can do.”

I don’t know if he meant what he said or not but at 8:00 a.m. the next morning I entered a room with my mom ready to be interviewed by a lady named, Leigh-Ann. They asked me questions like, “what made you decide in coming to the Met? What school did I attend before? What is your Interest and passion? Etc. . . . It was decided I was to be placed in Rachel’s Advisory, hmm . . . advisory, I guess it was something like a longer homeroom. Right after saying goodbye to my mom and reminding her to pick me up exactly at 2:30, I was taken to room #316 and was introduced to my new teacher, Rachel. I could not differentiate her from the rest of the other students. She was the skinniest person I had ever seen with long black hair, a pointy nose, and a large smile on her face. I noticed she was dressed completely in black and I immediately thought she was a witch who managed to get a teaching job just to ruin the life of adolescents.

After discussing our agenda for the day, we introduced ourselves. Laura, Raysa, Lea, Dimitriy, Jeff, Kyle, Jimmy, Omar, and Joslyn were my classmates. I was familiarized with Raysa from the Kingdom Hall but I didn’t really know her well. It took some time to adjust to my advisory, the smallness of the school, the guy who was always filming or taking pictures, get used to taking the public bus, some thing I had never done before. As I got to know Rachel, I realized what a great sense of humor she had and her great concern to make me and her other advisors feel at ease.

This was the very beginning of a great journey. I soon managed to understand the school’s philosophy and got well adjusted to the LTI idea. Because my biggest interest at the time was to be a secretary, I got an internship with Melissa Ambrosia at Women and Infants’ (the CHAD program). She was a research nurse and a study coordinator. From her I learned most of the steps involved in coordinating a study on very premature infants. I also spent time with the secretary, Geidy Nolasco. She showed most of the things I needed to know to run the office. She even showed me how to make power point presentations, which are very useful for me now. That was a great year. I learned a lot from the entire

experience. It even made me realize how much I did not really want to become a secretary.

That summer while I was pondering on what would be my next interest, my mother underwent surgery on her hand for carpal tunnel syndrome. When I saw how physical therapy was implemented in making her hand return to normal, this immediately sparked a new interest. I wanted to become a physical therapist. My tenth and eleventh grade internships were with physical therapists. One of the things I learned a lot of in one was about Fibromyalgia Syndrome. I learned so much of it, I developed a pamphlet to distribute to the patients. Something I learned from my other internship was about Watsu; a form aquatic therapy much like shiatsu done under water. My mentor was the only person in Rhode Island licensed to practice Watsu, which I thought, was pretty neat.

As for my senior year internship, I decided that broadening my options to general medicine would be more beneficial than if I decided to study physical therapy for the rest of my life. This is why I got an internship at Hasbro Children's Hospital in the Emergency room. Although I did not spend a huge amount of time there, I was indeed able to see many cool things such sutures and very deep wounds. In one occasion I witnessed how a patient's fibula was pointing out through the skin and how an orthopedic doctor, placed it neatly back inside like it once laid.

In the midst of being in and getting new internships, I did take many college courses. These include: Introduction to Physical Therapist Assistant, human anatomy, human physiology, composition, general psychology, oral communications and algebra for technology various times. What I learned from those classes I don't think I will forget any time soon. It wasn't really the good or bad teaching but the experience derived from attending those classes. Meeting new people, speaking about our assignments, the professors, what would we do after class, what would we do before class, whose house would we study next and of course the question never failed to ask, when is the last day for this class?

One big Met experience that I know will never be expunged out of my mind is the advisory's first ninth grade camping trip. Oh . . . the canoeing!! I had never been camping in my entire life, never mind having to canoe 40 miles, which is why I decided to go. My parents did not like

the idea at all. But with a teaspoon of the “Rachel convincing” they conceded. We were on our way to the Saco River. . . .

I wasn’t afraid until I saw the river. The thought of getting into a canoe which ultimately would float on water had not yet cross my mind. I wanted to go home right then and there. Bob was my canoeing partner. I had no other choice than to follow whatever one else was doing and start rowing. It was fun, but at the same time gave me butterflies in my stomach. Although I had a life jacket on, my biggest fear was falling into the water. I guess that is due to the fact that I can’t swim. Setting up our tents and eating by the fire was a completely new experience for me, never mind having to pee in back of a bush. Funny is the word. I remember one time that Raysa, Lea and I got up from our tents early in the morning to pee. We were all looking for the perfect spot except for Raysa. She was just going to pee anywhere. But when she noticed that we had left her alone, she got up from her peeing action and exclaimed, “Hey, you guys!” flashing all of us. This incident has been retold till this day.

Speaking of Raysa and Lea, my fellow advisees, I feel very fortunate for having the advisory that I do. They have always been there to make me laugh, help me with my projects, edit my papers, and speak to, but most importantly, they have made feel comfortable. Coming from schools leaded by structure to one without any structure was not easy. But what made the transition easier was my advisory. I knew that I could talk to them about anything and they would understand. And even if they didn’t understand, it was o.k. The advisory has helped me learned to apply the goal understanding diverse perspectives to the best extent. I am thankful for having them.

I am also very thankful to my advisor Rachel, who led us all. I can only imagine how hard it must have been for her to deal with 14-knuckle heads, all with different opinions. The arguments, the too much laughter, the unwanted silence, the I don’t want to talk to you right now Rachel, the hassling, the disciplining, the students copious worrying absences, the 6 million Rachel can you help me voices, the I don’t want to do this Rachel, the I failed or I passed my college class Rachel, the are you going out with so and so Rachel?, the forget it I am going to Central Rachel, the staple throwing wall punching vivid cursing episodes, the sorry we gave you an ulcer Rachel!, the don’ts, and whys, the give me

*that that's mine, and because of this. . . . We not only love you but we will miss you Rachel!*

*They say that the time spent in college are the best years of one's life but I am sorry, I disagree, the best years of my life I have already lived . . . here at the Metropolitan Regional Career and Technical center.*