

Ecological systems theory as a framework for understanding the individual plan of study: A
qualitative case study of three Kansas high schools

by

Stacy Smith

B.S., Kansas State University, 1992
M.S., Ottawa University, 2016

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

Department of Curriculum and Instruction
College of Education

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

2021

Abstract

This qualitative case study examined the individual plan of study (IPS) within three comprehensive high schools. Ecological systems theory was used as a construct for understanding the actions of the participants and their interactions within the ecology in support of the success of each student. Participants in this research shared their understandings of the individual plan of study priorities as well as their experiences in the organization and delivery of services in the support of each student.

Kansas communities face increasingly complex circumstances including generational, cultural, and economic change. Kansas high schools contribute to the development of students and their capacity to navigate these changes and launch into a successful young adulthood. Supporting students in early complex decision making regarding their educational journey has the potential to profoundly impact their lifespan outcomes. The research question explored the role that school counselors play in supporting student experiences through an organization of ecological members. The research further explored the relationships within the ecological system that students experienced and the roles or activities that members of the ecology filled to support the completion of individual plan of study activities which informed the growth of the student.

The literature study established the foundational nature of the individual plan of study as representative of experience-making that occurred as students grew and developed forming their understandings of themselves, their education, and their continuing journey. The literature examined the roles of school counselors in the comprehensive high school, examined career development models, and explored the importance of such learning experiences as applied

learning, contextual learning, and career and technical education in supporting student achievement.

As a bounded case study, data was collected from personal interviews, a focus group discussion, and examination of artifacts submitted by interview participants. Completed during the Covid 19 event, the delivery of individual plan of study services were unique to the year. Outside of major urban areas these three comprehensive high schools were primarily in-person learning environments throughout most of the year with periodic tilts toward hybrid instruction, and instances of individual quarantine affecting students, staff, community, and family in unique and individual ways.

This study's key findings contribute to the study of ecological systems theory as well as career development. Evidence showed that counselors representing the whole staff within the ecological system were facilitating the individual plan of study in ways that supported the connection of ecological members to provide support for student learning. The school counselors gained confidence and satisfaction through their actions which also supported the function of engaging other members of the ecology. Data suggested that school counselors' success was supported through strong organizational elements that provided a vehicle for arranging and engaging intersections which benefit student growth and experience. The data illustrated the importance of activities which included families, school staff, and communities as significantly important to providing a wide range of opportunities and experience, which when available fostered student capabilities. Where these parties were able to converge, students experienced increased opportunities for engagement.

There is potential for this study to have broad implications in schools as each student from the middle grades through twelfth grade is mandated by the Kansas State Board of

Education to create and maintain an individual plan of study. Each year school counselors are supported in the foundational ideas of the individual plan of study. An understanding of ecological systems theory will conceptualize knowledge, structures, and activities supporting the implementation of the individual plan of study and improve school counselors' perspective toward services. This may prove to be a transformative experience for a community as their students experience and grow through these implemented activities.

Key words: school counselors, individual plan of study, ecological system

Ecological systems theory as a framework for understanding the individual plan of study: A
qualitative case study of three Kansas high schools

by

Stacy Smith

B.S., Kansas State University, 1992
M.S., Ottawa University, 2016

A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

Department of Curriculum and Instruction
College of Education

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

2021

Approved by:

Major Professor
Dr. Spencer Clark

Copyright

© Stacy Smith 2021.

Abstract

This qualitative case study examined the individual plan of study (IPS) within three comprehensive high schools. Ecological systems theory was used as a construct for understanding the actions of the participants and their interactions within the ecology in support of the success of each student. Participants in this research shared their understandings of the individual plan of study priorities as well as their experiences in the organization and delivery of services in the support of each student.

Kansas communities face increasingly complex circumstances including generational, cultural, and economic change. Kansas high schools contribute to the development of students and their capacity to navigate these changes and launch into a successful young adulthood. Supporting students in early complex decision making regarding their educational journey has the potential to profoundly impact their lifespan outcomes. The research question explored the role that school counselors play in supporting student experiences through an organization of ecological members. The research further explored the relationships within the ecological system that students experienced and the roles or activities that members of the ecology filled to support the completion of individual plan of study activities which informed the growth of the student.

The literature study established the foundational nature of the individual plan of study as representative of experience-making that occurred as students grew and developed forming their understandings of themselves, their education, and their continuing journey. The literature examined the roles of school counselors in the comprehensive high school, examined career development models, and explored the importance of such learning experiences as applied

learning, contextual learning, and career and technical education in supporting student achievement.

As a bounded case study, data was collected from personal interviews, a focus group discussion, and examination of artifacts submitted by interview participants. Completed during the Covid 19 event, the delivery of individual plan of study services were unique to the year. Outside of major urban areas these three comprehensive high schools were primarily in-person learning environments throughout most of the year with periodic tilts toward hybrid instruction, and instances of individual quarantine affecting students, staff, community, and family in unique and individual ways.

This study's key findings contribute to the study of ecological systems theory as well as career development. Evidence showed that counselors representing the whole staff within the ecological system, were facilitating the individual plan of study in ways that supported the connection of ecological members to provide support for student learning. The school counselors gained confidence and satisfaction through their actions which also supported the function of engaging other members of the ecology. Data suggested that school counselors' success was supported through strong organizational elements that provide a vehicle for arranging and engaging intersections which benefit student growth and experience. The data illustrated the importance of activities which included families, school staff, and communities as significantly important to providing a wide range of opportunities and experience, which when available fostered student capabilities. Where these parties were able to converge, students experienced increased opportunities for engagement.

There is potential for this study to have broad implications in schools as each student from the middle grades through twelfth grade is mandated by the Kansas State Board of

Education to create and maintain an individual plan of study. Each year school counselors are supported in the foundational ideas of the individual plan of study. An understanding of ecological systems theory will conceptualize knowledge, structures, and activities supporting the implementation of the individual plan of study and improve school counselors' perspective toward services. This may prove to be a transformative experience for a community as their students experience and grow through these implemented activities.

Key words: school counselors, individual plan of study, ecological system

Table of Contents

List of Tables	xii
List of Figures	xiii
Acknowledgements	xiv
Chapter 1 - Introduction.....	1
Overview of the Issues.....	2
Rationale for the Study	5
Research Purpose and Questions	6
Research Question	6
Operational Definitions.....	7
Significance of the Study	7
Subjectivity Statement	8
Research Design	9
Chapter 2 - Review of Literature	10
Theoretical Framework.....	10
Ecological Systems Theory	11
Career Development and the Lifelong Lens	17
Individual Plans of Study.....	23
Contextual Learning.....	25
Summary	30
Chapter 3 - Methodology	32
Research Question	33
Methodological Framework.....	34
Setting	35
Timeline	37
Participants.....	38
Data Collection and Analysis	39
Interviews.....	40
Focus Group.....	41
Artifacts.....	42

Trustworthiness	43
Limitations and Possibilities of the Study	44
Summary	45
Chapter 4 - Key Findings and Results	46
Family Engagement	48
Family Meetings	49
Student Ownership	52
Communication Outreach	56
Staff Engagement.....	58
Leadership.....	59
Advisory.....	61
Applied Learning Courses	69
Community Engagement	72
Work-Based Learning.....	73
Collaborative Partnership.....	76
Postsecondary Institutions	79
Summary	82
Chapter 5 - Discussion	84
The Role of Ecological Systems Theory	84
Related Findings to the Literature Review	88
Discussion of the Research Question.....	90
Significance of the Study	96
Recommendations for Practice	96
Recommendations for Further Study	97
Implications for Researcher	99
Summary	99
References	101
Appendix A - School A Scheduled Grade Level Activities	105

List of Tables

Table 3.1. <i>Participant School Data</i>	36
Table 3.2. <i>Data Collection Timeline</i>	37
Table 3.3. <i>Semi-Structured Interview Questions</i>	41
Table 3.4. <i>Focus Group Questions</i>	42
Table 4.1. <i>School Performance Data</i>	47
Table 4.2. <i>Themes & Categories</i>	48

List of Figures

Figure 2.1. <i>Ecological Systems Theory</i>	13
Figure 3.1. <i>Multiple Agents of Ecology Agency</i>	35
Figure 4.1. <i>Family Engagement Percentages</i>	52
Figure 4.2. <i>Grade Level Conference Checklists</i>	67
Figure 4.3. <i>CTE Pamphlet (side a)</i>	71
Figure 4.4. <i>CTE Pamphlet (side b)</i>	71
Figure 4.5. <i>Work Keys Graphic</i>	77
Figure 5.1. <i>Ecological Systems Theory</i>	84

Acknowledgements

There is an Irish proverb that says, “Change is the breath of life.” Surely, we live in an age in which change is a constant. If we can continue to grow and learn, this change can be incorporated into our lives and facilitate new and exciting understanding of who we are and what we choose our purpose to be. The doctoral program at Kansas State University has been an important journey for me and an instrument of transformational change.

I would like to acknowledge the supportive staff at K-State. Dr. J Spencer Clark has been a good friend, a great teacher, and an inspirational mentor on this journey, and I truly appreciate the assistance with wayfinding as this has been a winding road for me. Part of that I can attribute to Covid but the rest of the twists and turns are just who I am. I would like to thank all of the K-State staff and acknowledge the importance of the coursework and the valuable knowledge imparted to me. Especially, my illustrious dream team of a committee, Dr. Vontz, Dr. Augustine-Shaw, Dr. Fishback, and Dr. Todd Goodson, I appreciate the supporting criticisms which helped me learn so much. Thank you!

I appreciate the patience of classmates and coworkers as I navigated change and processed new ideas during the program. I am humbled to study and work with so many great minds and kind hearts. Thank you for the exchange of ideas and inspirations! On a side note, I would also like to apologize to the casual pedestrians who, on occasion, may have seen me muttering as they passed me, deep in thought, arguing with myself.

I want to acknowledge the important contributions of my family. The support has been critical to this project’s completion, and to my emotional health. Sorry for missed events, shortened phone calls, distracted texts, or being self-absorbed. Looking forward to making it up to you!

My wife, Dr. Rachael Smith, has been instrumental in my completion of this dissertation. There were times when the scope of the project seemed insurmountable. Your support has helped me keep it together and make slow and steady progress. Thank you for the encouragement and guidance. I literally would not have done this without you. I would like to acknowledge that you are Awesome!

I Love You ...

Chapter 1 - Introduction

Public education is a consistent priority across the United States with each state striving to support the development of its citizens (Labaree, 1997). Through the goal of providing universal access to education, children are afforded opportunities for cognitive, social, and emotional development as they grow and mature. Local and state school boards, with the support of the U.S. Department of Education, strive to support the success of each student and by extension, the resiliency of the local communities. In order to support individual school progress toward integrated and inclusive learning environments, which mark the pluralistic values of the American people, many hands must be empowered to support the work (Cuban, 2013; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Labaree, 1997).

Dependent upon public funding and the taxation of citizens, education continues to be a divisive issue and much debated topic of local, state, and national politics (Cuban, 2013). Shared concerns for children mark the passionate debate in public circles regarding the goals of schools, school funding, and the assurances of quality afforded to pupils and their families (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Ujifusa, 2020). A significant problem which schools face is the clarity of shared vision and purpose as they strive to serve communities. The central constraint on the school mission of serving students is the community discourse surrounding the purpose of schooling (Cuban, 2013; Labaree, 1997). Within the context of these tensions, this study examined promising practices of the individual plan of study through which school counselors supported the ecological interactions of student, community, and staff. This convergence was examined for positive actions which impacted the student learning experience.

Overview of the Issues

Labaree (1997) pondered conflicting perspectives around American schooling and the competing emphasis of social mobility, democratic equality, and social efficiency. The priority placed on any one of these emphases can push the education system out of equilibrium. The focus on competitive edge between schools and the ranking of student performance results in enhanced social stratification within and between communities. This reveals inequalities which students experience based upon the access that they have to quality education programming, either as a result of community or familial capacity. Labaree (1997) concluded:

As a result, we can defend the public schools as a public good by drawing on the deeply rooted conceptions of education that arise from these traditions: the view that education should provide everyone with the capacities required for full political participation as informed citizens, and the view that education should provide everyone with the capacities required for full economic participation as productive workers. Both of these public visions have become integrated into the structure of U.S. education. (p. 51)

Recognizing the divide in perceived purpose of educational objectives is necessary to overcome the central constraint facing school communities. The more divided the community, the less likely the community is to work together effectively to achieve positive forward momentum in supporting student success. In 2015 Secretary of Education Arne Duncan spoke toward pulling the two aims together through a focus upon the outcomes facing students in the current education system. He stated, “Today, nearly half of all students who begin college do not graduate within six years, and the consequences of taking on debt but never receiving a meaningful degree can be severe. Students who borrow for college but never graduate are three times more likely to default” (U.S. Department of Education, 2015, p. 1). School provides the

opportunity for many students to learn, interact, and experience childhood, but it is also incumbent on communities to recognize the outcomes that students face after they leave high school and transition to postsecondary opportunities or enter the work force. When examining the opportunities that students face when they graduate, it is important to note that according to the U.S. Department of Education (2021), students who earn a bachelor's degree earn up to 66% more than their counterparts who do not. This is on average and fails to acknowledge the fact that all degrees are not equal in terms of return on investment and often the industry recognized credential, earned in a year or less, can provide access to a career that empowers viable income and can lead to career satisfaction. It is important to provide all students with quality learning opportunities that provide access to postsecondary paths of their choosing including a bachelor's degree "without the need for remediation" (KSDE, 2021b, p. 46).

Exiting high school without a strong array of skills and knowledge leaves students with very limited choices and opportunity. To this end the Kansas State Board of Education began to refocus education policy on May 11, 2010. One of eleven key initiatives approved was ensuring college and career readiness among all students. Included was an initiative directly addressing individual plans of study and declaring that the state would "Require every Kansas student, beginning in middle-level or junior high school, to utilize a personalized college career plan of study throughout his/her school experience" (KSDE, 2015).

The individual plan of study (IPS) initiative is a bold step toward reshaping the discussions around student learning with the goal of providing relevant experiences around rigorous academic standards ensuring our students have increased opportunity for successful life outcomes after high school. Feller and Wichard (2005) noted that "Change and discovery shape the world around and within us. Dramatically impacted by sophisticated technologies and the

choices created through globalization, the speed of change can surpass our ability to stay apace, throwing us into uncertainty and chaos” (p. xv). This observation underscores the fact that long-established academic standards and customs of schools have led to stagnation and stratification of student course-taking which is often not connected with interest exploration. This gap between real world experiences and academic content can be closed through careful attention to student completion of an individual plan of study. These tangible actions serve to inform the student of courses and activities through which they better prepare for adulthood.

The rate and pace of changing economic and social cultures are at the heart of what the Kansas State Board of Education’s implementation of the individual plan of study (IPS) is meant to address (KSDE, 2020). Feller and Wichard (2005) explored the capacity of education and educators to adapt and prepare youth for the challenging pace of change present in society. The dizzying rate of change and the disconnected nature of student learning from real world experience is explained as the authors explored the necessary steps for remedy (Feller & Wichard, 2005). One of the Kansas State Board of Education’s five outcomes reflecting school reform in Kansas has been to establish an individual plan of study to empower students and families to make meaningful decisions from an array of choices. For years the role of academic content in schools has been refined and developed, and yet, over that time the context of the learning for many students has been left unattended. The individual plan of study has become a vital programming element from the middle grades through college in the State of Kansas. The Kansas State Board of Education mandated that every student have an individual plan of study by the end of the 2018-2019 school year. According to KSDE (2020), “an individual plan of study is both the actual product a student develops and a process the school implements to guide students in developing their unique individual plan of study” (p. 1). Through multiple

discussions with school counselors and administrators, KSDE (2020) has set the following as minimum components of a student's individual plan of study:

1. A graduated series of strengths finder and career interest inventories to help students identify preference toward career clusters
2. Eighth- through 12th-grade course builder function with course selections based on career interests
3. A general postsecondary plan (workforce, military, certification program, two-year college, four-year college)
4. Portable electronic portfolio

While schools have responded and rushed to implement the individual plan of study, it is prudent to consider the additional and ongoing support of professional development that schools need and plan accordingly to support student success with the program.

Rationale for the Study

The progress of schools in supporting students through the individual plan of study has been evaluated annually through surveys administered by the Kansas State Department of Education and utilized for the purpose of developing resources and professional development to support schools (KSDE, 2021a). The surveys elicit broad information around key areas of school implementation efforts. While measurement through the surveys does provide some means of analyzing progress towards a goal, ranking schools was not likely to recognize nor acknowledge the different circumstances of communities as they strive toward their goals (Tierney, 2013). The problem in examining the individual plan of study through normative analysis was that it overlooked the natural advantage of privileged communities that have both more affluent families and by extension increased tax base to support school resources. Despite the best efforts

at implementing the individual plan of study, less advantaged communities would continue to be at a natural disadvantage as more privileged communities possess more dollars, more resources, and can connect their students to more opportunities (Bryan et al., 2011). Utilizing a qualitative tool for investigation supported a more effective analysis of the unique conditions within an ecological system and revealed direct insight on how interventions might best be implemented to improve services. This was a useful consideration as constraints or affordance of communities played a significant role in the ecological systems supporting the individual plan of study.

Exploring the individual plan of study process and investigating interactions between involved entities yielded greater understandings of the impact rendered by the effort to improve IPS. As the school's most likely organizing convener for individual plan of study services, this study utilized the lens of the comprehensive school counselor to investigate the individual plan of study through the ecological systems theory as a framework for understanding. This study shifted the discussion of the individual plan of study from a school-driven concept to a student-centered concept and examined promising practices of the individual plan of study, through which school counselors supported the ecological interactions of student, community, and staff.

Research Purpose and Questions

The purpose of this study was to investigate the implementation of the individual plan of study. The implementation of the individual plan of study was investigated through the application of ecological systems theory to reveal the important convergence of support necessary for student success.

Research Question

How do school counselors engage members of the school community's ecological system to support the development of the student's individual plan of study?

Operational Definitions

- **Ecological Systems theory**- a framework developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner in 1979 which operationalized an examination of an individual's social development within the context of unique experiences thorough four basic levels of relationships.
- **Individual plan of study**: The individual plan of study mandated by the State Board of Education which includes:
 1. A graduated series of strengths finder and career interest inventories to help students identify preference toward career clusters.
 2. Eighth- through 12th-grade course builder function with course selections based on career interests.
 3. A general post-secondary plan (workforce, military, certification program, two-year college, four-year college).
 4. Portable electronic portfolio (KSDE, 2020).
- **Members**: Family, community partners, or school staff.
- **School Counselors**: Professionally certified, licensed staff responsible for helping students achieve success. Responsibilities vary according to building assignments but often include counseling, career guidance, and organization of career development activities across the school staff. For this study school counselors are recognized for their role in organizing and facilitating the individual plan of study.

Significance of the Study

This study examined the facilitation of the IPS through an ecological lens. School staff were represented by school counselors because of their overarching perspective and consistent hands-on work with multiple levels of the ecological system. School counselors support all

students, the development of skills, and communication between stakeholders supporting student success.

Realizing the important consideration of the relevant stakeholders within the implementation of the individual plan of study, it was important to appreciate the intertwined efforts of individuals cooperatively advancing learning within a community and institution. Examination of the individual plan of study considered the successful ecology and explored how agency can be discerned and understood as it constrains or provides affordances through the interaction of the people involved. The curriculum of the individual plan of study possesses opportunities around which learning may be personalized and support student experiences relative to their interests and future opportunities. Within each learning community or ecological system, the person charged with organizing individual plan of study services, the school counselors, engaged the many ecological partners to scale access and equity for each student so that they might have the tools and support to achieve success.

Subjectivity Statement

I find myself positioned during this study as a researcher, subject, and stakeholder. As an Assistant Director at Kansas State Department of Education, I am responsible for the support and evaluation of the implementation of the individual plan of study in Kansas. As a former teacher, I was very invested in the development of the career advising role for school staff. As a lead for the individual plan of study, I was involved with school reform identified for this study. It is with this history that I have determined to attempt to go past the quantitative data which tends to rank and sort schools through normative analysis. Instead, this study utilizes qualitative analysis to examine the role of the school counselor in developing the actions and activities of the individual plan of study which support student achievement. Participant interviews created opportunities to

evaluate what effects are wrought through the processes developing as emergent phenomena within the community's learning culture to both increase graduation likelihood and create diverse opportunities for post-secondary success.

Research Design

My years as an innovative classroom teacher and then as a part of the Kansas State Department of Education have given me the opportunity to participate in nurturing the growth and development of Kansas adolescents as they strive to make sense of the world they live in and plan the next steps on their journey into adulthood. These experiences informed the decisions for organization in this study as I sought to understand how school counselors might serve to organize members of an ecology to more effectively and intentionally support student success. The research study utilized qualitative methods to investigate three comprehensive high schools with promising practices for the implementation of the individual plan of study. The participants within this study, volunteered their time and participation after an invitation was sent to a pool of ten IPS trainers for KSDE. The study collected data through semi-structured interviews of investigation, a collaborative focus group discussion, and a collection of artifacts from the research participants respective implementation models. The dominant impressions shared within the research were the result of coding analysis which utilized prominent categories created from chosen structural elements of ecological system theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018).

Chapter 2 - Review of Literature

Upon examining literature on the implementation of the individual plan of study in Kansas schools, two primary cases of research were identified as significant. The first included an investigation into foundational theory of ecological systems. The second, included a review of professional literature reflecting upon career development activities.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical perspectives guiding the lines of inquiry for this study fall under: Ecological Systems Theory (Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Chen, 1999; Herr, 1996; Leonard, 2010; Priestley et al., 2015).

This theoretical framework served to organize concepts for the investigation of the individual plan of study. Primary learning goals for the individual plan of study should be facilitated by school personnel in conjunction with familial participation and input. Each student possesses unique set of talents and disposition which need to be fully developed (Feller & Wichard, 2005; Gray & Herr, 2006; Hughey & Hughey, 1999; Perna, 2018; Solberg, 2019). True empowerment of student learning should engage the student and family to identify not just a succession of courses but also has a role in determining successful outcomes for the student. The development of metacognitive abilities, understandings of our society and the world, are natural by products of deep, rich conversations. This decision-making process, participation in self-determination, and development as a result of participation were exciting to consider as a part of this study.

The purpose of this study was to provide meaningful guidance for school districts as they develop the capacity of their school and staff to encourage and nurture students in complex decision making about their future roles in our society. These start in middle school years as

exploratory experiences and gain momentum as students approach their high school graduation. These student decisions become more concrete and require personal commitment and often personal financial investment to continue (ACTE, 2018).

Realizing the important consideration of the relevant stakeholders within the implementation of the individual plan of study, it was important to appreciate the intertwined efforts of individuals cooperatively advancing learning within a community and institution. Examination of the individual plan of study considered the successful ecology and explored how the interaction between ecological systems can be discerned and understood as it constrains or provides affordances through the interaction of the people involved.

Ecological systems theory helped frame an understanding of the individual and social importance of individual plan of study (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Examination of ecological systems theory further provided rationalization for and understanding of the agency that can be created for the student, as the student interacts within the familial, societal, cultural, geo-political realities in which they exist and experience the large number of social interactions which directly or indirectly, support their education, throughout the micro-, meso-, exo-, and macro-systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Chen, 1999; Herr, 1996). Through the study of the child, student, or adult in the context of their environment, Bronfenbrenner's model provided insight into understanding their development.

Ecological Systems Theory

The early development of the ecological systems theory by Bronfenbrenner (1979) served as foundational theory drawn upon widely in fields including sociology, psychology, and education. The context of the individual plan of study activities completed by students was examined using the lens developed by Bronfenbrenner to investigate the processes and

interpersonal interactions at play. The application of Bronfenbrenner's ecological model was foundational to understanding the interactions between the different parties engaged in the activities students complete within the individual plan of study. Applying ecological systems theory to the individual plan of study allowed a conceptualization of a student-centered paradigm with a series of relationships arranged similarly to “a set of Russian dolls” (p. 3). The closest relationships to the student, such as home and school are labeled as the “microsystem.” More distant yet impactful influence of the “mesosystem” is created by interrelations of settings such as home and its relationship to families’ workplace, etc. (p.25). Settings and events of the “exosystem” occur outside the experience of the individual but have a direct bearing upon members of the microsystem (p. 25). The “macrosystem” influences are often not immediately visible as this level signifies societal, cultural, political influences such as ideology, belief, law, etc. (p. 26). Identifying agents within the student ecology was useful in examining the affordances or constraints relative to the individual student’s experiences as a result of familial, social, cultural, geo-political realities of their life. The ecological framework (see Figure 2.1) facilitated the examination of these relationships and in this study was utilized to further understand the intended effects of individual plan of study interactions and activities.

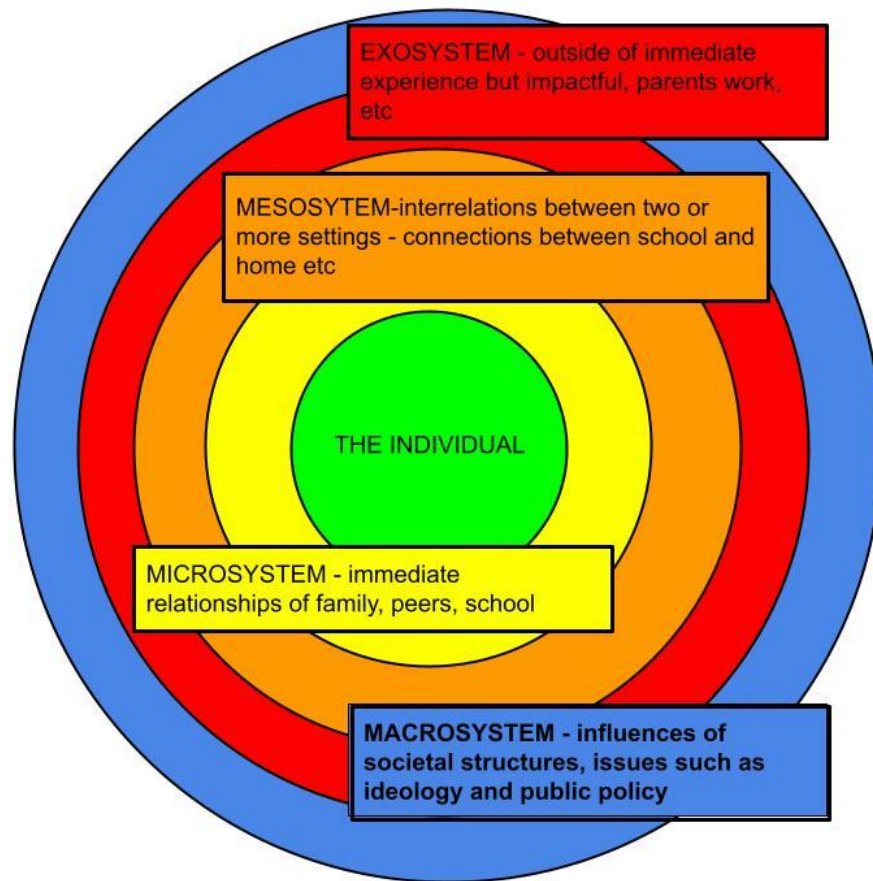


Figure 2.1.

Ecological Systems Theory

Bronfenbrenner (1979) utilized these conceptualizations to illustrate the importance of recognizing the influence of “interpersonal structures” within the microsystem referred to as “triads, tetrads.” These groupings (triads, tetrads) of involved entities usually represented three or four participants, who were essential in supporting an “effective context for human development” (p. 5). The inclusion of perspectives and voices within the student microsystem have the capacity to make or break the effective interventions supporting student development through the delivery of individual plan of study process. Described by Bronfenbrenner (1979) as a three-legged stool, the failure to provide supports and inclusion for one of the essential entities can result in diminished capacity, “as a context for development is seen to depend on the

existence and nature of social interconnections between settings, including joint participation, communication, and the existence of information in each setting about the other” (p 6). Herr (1996) observed the importance of the ecological context that individuals interact within. These Herr described as the “ecological contexts, in which individuals develop as people, citizens, and workers, significantly influence their possibilities for choice, the knowledge available about opportunities open to them, and the reinforcement of their behaviors” (p. 7).

The model is a useful structure for examining the relationships between members of the ecology to understand interactions which support student learning in a wide range of unique contexts. Herr (1996) was able to frame an array of issues with impact on an individual’s pursuit of knowledge and access relative to careers through the reference to the ecological context. Herr (1996) explores a range of possible impacts from the influence of Sputnik era national rhetoric on American policy to local plant closings and unemployment. These references of historical context by Herr (1996) can be used to illustrate the application of Bronfenbrenner’s model by attaching macrosystem to the described influence of “American policy,” as well as “Sputnik era national rhetoric.” These elements of the macrosystem are vague, abstract, and far removed from the individual child of the period until we consider the influence these policies had upon the workplace of the families (mesosystem) and the activities and priorities of school administrator (mesosystem) on establishing curricular emphasis on modernization of science courses. As the school counselor and families work together with the student (triad within the microsystem) on exploring options relative to schooling, we can see the many factors of the ecology which have direct and indirect influence on the experiences of the student.

Not yet mentioned, is the chronosystem explained by Bronfenbrenner (1979) which provided a lens for examining the changes which can occur relative to the ecology over time.

This lens, for example could be used to explore the influence of Soviet politics on American education from the height of the Sputnik era to post Berlin wall, Soviet collapse and modern Russian influence. This example briefly illustrates how Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) can be used to investigate and examine situations of influence. The theory is relevant for the exploration of the individual plan of study to represent the importance of the many agents within the ecology and the unique context of each student.

Herr (1996) also explored the influence of funding at the state and national level which supported the development of occupational training for citizens during times of "social or economic transition" thus impacting career guidance, resources, and policies (p. 10). The theory further serves as a valuable structure for examining, "the interdependency of individual behavior, social or public policy, career theory and practice and the components of the ecological context in which behavior and interventions in it are embedded and shaped" (p 17). The application of ecological systems theory as a foundational precept for organizing review of the individual plan of study is justifiable through the framework's ability to account for individual and group dynamics as well as its malleability across different communities and social systems. The ecological context for each entity of the microsystem can be examined to assess affordances and constraints within a given context, relative to the individual, which is unique to each. Chen (1999) stated, "The ecological frame presents an integral picture of multiplicity and interactive relationships with respect to a person's life career development" (p. 12). This conceptualization of these relationships affords school staff, and most directly the school counselor, a framework around which they might assemble and convene agents to support students in the completion of their individual plan of study.

Leonard (2010) utilized Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory to explore complex school and community interactions at one high school in Boston over a forty-year period. The study closely examined the influence of the economy on student achievement and the resulting shifts in educational reform. Examination of the reform strategies often involved community partners and were identified as to whether the reform addressed efforts directed at the microsystem, the mesosystem, and/or the exosystem. An important finding in the study revealed that, students who were successful students had their needs met "through relationships we hardly notice between teachers, parents, peer groups, and other members in microsystem settings. For at-risk students, these relationships are sketchy" (p. 31). Leonard advised identification of students who might benefit most from exosystem support to improve outcomes for the student, "and sometimes turn around an entire school or steer a district in a new direction" (p. 31). The study suggested that a successful reform strategy should be aimed at changing the school culture rather than reform aimed at curriculum or structure.

A useful extension of ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) was applied by Biesta and Tedder (2007) who introduced a theoretical perspective on agency connected with the ecological context of individuals which "enables agency to be conceived as something that is achieved, rather than possessed, through the active engagement of individuals with aspects of their contexts-for-action" (p. 3). Applying this definition within the ecological systems theory enabled the examination of the entities and their interactions with each other, and the structures, knowledge, and situations needed to develop knowledge and skills. The authors noted that, "[f]rom a lifecourse perspective, we suggest to see agency as the ability to exert control over and give direction to one's life" (p. 5). This perspective can be a useful support in considering the development of an individual and the ability to exert control as a part of their interaction with

their environmental circumstance. Viewed from the perspective of time, the development of agency may be viewed as iterative, as awareness and interactions may graduate in complexity for the individual. Priestley et al. (2015) described an:

Alternative conceptualization of agency is to see it as an emergent phenomenon - as something that is achieved by individuals, through the interplay of personal capacities and the resources, affordances, and constraints of the environment by means of which individuals act. This latter ecological conceptualization of agency emphasizes the importance of both individual capacity and contextual dimensions in shaping agency and, moreover, views the achievement of agency as a temporal process. (p. 19)

It is this understanding of ecological agency as an emergent phenomenon within ecological systems that was of interest in research of the individual plan of study. Student agency can be perceived as pursuant to successful participation by multiple entities as an achievement of agency developed through cooperative interaction in support of a unified goal. Central to the support of student agency is the agency achieved by the multiple entities organized in support of the student. The school staff charged with individual plan of study leadership, most often the school counselor, are the orchestrators cultivating these agentic actions of the engaged entities, including their own.

Career Development and the Lifelong Lens

Feller and Wichard (2005) detailed significant change in the way career development has engaged clients over the preceding forty years. The change was reflective of a developing society and the way a modern economy functions. Rather than merely “fitting clients into jobs or traditional dualistic learning options” (p. 1), career development has come to function with growing complexity, supporting the change throughout individual life experiences as educational

attainment and new opportunities converge at various junctures. Developing these skills is a part of the Kansas State Board of Education's vision and is reflected in the board mandate of the individual plan of study which will supporting students in the development of skills (Reed, 2014).

Indeed, as Feller and Wichard (2005) detailed the significant change of a worker's role in society and in what work has become, there have also been significant cultural changes affecting societal values (Hughey & Hughey, 1999). These macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1978) influences described by Feller and Wichard, require collaboration between exosystem and mesosystem partners to support interventions that are effective within the individual microsystem. It was emphasized that people must steward each other through a period of transformational change. These societal and cultural changes necessitate continuing renewal of and adaptation to individual life plans. Feller and Wichard (2005) anticipated continuing transformational change and advised a "commitment to self-advocacy and self-management, heightened resiliency, and a clarion call to make meaning out of one's existence" (p. 2). To support the agency of the individual in adaptation within a changing ecology, it is critical that communities ensure lifelong learning and that personal development opportunities were in place to support those individuals who experienced displacement from the workforce or barriers in accessing quality education and/or training programs (Biesta & Tedder, 2007). Each community must develop and convey clear messages about the vision and direction for the community and ensure that there is a layer of support available to community members to better themselves academically, socially, culturally, and economically through access to lifelong learning. Hughey and Hughey (1999) observed that, "Given that the workplace and the requirements for success in the workplace are changing, it is important that students become well prepared for the transitions they will make

throughout their career. Helping facilitate the career development of students must be a priority for school guidance programs and educational programs” (p. 208).

Perna (2018) also addressed disruption and emphasized that, “we must prioritize career development exploration as an integral part of the K-12 system. Higher education is remarkably expensive, and yet many students head off to college without a clear plan of what they would like to do with their lives” (p.17). Students graduating high school would benefit from understanding more about opportunities which exist in the mesosystem before they arrive at important decision-making junctures (Advance CTE, 2018; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Feller & Wichard, 2005; Herr, 1996; Hughey & Hughey, 1999; Solberg, 2019).

Perna (2018) shared an interesting perspective on the generational rifts within the workplace and the disconnect between various represented generations. He noted the “Why Generation” encompasses both Generation Y (the Millennials) and Generation Z (currently the youngest generation). These cohorts approach education, careers and everything else in their lives with a strong desire to understand the purpose behind what they do” (p. 4). This perspective was contrasted with prior generations who faced different expectations of tradition. The “Because I said so” cliché is not a sufficient answer for Why Generations. Perna discussed an “awareness gap,” which exists in American society as he described the “six million open jobs within the US economy that are middle- to high- skilled, living- wage positions requiring significant training in high-tech environments using state-of-the-art equipment and techniques for fields like advanced manufacturing, construction, healthcare, engineering, aviation, and many others” (p. 2). Oversold on university bachelor's degrees, this generation reported a lack of interest and engagement with work after successfully completing their degrees and finding a job. Perna (2018) reported, “Some 55 percent of young people report feeling unengaged at work.

Perhaps even more alarming, some 66 percent expect to leave their current positions by 2020” (p. 2).

The tendency for the modern generation of workers to look at employment with current employers as temporary stops within their career development is a trend that has been growing for some time. Feller and Wichard (2005) described these players as “knowledge nomads” or free agents who, “are clearly aware of their employment opportunities, and they typically create their own opportunities within and beyond traditional organizations” (p. 48). Typically, these dissatisfied employees are the former students deemed highly successful by families and communities after entering and completing university preparation and do not even include the 30% of students left out of the postsecondary success discussions who are bound straight for the workforce after, in many cases, a silo of studies defined by curricula defined by university success. These students studied under the “One Way to Win” doctrine and their situation is detailed by Herr and Gray (2006). The university path, presented as the only “Way to Win” narrows the playing field of success so tightly, reducing the margins of error, and defines an exclusive field of successful students which is largely determined by a competitive rank decidedly predetermined by the family the student is born into (p. 527). The ability of the individual to successfully navigate the complexities of the ecology become increasingly difficult. Effective interventions can be identified through the organization of exosystem partners (Feller & Wichard, 2005; Hill et al., 2003; Hughey & Hughey, 1999; Solberg et al., 2012).

In order to adjust to the complexities of the 21st Century ecology and support career development opportunities, the sophistication of comprehensive school counseling programs across the nation have been aided by national initiatives to support robust models of school counseling (Advance CTE, 2018; Kansas Comprehensive School Counseling Program, 2021).

These career guidance activities “Suggest that it is more than a set of activities and services; it is a systematic, sequential, purposeful, and developmental program aimed at helping students achieve specific outcomes” (Gray & Herr, 2006, p. 145). Recommendations for career development were made to include incorporating activities as early as elementary age to support the understanding of the world and the structures and hierarchies that exist (American School Counselor Association, 2021). Middle school exploration of possibilities was important to determine aptitudes and explore the intersection with student interest and real-world possibilities (ACTE, 2018; Dewey, 1938; Herr, 1996; Solberg, 2019). High school was important in the development of skills and the transition to post-secondary opportunities. Each stage built upon capacity developed within the previous. This sequence of learning experiences and student competencies establish a plan of action which students develop under guidance of school counselors and school staff with family input. Student engagement was critical at the earliest stages in order to support the development of student abilities at decision making on the path to being independent and self-determinant (Hughey & Hughey, 2009; Gray & Herr, 2006). Perna (2018) also stated, “Empowering students to select a pathway based on their unique interest is the key to helping them focus, plan, and take the necessary action in the direction of their ‘want-to,’ a chosen field based on both the career and lifestyle advantages that appeal directly to each student” (p. 175). This very important consideration can help students thoughtfully consider the debt that they are incurring for their education and what the educational attainment can mean in supporting the lifestyle they choose. It is also important to close the skills gap in the workforce and fill the millions of open jobs with capable contributors that can support an economic foundation which extends support to an infrastructure of social programs stretching from cradle to grave (Feller & Wichard, 2005; Hughey & Hughey, 1999; Perna 2018) A thriving ecology

presents more opportunities for the success of the individual (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Supporting student involvement in this complex society and its workings is important. Perna (2018) noted:

Young people truly want and need to understand why things are done a certain way because it lends credibility to their participation. If they see no logical reason for the effort, they will not put in a great deal of energy. They want their contribution to mean something. In fact, they want to determine for themselves if there is a better way to do it and if there is something they can add to make it better for everyone. It's not about challenging authority but improving the process and outcome as a team player. (p. 34)

The younger generations of society are developing their skills, abilities, and aptitudes in an ever-changing environment which includes demographic shifts, cultural change, technological advancement, and new paradigms of understanding ourselves and others.

Feller and Wichard (2005) delved into this examination as the “current shift from global competition to global alliances expands” (p. 24), and global corporations affect national workforces with migrations of jobs across the world in search of productivity. In the case of manufacturing, U.S. jobs are off shored in pursuit of cheap labor but have begun to re-shore with the advent of automation on the manufacturing floor and low domestic energy cost. The original lost jobs are not returning as they exited. The re-shored jobs will require different jobs servicing the automation and spread across the logistics supply chain. Feller and Wichard (2005) describe the emerging “Knowledge Nomads” who will by necessity be shifting from sector to sector, not just following the current career but continually honing their skills and developing into new careers as they emerge. The ability of the high school student to identify their interest, learn and apply, and pursue personal development, will become a lifelong endeavor as they continue to

develop with the opportunities that emerge in their lifetimes. Shifting the still prevailing one way to win philosophy in this society will necessitate continuous messaging about the real opportunities in our community for a broad range of participation that should be inclusive of all career paths and return respect to the nobility of work.

Individual Plans of Study

The Kansas emphasis of supporting individualized plan of study for students was reflective of the national movement to recognize and incorporate the highly effective strategy for supporting student achievement. A national leader in career development strategies, Solberg (2019) emphasized that the effort around individualized learning plans (ILP) was critical in lieu of an “increased awareness of the fact that there is a large segment of our population that has been left out of the economic growth of the past thirty years” (p. 1). The value of the individual learning plan was empowering students to participate in planning for life goals, with school staff and families. Solberg stated, “The immediate positive impact is that youth realize that education matters- that academic coursework offers them the foundational skills needed to pursue their objectives” (p. 2). The findings shared by Solberg (2019) were drawn from two research projects which included school, state, and national perspectives on ILP implementation. The promising practices for effective ILP implementation included the importance of school wide coordination in support of implementation for all students, the value of family engagement with the ILP, and the importance of work-based learning experiences. These as well as the other promising practices supported, “a shift in thinking, from the dominant paradigm of career decision-making to a focus on helping students attain necessary skills in three career development areas” (p. 22). Through organizing three key areas including self-exploration, career exploration, and career planning and management, Solberg (2019) established a structure for implementing highly

effective strategies to support staff, students, and families in actionable support. These interactions have a great impact upon the microsystem experiences of the student. As the effective communication among the members of the ecology are assembled to act in support of the interventions, then the student has optimal support to achieve development and success.

Several case studies conducted and discussed by Solberg (2019) attest to the positive outcomes experienced by educators, students, and families from the individual plan of study experience. The case studies, “describe the impact of the ILP process and how ILP’s can enable youth to take control of their own career and life opportunities and thereby enter a postsecondary training or degree program with determination and purpose” (p. 18). The opportunity to participate in “a range of self-exploration and career exploration skills” (p. 18) developed through interaction with school staff and family are framed as positive experiences which both shape youth interests and nurture skills and knowledge to support them on their journey to success.

Of additional note for this study, Solberg (2019) identified the important impact that “Caring and Encouraging Adults” can have upon the experiences of youth if they are supported in the opportunity to engage and inform. The adults can range from external partners from community agencies, employers, or career mentors. The recognition of mesosystem influences and deliberate action to strengthen their focus on student support is integral to advancing student achievement. The comprehensive support for implementation of the individual plan of study which aligns with the important agents of the ecological system are critical for success.

Within the whole school concept of individual plan of study, Schanfield (2010) highlighted key aspects of high school advisory programs that may be transferable to postsecondary institutions and support successful transition for students moving from high

school to postsecondary. Two of the highlights that Schanfield identified include: the dedication to ongoing professional development, which high school teachers and counselors have access to, and the organization of advisory related to “the group advising aspect of high school advisory” (p.2). This allows for an increase of personalization within the group to develop “a foundation of social, emotional, and study skills needed for students to succeed in college” (p.3). These experiences could be critical in developing persistence and increasing the postsecondary effective rate for Kansas students. An increased relationship between isolated secondary instructors and their postsecondary peers could serve as an invaluable opportunity for developing shared understandings about the issues and hurdles which this cohort of students are experiencing during their maturation. This increased communication could be critical as instructors and institutions seek to preserve foundational excellence and yet provide malleable support to the individual needs of each student.

Contextual Learning

Education with a purpose^{is} developed upon the idea that answering individual student questions around “why” was a difficult subject to address. Answering the student “why” was leveraged to greater advantage through development within a context, grounded in reality, and supported with conversations as student ability to reflect was developed through experiences. These constructivist experiences which provide for the development of agency were critical in the development of student capacity (Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Dewey, 1938). According to Perna (2018), students were anxious to understand how learning fits into their life and to what purpose the learning might be applied. Contextual learning was useful as it drew, “students’ diverse skills, interests, experiences, and cultures and integrates these into what and how students learn” (Perna, 2018, p. 163). But when and where are students empowered to

develop the decision-making capabilities to determine what the context is that they want to pursue? How might schools best support curriculum which prepares student agency to successfully understand their ecology and interact within it (Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Dewey, 1938)? Gray and Herr (2006) asked if the default program of study, the college prep sequence of courses, dictated that higher education was the only way to win. Placing the learning and development within a context of purpose and pragmatic realism increased student engagement and interest. Gray and Herr (2006) argued:

That the success of any such efforts would require informed decisions by teens and their parents—thus the importance of career development/ guidance programs. These programs have three major goals: (1) to assist students in developing related career interests by the 10th grade, (2) to verify these interests in the 11th and 12th grades, and (3) to use this information to develop postsecondary plans. (Gray & Herr, 2006, p. 168)

These foundational experiences in high school, engage students through the rich inquiry of contextual learning, and are important parts of a well-rounded education, during all developmental ranges, starting with the earliest preschool experiences.

Career and technical education courses are a strong example of successful contextual learning which students can experience in the American comprehensive high school (Broderson et al., 2021; Solberg, 2019). Yet, these programs are viewed as a backup plan to the college prep plan of study. Despite being ignored or undervalued, CTE “continues to elicit positive results in high school students’ career development and academic success” (Feller & Wichard, 2005, p. 5). Broderson et al. (2021) revealed that “CTE concentrators (students who complete a sequence of CTE courses aligned to a specific career field such as manufacturing or education and training) were 7 percentage points more likely than non-CTE concentrators to graduate from high school

on time and 10 percentage points more likely to enroll in any type of postsecondary education within two years of their expected high school graduation year” (p. 1). The blending of academic and technical coursework in a student learning experience can be linked to increased retention and graduation rates. The integration of applied experiences within the program of study appeared to reinforce student learning through the application of skills and knowledge within the contextual learning opportunities (Feller & Wichard, 2005, p. 6). Often these courses contained work-based learning opportunities which extended student engagement beyond the classroom in partnership with business and industry partners who host student field trips, job shadows, and high school internships (Alfeld et al., 2013). These rich experiences can be a vehicle for meeting mentors, networking, and learning about the role of learning in the real world and may also be an introduction to the world of opportunities the student may not have yet had the privilege to experience.

A recent study by Aragon (2021) of teacher and administrator perceptions of middle school career and technical education coursework in California public schools studied important features of education programing. This study examined factors which contributed to student growth in academic ability, technical skill, and included important integration of social emotional learning experiences that contributed to positive behaviors in the classroom and successful outcomes for students. Aragon (2021) examined the learning within this context and revealed six key findings which support the incorporation of career and technical education as a significant support for student achievement. The importance of positive, engaged, and active environments was highlighted as important for students. The six key findings include (pp.111-112):

1. Hands-on learning in an active learning environment where students are engaged with applied learning that promotes positive classroom behavior.
2. Activities that require students to probe for answers and figure things out develops inquisitive minds and fosters positive classroom behavior.
3. Collaborative group work supports the development of interpersonal and communication skills, building relationships that have a positive impact on classroom behavior.
4. Real-world application and career-related projects allow students to build confidence and have a positive impact on classroom behavior.
5. A classroom atmosphere that allows student autonomy has a positive impact on classroom behavior.
6. Providing opportunities for students to complete tasks that demonstrate competence promotes positive classroom behavior.

Throughout career development units, students were empowered to explore their own potential, learn about their community, and to explore career opportunities. These lessons and activities were described as quite successful in engaging students. The student-centered focus and the choices students were able to make as they framed and personalized the learning experience, based upon their unique interest and understanding of the world, to further develop their knowledge and envision possible outcomes of their actions, can be seen as a significant support for student success. Described by Vanderstraeten and Biesta (1998) contextual learning can be used to address concerns for low student achievement which “are mostly attributed to the dis-embeddedness of learning situations in schools” (p.1). The authors described the importance of “authentic learning” which supported the students in “acquiring knowledge in the contexts that (will) give this knowledge its meaning” (p.1). The importance of including the curriculum of

the individual plan of study in schools can be supported through the example and application of experiential learning and authentic learning. Integrating contextual learning opportunities within the student experience reinforces the importance of the individual plan of study and creates building blocks for new decisions and exploration of new knowledge (ACTE, 2018).

Leveraging the learning experiences of the student in preparation for adult life in a complicated society necessitates a wide range of supports across the ecology which require participation by adults in addition to the school counselor to foster the development of agency (Gysbers, 2013; Herr, 1996; Hughey & Hughey, 1999). Community support, as well as family support, and classroom teacher integration of concepts and actions, present a well-developed approach for developing student skills, knowledge, and capacity for self-informed assessment of skills, interest, and aptitudes yielding optimal outcomes for decision making (Solberg, 2019). Gysbers (2013) discussed the “substantial contributions to helping all students become career ready through their work in comprehensive school counseling programs” (p.287). School counselors, aided by administrators and families, develop these student decision-making skills (Hughey & Hughey, 1999). This strengthens and develops personal capacities and abilities preparing the student to engage in interaction within the ecology. Gysbers (2013) further discussed the importance of community organizations that support school vision and policy in presenting and supporting student opportunity for development of career readiness (Hughey & Hughey, 1999). These mesosystem partners present an opportunity for extended experience and interaction further strengthening student capacities and abilities (Aragon, 2021). The “goal of student career readiness must also be reflected in the activities of local chambers of commerce, service clubs, and business, industry, and labor organizations” (Gysbers, 2013, p. 287).

Summary

The review of literature in this chapter has served to encapsulate key foundational knowledge related to the individual plan of study and the actions relevant to participants in the process of administering an individual plan of study in a school setting. The review serves further to organize and frame elements of the theoretical framework for research to be discussed in chapter four.

The function and role of foundational theories discussed in the chapter illustrate the importance of ecological systems in guiding practitioners implementing the individual plan of study. It is fundamental to consciously support student experience and sense making as students engage in growth opportunities which lead them to new understandings of the world, themselves, and their interactions. This is unique to each student, dependent on their life experiences which may be affordances or constraints. The administration of the individual plan of study necessitates flexible student-centric supports in order to be successful. Ecological systems theory serves to illustrate the complexity of interactions and considerations necessary to thoughtfully approach the student context and inform iterative opportunities to foster development. Agency for individuals can be developed through a successfully functioning ecology. The individual plan of study can be envisioned as achievable within this ecological framework and each of the entities engaged in the individual plan of study can be supported in participation.

Additionally, the literature review revealed implications for career development which illustrate the powerful ways in which technological and generational change create tension within the ecology and create potential constraints. Student learning experiences which include applied learning, contextual learning, community-based learning, and career development

activities offer affordances which support student development of new knowledge and skills that may not otherwise be available to them.

The importance of developing practical approaches to career development is fundamental to support and guide the actions of those charged with the delivery of individual plan of study services. The ongoing professional development, organization, personalization, and communication are essential to support the individual needs of each student. The importance of integrating career development strategies is shown to be critical and a compelling case is made to support educator capacity in this context.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

The methodology utilized within this bounded, case study examined the experiences and circumstances of selected secondary school counselors in Kansas comprehensive high schools participating in an individual plan of study professional learning network, with respect to their experiences in the delivery of the individual plan of study. Three school counselors were selected for participation in the study based on their leadership within statewide individual plan of study training and their willingness to participate. This chapter will additionally include explanation of purpose and investigative and descriptive research design of the bounded case study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). Participant school populations will be discussed, as well as methods for collecting and analyzing data, trustworthiness of the study and ethical considerations, and examination of the limitations of the study (Bhattacharya, 2017).

This bounded case study, utilized investigative and descriptive techniques (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam, 1998; Stake, 2006; Yin, 2018) as it followed three school counselors charged with leading the implementation of the individual plan of study. School counselors were chosen for their broad and overarching connection to all members of the ecological system, which support student growth and development. Data yielded from the study revealed the form and structure of individual plan of study, as well as the organization, and engagement of members of the school community ecology to support student success (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Herr, 1996)

This study utilized qualitative data collection methods (Bhattacharya, 2017; Creswell & Poth 2018; Saladana, 2016) to conduct formal, semi-structured interviews in which research questions were created to examine the relationships supporting the individual plan of study in

school community ecological systems. A focus group was convened to gather the three participants to explore an interchange of ideas and reflections on individual plan of study. Artifacts were collected from all three participants to provide further evidence of the individual plan of study implementation. The constraints of this study include a lack of generalizability and considerations of local influence.

A priori themes were derived from the examination of Bronfenbrenner (1979) ecological systems theory. The data were iteratively compared and grouped for similarities to reveal patterns within the data. Data analysis provided the emergent categories of similarities and differences that revealed unique implementations of the individual plan of study in each system (Merriam, 1998, as cited in Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 18).

Research Question

The purpose of this study was to investigate the implementation of the individual plan of study. The implementation of the individual plan of study can be investigated through the application of ecological systems theory to reveal the important convergence of support necessary for student success. Utilization of the ecological systems theory allowed for an expansion of discussion as local or regional circumstances (micro-, meso-, and exo-systems) within schools and communities could be considered in the strategic planning of the individual plan of study. For the purpose of investigating the state of individual plan of study interventions, this study examined perceptions relative to the following research question:

- How do school counselors engage members of the school community's ecological system to support the development of the student's individual plan of study?

Methodological Framework

This qualitative study consisted of a bounded, case study design. The study was situated in three midwestern comprehensive high schools. The school counselors were responsible for the local implementation of the individual plan of study. This bounded, single case study examined individual plan of study expectations following the theories of Stake (1995). As explained by Bhattacharya (2017), “This kind of case study focuses on a unique, information-rich situation, concern, or problem and selects a bounded system as a case to study this case. The bounded system in this instance could include one participant, many participants, or an entire organization” (p. 110). Incorporation of semi-structured interviews, focus group discussion, and examination of instructional artifacts, created broad context rich with data. The semi-structured interviews included “preparing questions in advance with possible probes identified. The research usually sticks to the prepared protocol while making room for unexpected directions in the interview if it occurs and is relevant to the study” (Bhattacharya, p. 127). These interviews elicited responses that provided discourse beyond single response items collected with the potential use of a survey. Interview questions and general principles were intended to explore the implementation of the individual plan of study through the application of the ecological systems theory framework to examine the role participants played in arranging support, within the ecology, for the student in the development of knowledge and skills. In addition to the general information provided by the interviews, the transcription and analysis of the open-ended responses elicited detailed narrative to support effective stakeholder agency in developing student individual plan of study (see Figure 3.1). This student-centric model illustrates the multiple agents of the ecological system gathered in support of the student. Focus group and artifact collection provided further triangulation of documentation for analysis as evidence of

participant description of process, procedures, and outcomes of their programs (Bhattacharya, 2017; Creswell and Poth, 2018; Saladana, 2016).

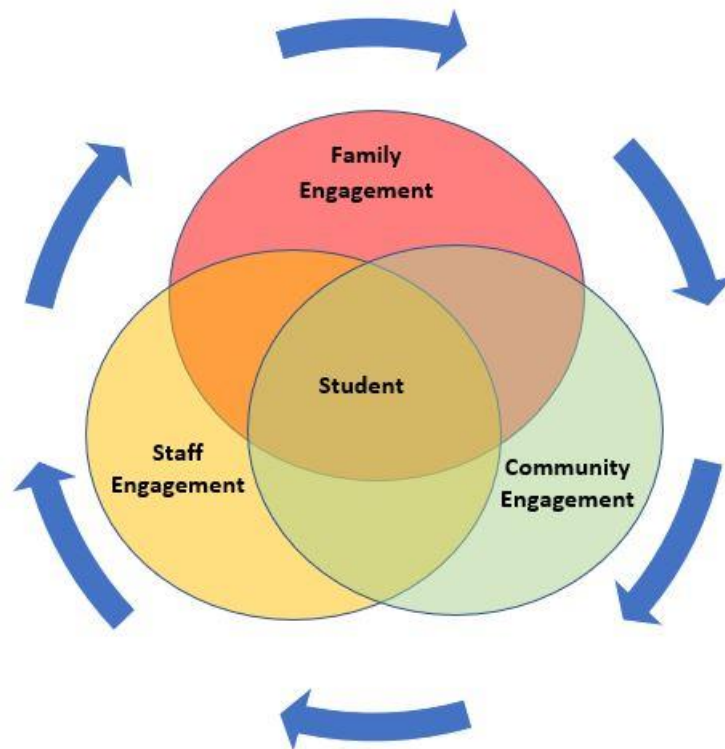


Figure 3.1.
Multiple Agents of Ecology

Setting

This study investigated the facilitation of the individual plan of study through an ecological lens. The implementation of the individual plan of study was examined within three typical midwestern school districts with enrollment between 2,000-3,000 students K-12. School participation in this study was the result of the school counselor selection and not by criteria of the school or community. School demographics are illustrated in Table 3.1 which presents individual characteristics of schools. Two of the school districts participating in the study were

identified from the NCES data definitions as Town, Distant while the third school was identified as Town, Remote.

Table 3.1.
Participant School Data

	K12 school population	Economically Disadvantaged	Five-year graduation avg	Five-year post-secondary success avg
School A	984 African American-1.52% Hispanic-20.33% Other-2.03% White-76.12%	47.96%	84%	43%
School B	1,570 African American-1.08% Hispanic-5.29% Other-4.27% White-89.36%	27.42%	92%	51%
School C	2,396 African American-1.38% Hispanic-5.59% Other-6.97% White-86.06%	55.34	83%	37%
Statewide	African American 6.84% Hispanic- 20.47% Other 9.41% White – 63.27%	47.12%	86%	48%

Timeline

The timing of this study was intended to begin during the fall of 2020 during the somewhat uncertain conditions of the Covid 19 pandemic and the reopening of Kansas schools which closed 8 weeks early during the spring semester. Instead of beginning in the fall, the study shifted to the second semester allowing more time for staff to address the challenges of their local teaching and learning environments. The scheduled activities for the study are listed below in Table 3.2:

Week One	Invite potential participants of the study
Week Two	Schedule zoom meetings and send calendar invites with links and preparatory questions
Week Three	Meet with participants individually and complete semi-structured interviews: collect Informed Consent Documents.
Week Four	Code data and develop focus group discussion for participants
Week Five	Convene focus group discussion with participants
Week Six	Code data from focus group discussion with participants
Week Seven	Solicitation of individual plan of study artifacts.
Week Eight	Follow up via email, if needed, with participants for remaining data collection
Week Nine	Data analysis of interviews, focus group discussion, artifacts
Week Ten	Feedback Statement

Table 3.2.

Data Collection Timeline

Participants

In order to study the individual plan of study the three school counselors were recruited from a cohort of ten regional leaders to explore the individual plan of study, as well as the engagement of the student's ecological systems and their impact. The school counselors were approached and recruited for participation in discussions about the individual plan of study within their school districts. Each of the participants received an informed consent document which was signed by each and collected by the researcher prior to participation. Pseudonyms were selected for the participants to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. In order to explore the workings of the ecology through the case study, it was necessary to engage with stakeholders beyond policies and terminologies to meet, greet, and hear the lived experiences of participants through inductive analysis.

The key partners within the administration of the study were three school counselors charged with leading the implementation of the individual plan of study which included post-secondary preparation and planning. This study sought participants who had engaged as a leader of one of the ten regional individual plan of study professional learning networks. The three school counselors identified and selected for this study volunteered their participation.

Participant, Mrs. Brown was a school counselor with experience in public schools for 26 years. In addition to school counseling, Mrs. Brown had several years of experience as an English Language Arts instructor. Mrs. Brown was a white, heterosexual, female school counselor.

Participant, Mrs. Rose was a school counselor with experience in public schools for 21 years. Mrs. Rose was a white, heterosexual, female school counselor.

Participant, Mrs. Green was a school counselor with over 25 years of experience in public schools. In addition to being a school counselor, Mrs. Green additionally served as a high school career and technical coordinator for the high school. Mrs. Green was a white, heterosexual, female school counselor.

Data Collection and Analysis

This study utilized three dominant methods of data collection: individual interview, focus group discussion, and artifact collection. The recorded interviews were housed on a secure server and transcribed and coded individually before the evaluation of similarities and differences across participants occurred.

The analysis process was arrived at through the study of Bhattacharya (2017), “the process through which a qualitative researcher might look at all the raw data, chunk them into small analytical units of meaning for further analysis (usually called codes), cluster similar analytical units and label them as categories” (p. 150). Organizing the salient patterns that emerged throughout the a priori themes presented an opportunity to evaluate and analyze information that reflected the individual plan of study experiences within the school community ecology. This analysis provided evidence and understandings around these unique participants and to what extent the ecological agency functioned in these communities. Gathering participant expertise through semi-structured interviews, gathering them in a focus group, and a collection of artifacts from each yielded a range of data and emergent evidence that contributed to the central understandings of the study.

Analysis was focused through the lens of ecological systems theory to examine school implementation of interventions to support the development of the individual plan of study and the capacity of students, families, school staff, and community to engage in actions related to the

individual plan of study (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Biesta, 2015). Particularly, the interview questions operationalized the framework of ecological systems theory to investigate the implementation of the individual plan of study in local initiatives to foster student achievement (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This critical lens served to guide investigation of the individual plan of study and further served as an initial guide in establishing themes a priori. Organizing themes in alignment with the elements of the ecological systems theory allowed for organization around prior knowledge from established theories to better develop questions and further promote investigation and resulting descriptions emergent through the semi-structured interviews, a focus group discussion, and examination of solicited artifacts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As foundational pre-knowledge, this information aided in the observation and notation of emergent categories from the semi-structured interviews of participants as understandings of local circumstance began and evolved. Described by Creswell and Poth (2018) as “simultaneous procedures” (p. 192), interviews, analysis, organization, and other research activities influenced one another and careful attention to memos, notation, and transcription was taken in regard to each part of the process to culminate in a successful analysis of research findings.

Interviews

Each participant was scheduled for an initial semi-structured interview scheduled through internet communication via the cloud-based Zoom application. Interviews were recorded via password protected Zoom accounts and downloaded for transcription where both video and transcribed notes were stored in a documents folder on my personal laptop computer which was password protected and utilized up-to-date computer security software via Windows Firewall and Microsoft Defender Antivirus. Interviews were developed around semi-structured questions seen below in Table 3.3.

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

- 1) To what degree are families involved with their child's decisions around what occupation or career field they might pursue?
 - 2) How has the school sought to engage families in the development of the individual plan of study? Are these experiences in school settings? Outside of school settings?
 - 3) What community or external partners have been supportive of the delivery of individual plan of study services?
 - 4) Are there any particular classes or teachers that students discuss as significant in the development of their individual plan of study?
 - 5) Which positions in the school staff have been supportive of and assistive in the delivery of knowledge and activities with the individual plan of study?
 - 6) What would you like to see happen in your school/community to support the individual plan of study for each student?
-

Table 3.3.

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

During interviews, participant responses guided opportunities to probe for relevant information; note and memo taking during interview process served as pre-transcription code checking and preliminary coding (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Saladana, 2016). Upon completion of interviews and their subsequent transcription, the transcripts were analyzed for salient similarities and differences. The a priori themes of ecological systems were determined, and emergent categories were noted across data collection. These were examined for prominent alignment and provided narrative descriptions, and the meanings interpreted as representative evidence (Bhattacharya 2017; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Saladana, 2016). These findings served as the guide for establishing structure for dialogue with the subsequent focus group.

Focus Group

After the conclusion of the individual interviews and the resultant data analysis, research participants were brought together for a focus group discussion which built upon the themes and

emerging categories developed from the data during initial individual interviews. Semi-structured questions were developed to begin focus group discussion and encouraged the sharing of individual perspectives within the group (see Table 3.4 below).

Semi-Structured Focus Group Questions
1. What might you tell other districts about your school's individual plan of study implementation and its impact on individual plan of study for change/reform?
2. What might you tell peers about being in an individual plan of study professional learning network and its support for reform/change?
3. What advice do you have for peers regarding the challenges you have seen?

Table 3.4.

Focus Group Questions

The interplay of individual perspectives within the focus group discussion was intended to verify initial findings and provide shared and or distinct perspectives to be expressly clarified. Focus group discussion began around three semi-structured questions, designed after initial interviews, to elicit historical perspective and reflect current status of the individual plan of study within the school. The initial discourse quickly developed into an open-ended discussion among participants where each posed questions of the other. The focus group became a free exchange of ideas and revealed a large amount of data for analysis. Memos and notations served to guide preliminary coding of transcribed responses obtained from the recorded Zoom session of the focus group discussion (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Saladana, 2016).

Artifacts

Artifacts were gathered for analysis as another form of data collection, which was conducted subsequent to the focus group discussion. Individual participants were invited to share documents, presentations, and/or other exemplars utilized in the individual plan of study at

their school. The artifacts served as tangible items for examination which illustrated the focus and type of support for the individual plan of study, as well as how each school sought to engage with members of the ecology. Artifacts were evaluated for alignment with the themes and categories emergent from the participant interviews and focus group discussion. The artifacts were significant demonstrations of specific engagement with a member of the ecological system chosen to be highlighted by each of the school counselors.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness of the data occurred through the triangulation of the methods of data collection. Triangulation within this study was completed utilizing personal interviews, a focus group discussion, and collection of individual plan of study artifacts. The examination of emergent categories across three themes were investigated to reveal similarities and differences across participants and across each method of data collection. Trustworthiness in this qualitative research was demonstrated through systematic rigor of the research design, credibility, believability, and applicability of research methods (Rose & Johnson, 2020).

Rigor of the study was a result of rich contextual detail aligned within the findings and discussion, the theoretical framework of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, the case study methodology, and the analytical insights established through literature review (Bhattacharya, 2017). Credibility of the study was a result of internal and external validity. During individual interviews, internal validity was established through individual representations of the research participant's reality and expert opinions. Comparisons across participants created external validity comparing populations and settings, individual interviews, focus group discussion and artifacts presented. Further external validity could be established across similar school populations and settings using the theoretical framework, literature review, research

question, methodologies, and questions during interview by outside researchers and would likely show similar and comparable results. Reliability would also be established in the replicability of the study across Kansas schools utilizing the individual plan of study and school counselor participation.

Limitations and Possibilities of the Study

There are constraints upon the applicability of this study particularly centered upon the time and space in which it was conducted. The normal school cycles have been disrupted by Covid 19 and most assuredly have affected the perspectives and attitudes of all participants. The results pay testimony to the experiences of the participants but should be re-evaluated during a less traumatic time for more validation. It was also possible that these historic events have created an intersection for real self-assessment and the search for meaning.

The rigorous research design ensured that aspects of the study were transferable to other schools and situations. Careful consideration should be taken when developing the research design for individual school and community mesosystem and exosystem interactions. Macrosystem influences of national, state, and regional policies and culture have nuances that may be considered. There is some limitation further applied to this research as the study reflects the unique nature of Kansas education and the statewide mandate for the individual plan of study.

A successful outcome for this study would be to provide meaningful guidance for school districts as they develop the capacity of their school, staff, families, communities, and students to encourage and nurture opportunities for students to engage in complex decision making about their future roles in our society. These start in middle school years as exploratory experiences and gain momentum as students approach their high school graduation and decisions become

more concrete and require personal commitment and often personal financial investment to continue.

Summary

The research methodology employed within the study utilized a bounded case study design to conduct a qualitative investigation. An overview of the definitions and procedures chosen to support rigorous data analysis from qualitative methods were explained. The particular study was designed to connect ecological systems theory to the implementation of the individual plan of study in the State of Kansas. Literature directly linking the theory to the individual plan of study was not found within the Kansas State Department of Education nor by this author in his research. Applying the ecological systems theory framework with the individual plan of study provided the opportunity to examine where different levels of the ecology were interacting with each other to overcome restraints and/or develop affordances for students within the ecology.

Chapter 4 - Key Findings and Results

The focus and priority of the Kansas State Board of Education's mandate for an individual plan of study for each student is focused by and justified through alignment with nationally recognized practices (American School Counselor Association, 2021; Feller & Wichard, 2005; Gray & Herr, 2006; Gysbers, 2013; Hughey & Hughey, 1999; Perna 2018; Solberg, 2019). Yet, an individual plan of study is often not recognized as a critical part of school mission in many school districts (KSDE, 2021b). The purpose of this study investigated the implementation of the individual plan of study through the application of ecological systems theory to reveal the important convergence of support necessary for student success. Research explored how school counselors engaged members of the school community's ecological system to support the development of the student's individual plan of study.

This study investigated the ecological systems interactions supporting the individual plan of study in three midwestern, moderate sized, comprehensive school districts. Two of the schools scored at or above the statewide poverty indicator for economic disadvantage. Current school performance is reflected by the range of graduation and postsecondary effectiveness percentages shown in Table 4.1.

	K12 school population	Economically Disadvantaged	Five-year graduation avg	Five-year post-secondary success avg
School A	984 African American-1.52% Hispanic-20.33% Other-2.03% White-76.12%	47.96%	84%	43%
School B	1,570 African American-1.08% Hispanic-5.29% Other-4.27% White-89.36%	27.42%	92%	51%
School C	2,396 African American-1.38% Hispanic-5.59% Other-6.97% White-86.06%	55.34	83%	37%
Statewide	African American 6.84% Hispanic- 20.47% Other 9.41% White – 63.27%	47.12%	86%	48%

Table 4.1.

School Performance Data

The inclusion of graduation and postsecondary success effectiveness percentages served as measurable systemic performance indicators for schools and in part reflect district effort to improve student performance through initiatives. The information taken from the building accountability efforts should be considered carefully as the lag indicators reflect data from the graduating cohort of students in the years 2014-2018. The longitudinal data represented in these reports are not directly linked to the effectiveness of the current interventions for students present in the district today. The data from Table 4.1 illustrated district characteristics, prior longitudinal performance, and the justification for initiatives like the individual plan of study to support and guide systemic change in services and also support the priorities around staff professional development and training to sustain long term school improvement.

To begin analysis, I isolated and focused on three themes established a priori, based upon the ecological systems theory. The three themes which were established were **Family Engagement**, **Staff Engagement**, and **Community Engagement**. Utilizing this themed perspective, it was possible to analyze the data collection and discover the prevalence of these themes and further probe the data for descriptions of active interactions of the respective agents. Through this process it was possible to categorize data respective to actions identified by participants as contributing to the emergent agency present within each theme (see Table 4.2).

Themes	Family Engagement	Staff Engagement	Community Engagement
Categories	Family Meetings	Leadership	Work-Based Learning
	Student Ownership	Advisory	Collaborative Partnership
	Communication Outreach	Applied Learning	Postsecondary Institutions

Table 4.2.

Themes & Categories

Family Engagement

The value and importance of engaging families in the individual plan of study was a theme within each school with targeted actions for supporting family involvement. The three interview participants engaged in dialogue through a question that asked them to examine the individual plan of study delivery within their school: *To what degree would you say that families are involved with their children's decisions around occupations or the career fields in which they might be interested?*

During their individual interview, participants described in detail the actions category of **Family Meetings** which were intentional intersections with family to exchange information and understandings regarding their student's education. Dialogue also revealed a shared category which I have identified as **Student Ownership**. This category can be viewed as emergent from and amplified by family meetings as evidenced by participant recollections, yet unique enough in

its influence through the ecosystem that it was justified as an independent category. Student ownership represented a shift in the focus and intent of discussions between student, family, and school as well as actions and activities available to students within the school and the community. Student ownership was a key indicator of the presence of a student-centered implementation of the individual plan of study. An additional significant category identified was **Communication Outreach**. New communication outreach strategies were identified as an intentional strategy in face of the challenges resulting from the Covid 19 disruption to regular school activities.

Family Meetings

In the interview discussion with each of the participants, an intentional structure and purpose was revealed for family engagement, focused and directed through a series of family meetings which included open house, informational sessions with families by student grade levels, conference schedules, family meetings outside of the school day, etc. The details around each school's strategy for family engagement possessed differences which were often subtle, yet revealed significant adjustments to fit local needs. Ms. Rose in School A described family engagement occasions scheduled by grade level, seasonally, including fall for seniors, winter for juniors, and early spring for sophomores. These visits were structured for discussion, culminating in enrollment plans built from academic and career path investigation. These family and student joint meetings supplemented the two annual student led conferences providing families with invaluable information on the progress of student learning. Family participation in the school events was viewed as successful and positive with over 75% participation in the family meetings and over 90% on student-led conferences according to Ms. Rose. Having had

the conferences for several years, the school began piloting several changes this year. According to Ms. Rose the school sought to develop:

Things we were doing in the parent meeting to really have more of a focus in the student-led conferences. So instead of just, 'Hey go over your grades,' which parents can see online, it was more along the lines of, 'What are your hopes and dreams? What are your passions?' (personal communication, March 1, 2021)

This crucial step fostered student ownership as students began to develop and articulate a vision for their future. This provided the opportunity to explore the vision with their family and investigate possible hurdles they might face.

The interview with Ms. Brown from School B on the degree of involvement with families revealed a similar structure for family engagement. School B included an open house and informational sessions by grade levels with family and scheduled enrollment meetings with students and counselors. Family participation during student enrollment meetings was required at this school and has become an important tool available for student success and planning additional intersections when needed for accessing support. As illustrated in the interview by Ms. Brown:

Now when they come in there is a huge discrepancy. Some are so excited and so involved and have had the conversation at home and come in continuing that. Some are like, 'Oh, I didn't even know; this is kind of exciting.' It starts the conversation which is great! (personal communication, March 1, 2021)

According to Ms. Brown, the school engages 95% of families and struggles with about 5% of student families who do not engage and participate in the enrollment family meetings.

The interview with Ms. Green from School C on the degree of involvement with families illustrates the impact of student-led meetings on family engagement and was a highlight of focus

as the school had incorporated them for the first time the previous year and was completing them for the second time in the coming week. According to Ms. Green:

All the research says that parents are the greatest influencers which I do agree with. I think for us, in the last couple of years, we have made a concerted effort to include parents more and I think probably our greatest outcome was last year when we did student-led conferences. (personal communication, March 1, 2021)

With an 82% participation rate in the preceding year, the expectation at the school was high in the current year for a significant opportunity to engage families.

The individual school percentage participation by family in key family engagement activities is illustrated in Figure 4.1. Each of the schools described these activities as the benchmark for family engagement. Each school utilized additional means of reaching families through telephone calls and personal meetings where necessary. Each schools' focus on student led meeting has had a significant impact on the types of discussions between the student and their school staff and family (see Figure 4.1 below). This was the tipping point within the ecological framework where the purpose/emphasis for the family meeting shifts toward empowering the student to participate and own the actions and decisions ensuant to the meeting with school staff and family.

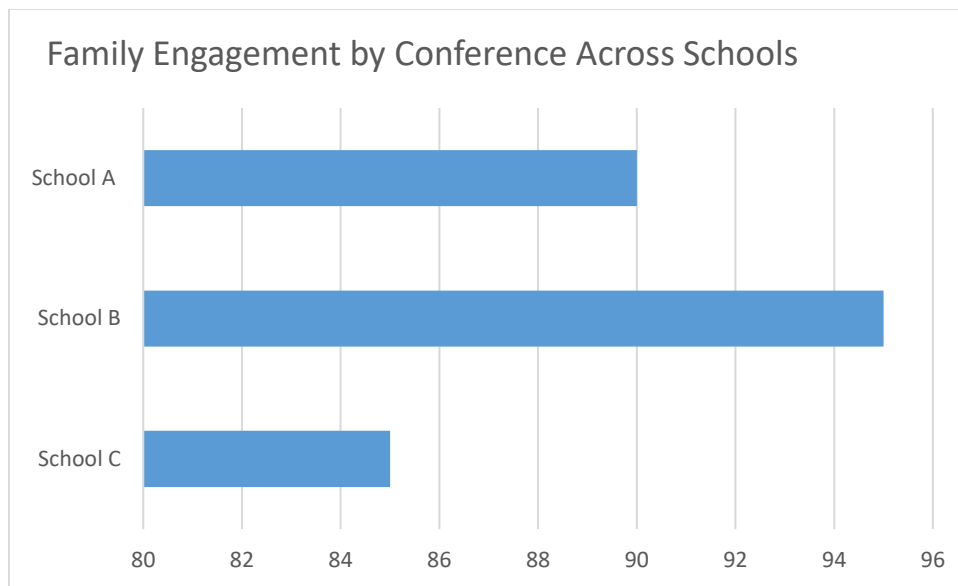


Figure 4.1.
Family Engagement Percentages

Student Ownership

The category student ownership can be viewed as dependent upon the family meeting as this is the tipping point in the schools with the student led position of the meeting. This joining of the family and school staff in a commitment to support student self-expression leads to the developing abilities of the student to engage in steps toward self-focused planning. Throughout the discussions the theme of family engagement revealed a priority to place the student at the head of discussions and the purpose of the meetings was viewed as fundamentally important.

The three interview participants spoke to the importance of student ownership as part of family engagement evidenced by changes in the discourse utilized throughout the family meetings. Students were no longer engaged solely in deficit language around their current standing in courses or their scores on standardized assessments but were instead offered an opportunity to talk about their interests and their skills. This resulted in empowering families to

gain a greater understanding of their student's strengths and successfully participate in supporting the student planning process. The shift in a family's ability to effectively engage and participate in the enrollment family meetings was described by Ms. Brown as transformative. The transformation was illustrated by a family that typically began the conversation as, "You know what, they can pick what they want. Why am I even here?" Ms. Brown surmised the family members reaction:

It's not even that they're disinterested necessarily, but they feel like it's their student's choice, I guess. But on the flip side it's really cool for me to see a parent, who maybe hasn't been supportive of what the student wants to do and then as part of that meeting when they see 'Oh they really have planned that out' or 'Oh they really could make a good living at this career.' (personal communication, March 1, 2021)

The change in attitude by family participants was reiterated by Ms. Green, School C, whose conferences were set up with the theme of "What my career goal is and what I want to do after postsecondary!" The event according to Ms. Green:

For some parents [the event] has been very enlightening. We had especially senior parents who just raised and pitched a fit... they didn't need to come to this... their kid was graduating... and they are some of the parents that got the most out of it! Because they were just kind of surprised at some of the things that their kids said. (personal communication, March 1, 2021)

This dramatic shift in the function of family engagement was attributable to the student ownership established in part by the focus of the meeting which was illustrated by the possessive personal pronouns present within the theme of the conferences: "my" career goal and what "I" want to do. Placed at the head of the discussion and supported in a statement of purpose and

declaration, the student clearly established the desire and intent of their purpose within the meeting. This opening dialogue created an opportunity for establishing shared understanding around means to achieve the end and established a path toward defining necessary steps toward its fruition. This shift toward student ownership was no easy task as explained by Ms. Rose who summed the substance of the shift as she shared that the student-centered and led discussions were powerful, yet difficult in many instances as:

We know that parents often want to be the voice in what their children decide, so there is that fine line between letting them [family] have a voice and them being the voice. So really [through] these parent meetings and student-led conferences we are really trying to make it student-driven which is really hard because I'm very used to being the giver of information and directing the path of every student. So now we are really turning it over to the student. I've had some hard conversations this year with parents about letting kids make the decisions and letting those decisions be logical decisions. (personal communication, March 1, 2021)

The potential tension between the vision of the family, school staff, and the student can be a significant challenge for the parties to navigate. Each of the three participants explained the importance of effectively planning a scope and sequence that started early in the student's school experiences of secondary education to develop the skills and attitudes of students and families over time to culminate in the abilities to effectively plan for the student success through and after high school. School staff play a crucial role in organizing and scheduling the opportunities for students and families to have the necessary support and occasion for these valuable experiences which is the intersection where growth and development occur.

Student ownership was revealed to be a critical consideration in school improvement plans during the focus group discussions where participants shared several important aspects of

keeping individual plan of study as a central focus of school redesign. Where the discussion touched upon school reform, it included rich observations around connecting the academic plans for students to outcomes around student experiences in course taking and work-based learning, based upon individual plan of study process being developed. Ms. Rose noted that the school reform for School A had a specific intent for the individual plan of study:

We went into it with individual plans in mind. What are we doing now that is not working? What do we want to do that we can individualize everything for our kids? I mean you know from changing up our schedule to adding different classes to making our work-based learning more relevant and expanding it, you know that it's just all connected. I keep telling everybody that everything that we're doing is redesign, but it's also individual plan of study. It's KESA, everything is connected! (personal communication, March 1, 2021)

This reflects a clear focus on changing the activities available for students. This begins by understanding what has not worked for students in the past, as well as what has, and the need to include opportunities for student decision making regarding learning experiences. This was a significant, tangible step toward student ownership. This focus was reiterated by Ms. Green who noted the importance in School C:

It is important to analyze data to see those things that have been in place for a very long time that maybe just don't fit anymore. But I also think the other impact that was made at [School C] was when we did the needs assessment for Perkins V in looking at that data in conjunction with the redesign data. So what is it that our community needs? What is it that our region needs, and how are our pathways and other things that we're doing from work-based learning fit together? And then how do we help our kids

understand this is what's available around us? (personal communication, March 1, 2021)

The specific school reform of including connected experiential learning for students to develop knowledge through applied learning further nurtured the attributes necessary for students to actively take part in the decision making required for enrollment options and intentional academic and skill development. Through the development of learning experiences relevant to the student and community, schools can make the options available for student consideration transparent and encourage the development of student abilities to reflect upon their knowledge, skills, attributes, and with guidance, participate in developing their path toward success. It was consistent among all three participants that student perceptions of work, technical school, and college were limited to vague notions and understandings during early high school. Through the exposure of students and their families to information about opportunities, costs, and relevant outcomes, the desired goal was to make possible informed decisions by students and families to foster the best possible outcomes given the unique needs of each student.

Communication Outreach

The three interview participants spoke to the importance of communicating information with families. Two of the interview participants explained their experiences with significant school disruption as a result of the Covid pandemic, which had a profound impact upon communication with families. This challenging period created circumstances which inspired innovative practices which I have grouped into the category of communication outreach. Ms. Brown indicated the desire to develop and integrate a scope and sequence for key activities of the individual plan of study for families at School B. With a family scope and sequence, families would be able to visualize the intersections that were approaching as they were asked to support their students in planning for the future. This would be particularly useful for students who have

the potential to be the first in the family to pursue postsecondary coursework. This would additionally prepare the school staff to strategically engage them. Ms. Brown stated:

I really want to create that for our parents—where it’s more just like each grade level—here’s things that we do: Pre-ACT, WorkKeys, ACT, here’s the financial aid, just so they can see how that fits in with the individual plan of study. This would be the things they need to know, because they’re just like, ‘What should I be doing?’ Or they’re getting overwhelmed with all the information that’s coming at different times and through, you know, email after email. (personal communication, March 1, 2021)

Ms. Brown explained her vision for the family scope and sequence as a big picture of how it all fits together to support them when they feel “bombarded” by the steps of incremental development throughout the high school experience—especially for students whose family have not participated in postsecondary education whether it be a university, community college, or trade school. Mentioned within the schools’ efforts at supporting communication, email was described as far less reliable form of communication for this cohort of families in contrast to phone conversations, text messages, and Zoom distance in lieu of some face-to-face communication events.

Ms. Green described the steps taken by School C to support communication with families as hurdles for physical attendance by families became difficult due to quarantine. Arranging for childcare for younger siblings, as well as general apprehension of public spaces became barriers to participation. Given the likelihood that COVID would change the event and discourage family attendance, school staff sought to support the students whose family were unable to attend. Ms. Green explained:

For whatever reason [the student] will still have to give their student-led conference to an administrator or a counselor. They

still have to give it, and I think that is one of those things that's very helpful for our students. [The district planned to make the session available for parental viewing via technology] so if a parent couldn't be here, we could at least maybe set up the time so that parent could at least hear part of it during the day. I think we're kind of looking outside of the box a little bit as to how we can use what we've learned from Covid to help all of our families. (personal communication, March 1, 2021)

Another strategy for family involvement highlighted by Ms. Green involved coordination with the district technology director who created a question-and-answer session for individual plan of study planning around postsecondary participation. Families were able to attend live via YouTube, and Ms. Green remarked, "Parents could turn in any question, and we would answer it." Recorded and posted online, the school received a lot of positive feedback as parents were able to participate remotely and ask questions anonymously using their Gmail accounts. This empowered many families to engage who might not have participated otherwise. Ms. Green reflected that the district was excited about this new form of engagement which reached out to families, anticipated needs and empowered them to act, with knowledge on behalf of their student.

Staff Engagement

Investigation of the broad theme of staff engagement was elicited via a discussion prompt that asked participants: *In what ways have school staff had a significant influence on individual plan of study services?* A shared perspective was established by the three interview participants on the essential part that staff engagement played in an effective individual plan of study implementation. There was general consensus in the interview responses among the participants that supported Ms. Rose's statement regarding staff engagement in School A:

It's pretty typical. You have those few teachers who don't always buy in and do everything, but I would say the majority of my staff does. I really can't say that there's just like one or two, you know a handful of teachers, who are specifically making a difference, because they all make a difference. (personal communication, March 1, 2021)

The discourse on staff engagement when coded revealed a rich discussion of the characteristics that fostered staff engagement and the key activities described can be grouped into the three categories of **Leadership**, **Advisory**, and **Applied Learning**. These three categories detailed the actions in place for all three districts to strengthen staff engagement within each system.

Leadership

The role of building and district administrators were cited as key contributors to teacher buy-in for the delivery of individual plan of study and was foundational for the depth and breadth of the implementation models. Superintendents and principals were discussed as important in developing strategic development aligned with school accreditation. This resulted in dedicated time and resources for engaging staff with professional development and time to learn and develop valuable resources for engaging students. This support was characterized in School A by Ms. Rose as a significant commitment:

My administration is the best. I can't say enough about when I have an idea, or I want to do something. They're like, 'Go for it.' There's never any question as to support. Here we have support and because we have support from our Superintendent on down, I think that's why we have such a great buy-in now. (personal communication, March 1, 2021)

Two of the three superintendents were described as actively engaged with the chamber of commerce and economic development groups to create opportunities for students which will also be discussed under the theme of community engagement. In addition to the support of administrators, Ms. Green also mentioned the support of an instructional leader at School C that approached content experts with the purpose of diversifying their classroom approach toward individual plan of study integration and student engagement. This work shows a significant step forward in strategic improvement of student services. Ms. Green reported:

Our curriculum director, [who] does an excellent job. She truly believes in individual plan of study; she truly believes in our students having the opportunity to share. Also knowing that they have the option to explore and to investigate and to think outside the box to think about what could be, and whether you want to call that dreaming, but what are the options out there? What can you do beyond what you think you can do? So that's been helpful.

(personal communication, March 1, 2021)

The strategies and actions employed within the schools' staff engagement included district support, building initiative, and active steps by instructional leaders. This network of cohesive individuals illustrated a crucial component of the ecological system that resulted in support for meaningful classroom activities which fostered the success of students engaged in individual plan of study activities. This discussion on leadership would be incomplete without noting the characteristics portrayed through the discussion by the participants themselves. None of them referenced themselves as school leaders but through the interviews, the school counselors detailed their actions and interventions which clearly conveyed the vision, organization, and support for staff which are leveraged for students and families to engage in individual plan of study activities.

Advisory

The three participants shared that each of the schools had a set instructional time for the broad foundational support of the individual plan of study activities spread among school staff. Sometimes called Connection Class, Power Hour, or a trendy name associated with the school mascot, the instructional time included advisory activities that were part of the scope and sequence of assigned and documented individual plan of study. Ms. Rose described the importance of student cohorts within these set instructional times as foundational to building relationships with staff and key stakeholders in their educational progress at School A. She said, “We want this group of kids to have a relationship with this teacher. And these teachers, I would say the majority of them, have worked really hard to build that relationship” (personal communication, March 1, 2021). The school district’s intentional placement of time on the student and teacher schedule for the development of relationships to nurture knowledge and understanding necessary for meaningful academic and career advisement was characterized by Ms. Rose as a significant commitment by staff. Ms. Rose acknowledged that the staff was imperfect, and improvements could be made. Ms. Rose discussed teacher buy-in:

I’m very fortunate here that we do have a lot of teacher buy-in. But there’s those few that if we just had a few more, like really show the enthusiasm and encouragement to their students, their group of 12 kids that they have every single day, you know I think that would make such a difference. I mean, I just, I, I do! (personal communication, March 1, 2021)

The importance of a teacher-mentor to facilitate student exploration and personalize the individual plan of study journey was described by all three. Notably, Ms. Green did mention the particular difficulties of maintaining staff engagement and enthusiasm during the pandemic year at School C:

I just think this year with IPS and advisory, why we still have it, teachers are just very overloaded, and I don't see the enthusiasm that I saw last year. It's not just IPS, it's in a lot of things because I just think our teachers ... they're just overwhelmed right now.
(personal communication, March 1, 2021)

To support staff and student morale, Ms. Green described some of the interaction time around the advisory periods, arranged into four-year cohort family groups, have focused upon social emotional support activities which include opportunities around cultural celebrations like decorating doors during holiday observances and pizza party celebrations. These fun events acknowledged the conjunction between social emotional components and career development relationships and an effort to support staff as they pulled activities together for support of each student. This development of relationships through fun engaging activities centered around advisory groups provided support for the development of interpersonal skills which can strengthen future conversations around student choices as enthusiasm and confidence result from an array of foundational experiences tied to nurturing relationships.

The importance of applied learning was also established as a prominent category in focus group discussions. This proved to be a dynamic element of discussion as participants shared their versions of the advisory periods created through school improvement process to support the delivery of the individual plan of study. A distinction emerged between courses created specifically for the scope and sequence of individual plan of study activities and with the courses created for other reasons important in school strategic planning which included some opportunities for student choice in applied learning options. The table below illustrates some brief characteristics of the schedule time for schools (see Table 4.4).

Advisory time	
School A	Daily – 40 minutes Mon – Grades Tu/Th – Academic Focus Wed – IPS Friday – SEL
School B	Friday – 90 Minute Block
School C	Power Hour Daily 55 minutes-Over lunch Friday – 45 minutes

Table 4.4.

Schools Advisory Schedule

During focus group discussion a wide-ranging conversation over school time and organization occurred. School B was not satisfied with the flex Friday 90-minute block that they had been following. It was not working effectively for many students. The long period tended to include too much idle time at the end of the week and the school possessed a general attitude that the time was not effective in supporting student achievement. School A had a sequence of activities that was well planned out and was perceived to be effective in services and had been in place for some time (see Table 4.5 below and Appendix B). The rich exchange of ideas and strategies between participants led to many shared ideas which could be taken back to their building implementation teams for consideration.

Table 4.5.*School A Grade Level Activities*

		7 th	8 th	9 th	10 th	11 th	12 th
8/22	SH	Explain CC	Explain CC	Explain CC	Explain CC	Explain CC	Explain CC
8/29	SH	Goal Setting	Goal Setting	Goal Setting	Goal Setting	Goal Setting	Goal Setting
9/5	JL	Organizational Skills	Organizational Skills	Time Management	Time Management	Junior Year Checklist	Senior Year Checklist
9/12	JL	ASP	ASP	ASP/Credit	ASP/Credit Checks	ASP/Credit Checks	ASP/Credit Checks
9/19	SB	Homecoming Fun-STUCO	Homecoming Fun	Homecoming Fun	Homecoming Fun	Homecoming Fun	Homecoming Fun
9/26	JL	Academic Integrity	Academic Integrity	Test Taking Strategies	Test Taking Strategies	Staying Motivated	Staying Motivated
10/3	KW	Anti-Bullying	Anti-Bullying	Anti-Bullying	Anti-Bullying	Anti-Bullying	Anti-Bullying
10/10	TS	Kindness	Kindness	Kindness	Kindness	Kindness	Kindness
10/17	TS	Social Media	Social Media	Social Media	Social Media	Social Media	Social Media
10/24	NF	Red Ribbon	Red Ribbon	Red Ribbon	Red Ribbon	Red Ribbon	Red Ribbon
10/31	TS	Halloween fun	Halloween fun	Halloween fun	Halloween fun	Halloween fun	Halloween fun
11/7	CL	Fall Clean Up	Fall Clean Up	Fall Clean Up	Fall Clean Up	Fall Clean Up	Fall Clean Up
11/14	JL	Xello	Xello	Xello	Xello	Xello	Xello
11/28	JL	Career MatchMaker	Career MatchMaker	Career MatchMaker	Resume Builder	Resume Builder	Resume Builder
12/5	NA	Senior Citizens Dinner	Senior Citizens Dinner	Senior Citizens Dinner	Senior Citizens Dinner	Senior Citizens Dinner	Senior Citizens Dinner
12/12	KW	Season's Greetings (Appreciation Notes)	Season's Greetings (Appreciation Notes)	Season's Greetings (Appreciation Notes)	Season's Greetings (Appreciation Notes)	Season's Greetings (Appreciation Notes)	Season's Greetings (Appreciation Notes)
1/9	JL	Career Expl/CC My Skills	Career Expl/CC My Skills	Career Expl/CTE Pathways	Future Plans/CTE Pathways	Future Plans/College Search	Future Plans/Scholarships
1/16	JL	Xello	Xello	CTE/Pathways	CTE Pathways	CTE Pathways	Cr Checks/Scholarships/Plans
1/23	JL/KW	Student-Led	Student-Led	Student-Led	Student-Led	Student-Led	Student-Led

		Conference s	Conference s	Conference s	Conference s	Conference s	Conference s
1/30	JL/KW	Student- Led Conference s	Student- Led Conference s	Student- Led Conference s	Student- Led Conference s	Student- Led Conference s	Student- Led Conference s
2/6	KW	Stress Manageme nt Fun	Stress Manageme nt Fun	Stress Manageme nt Fun	Stress Manageme nt Fun	Stress Manageme nt Fun	Stress Manageme nt Fun
2/13	CT	Teacher's Alma Mater	Teacher's Alma Mater	Teacher's Alma Mater	Teacher's Alma Mater	Teacher's Alma Mater	Teacher's Alma Mater
2/20	BC	Jobs in Teacher's Subject	Jobs in Teacher's Subject	Jobs in Teacher's Subject	Jobs in Teacher's Subject	Jobs in Teacher's Subject	Jobs in Teacher's Subject
2/27	TS	OOH – Highest Paying Occupation s / Fastest Growing Occupation s	OOH – Highest Paying Occupation s / Fastest Growing Occupation s	OOH – Highest Paying Occupation s / Fastest Growing Occupation s	OOH – Highest Paying Occupation s / Fastest Growing Occupation s	OOH – Highest Paying Occupation s / Fastest Growing Occupation s	OOH – Highest Paying Occupation s / Fastest Growing Occupation s
3/6	JL	Career Fair Reflections	Career Fair Reflections	Career Fair Reflections	Career Fair Reflections	Career Fair Reflections	Career Fair Reflections
3/20	JL	Communic ation Skills	Communic ation Skills	Communic ation Skills	Communic ation Skills	Interview Skills	Interview Skills
3/27	JL	JH Electives for next year	Enrollment Handbook & Course Planner on Cruising	Enrollment Handbook & Course Planner on Cruising	Enrollment Handbook & Course Planner on Cruising	Enrollment Handbook & Course Planner on Cruising	Scholarship s/College Acceptance Pics
4/3	JL	Pre- Enrollment	Pre- Enrollment	Pre- Enrollment	Pre- Enrollment	Pre- Enrollment	Scholarship s/Update resume
4/10	JL	Pre- Enrollment	Pre- Enrollment	Pre- Enrollment	Pre- Enrollment	Pre- Enrollment	Scholarship s/Update resume
4/17	JL	Intro to IPS	High school IPS	Update IPS	Update IPS	Update IPS	Scholarship s/Update resume
4/24	SH	Goals / Updates	Goals / Updates	Goals / Updates	Goals / Updates	Goals / Updates	Goals / Updates
5/1	SH	May Day thanks?	May Day thanks?	May Day thanks?	May Day thanks?	May Day thanks?	May Day thanks?
5/8	CL	Volunteeri ng	Volunteeri ng	Volunteeri ng	Volunteeri ng	Volunteeri ng	Life after high school
5/15	ALL	Finish strong!	Finish Strong!	Finish Strong!	Finish Strong!	Finish Strong!	Finish Strong!

The artifact above was identified by Ms. Rose as illustrative of school improvement and supportive of staff engagement. Throughout the school year, individual plan of study and social emotional learning activities and curriculum had been designed to correlate with school functions and student needs. This included a variety of activities and ensured that students received support and were prioritized by staff. Staff were supported in engaging with students around many diverse activities with curricular resources designed to facilitate student growth through specific knowledge and actions which were developed with staff assistance. For example, in preparations for student led conferences, time was set aside within the Connections Class for the advisory teacher to support the student and facilitate student preparation for the activity by utilizing the checklist in the subsequent artifact located below (see Figure 4.2).

Figure 4.2.

Grade Level Conference Checklists

10th Grade Student Led Conference Checklist

- _____ Introduce your parents/guardians to your teacher.
- _____ Using the PowerSchool app on your iPad, discuss your current grades and the teacher comments that were posted.
- _____ Check to see if your parents can access PowerSchool and Schoology. Remind them that we no longer send out grade cards, but they can request a copy from the office if needed.
- _____ Login and discuss your Xello results with your parents. Use the “Student Led Conference Feb. 2021” document that you created in CC to guide your discussion. Emphasize your skills, hopes/dreams, and job/career plan.
- _____ Talk to your parents about your Long Range Plan. Tell them what classes you plan to take and why. Point out the dual credit courses. Make sure they know that the plan is not permanent and they can set up a meeting with Mrs. Lehman if they would like to discuss it further.
 1. Discuss what you have done so far in and out of school to meet your dreams/goals/plan.
 2. Discuss what you still need to do in and out of school to meet your dreams/goals/plan.
- _____ Use your iPad (student iPad) to scan the QR code provided. Instruct your parents to complete the conference survey.

11th Grade Student Led Conference Checklist

- _____ Introduce your parents/guardians to your teacher.
- _____ Using the PowerSchool app on your iPad, discuss your current grades and the teacher comments that were posted.
- _____ Check to see if your parents can access PowerSchool and Schoology. Remind them that we no longer send out grade cards, but they can request a copy from the office if needed.
- _____ Login and discuss your Xello results with your parents. Use the “Student Led Conference Feb. 2021” document that you created in CC to guide your discussion. Emphasize your skills, hopes/dreams, and job/career plan.

_____ Talk to your parents about your Long Range Plan. Tell them what classes you plan to take and why. Point out the dual credit courses. Make sure they know that the plan is not permanent and they can set up a meeting with Mrs. Lehman if they would like to discuss it further.

3. Discuss what you have done so far in and out of school to meet your dreams/goals/plan.

4. Discuss what you still need to do in and out of school to meet your dreams/goals/plan.

_____ Use your iPad (student iPad) to scan the QR code provided. Instruct your parents to complete the conference survey.

12th Grade Student Led Conference Checklist

_____ Introduce your parents/guardians to your teacher.

_____ Using the PowerSchool app on your iPad, discuss your current grades and the teacher comments that were posted.

_____ Check to see if your parents can access PowerSchool and Schoology. Remind them that we no longer send out grade cards, but they can request a copy from the office if needed.

_____ Use the “Student Led Conference Feb. 2021” document that you created in CC to guide your discussion about the following:

1. Your hopes and dreams

2. Your plans after high school based on your hopes and dreams

3. What you still need to do to complete high school

_____ Talk to your parents about your plan for after high school.

1. What have you done so far in and out of school to meet your dreams/goals/plan?

2. What else can you do to meet your dreams/goals/plan?

3. If you will continue with your education, list the classes you’ll need to take next year.

4. If you plan to go into the Workforce, what do you still need to do? (Certifications, resume, applications, etc.)

_____ What is the cost involved with your plan and how do you plan to pay for it?

_____ Use your iPad (student iPad) to scan the QR code provided. Instruct your parents to complete the conference survey.

Through the student conference checklists staff were supported by structured activities and intentional time set aside for the engagement of students in the prescribed lessons.

Participant conversation in the focus group spent a lot of time discussing the Power Hour in place at School C which involved student decision making throughout the week. As a part of the school turnaround effort, Power Hour has been credited at the school with reducing students failing grades during the first semester from 652 the prior year to the current year total of 69. With a higher poverty index, Ms. Green observed that it was discovered that a large number of students were employed after school or engaged in supporting younger siblings while families worked and did not have sufficient time or affordances to maintain academic progress. Providing a time within school hours to seek support and time to accomplish individual student goals, had been the first step toward turning around failing grades. The administration had been noted as particularly significant support for the effort. Through the tracking down of students during Power Hour and supporting them in establishing priorities for the hour, administrative presence had been a strong asset in supporting staff in assisting students. School staff buy-in for the effort helped maintain consistent expectations for students and encouraged an increased level of student accountability. Participants agreed that with supportive culture and climate, including shared understandings for staff, students were most effectively supported through a combination of structured activities and unstructured, yet an accountable time for pursuing personalized learning goals.

Applied Learning Courses

The category of applied learning courses reflects the importance shared by the participants in empowering staff to engage students in experiential course work that builds upon their skills and interests showing them the potential areas in which their aptitudes might be

developed. Linking the learning opportunities developed by the teachers to the individual plan of study activities which students are engaged in was a powerful part of connecting the academic, technical, and social emotional learning in a meaningful way for educators and students. All three of the participants discussed school planning to create more flexibility of time within the school schedule. This would create learning opportunities that look different by student and by grade level as the schools strive to address the needs of some students through either experience or relationship building, and for some students the opportunity for dual credit, work-based learning, or technical skill advancement. This range of flexibility to personalize learning seemed to be an encouraging step toward bending institutional structure toward the support of even greater staff support of student engagement in individual plan of study activities. Each participant identified career and technical education enrollment as instrumental in informing student decisions on future academic plans and a natural outcome of the individual plan of study activities evidenced by Ms. Brown through the CTE pamphlet provided as an artifact of applied learning at School B (see Figure 4.3).



Figure 4.3.
CTE Pamphlet (side a)

Figure 4.4.
CTE Pamphlet (side b)

These diverse, decision driven CTE course enrollments reflect a very customized student education experience based upon choice and informed selection. Ms. Brown further spoke on the perceptions of tracking and limiting student decisions but explained that it was important to message the reverse. Students were encouraged to carefully reflect and when desired, change their minds on subsequent course work and that students were never locked into future enrollment paths.

In School C, Ms. Green spoke to a difficult matriculation from middle school to high school for many students. The district encouraged a wide array of opportunities for students in applied learning to present and demonstrate to middle school and elementary students through scheduled and designed activities. This was instrumental in helping teachers at younger grade levels see the importance of applied learning and expose middle level students to opportunities that would be available to them in high school. Tapping into the strengths of teachers devoted to applied learning opportunities was repeatedly underscored in discussions and were effectively summarized by Ms. Rose as, “The experiences they are providing, that is the whole, you know it all fits together. It’s not just something we have to do, it’s what we are.” Helping staff see the connections between their course or content and the individual plan of study has been highly effective at creating staff buy-in at School A.

Community Engagement

Partnerships with community organizations, institutions, businesses, and industry, are smart time investments by district and school leaders as they look for comprehensive support and resources to support student growth and development while in school and after they leave the school. Highly structured schools pressured to achieve academic standards often leave little time in the margins for school staff to engage with community partners and develop the relationships

and understandings that yield collaboration and result in elevating school services and student experiences in ways that are connected to the realities of the student within the context of the community. A shared priority in the three schools was revealed as each had strategic plans for engaging with the community and addressing this short coming. The relationships which have developed, and the actions being planned, spoke to a commitment for ongoing community engagement and continuing improvement. In the interviews with participants, they were asked: *What community or external partners have been supportive of the delivery of individual plan of study services and how have they been supportive?* The examination of data related to the theme of community engagement was highly informative and key categories coded from participants included **Work-Based Learning**, **Collaborative Partnership**, and **Postsecondary Institutions** and detail the key strategies in place for supporting community engagement.

Work-Based Learning

Supporting the broad continuum of work-based learning experiences was a category of much interest in the interviews as the three participants related the district efforts to support student experiences as a part of the individual plan of study. Early career awareness was universally recognized as a foundational part of student experiences. Ms. Rose described these as important experiences for students as they look at the options available to them:

When I've been piecing together this career fair and making sure students have all their sessions... Kids pick what they know. I mean, "Oh my mom's a teacher, so I'm going to the elementary." "My dad works in Ag., so I'm going to Precision Ag." You know, I mean, it's like straight across. You can see the connections that these students are just picking what they know instead of exploring what they don't know. (personal communication, March 1, 2021)

Encouraging the wide exploration of available career paths expands the scope of understanding that the student has of the world of work and the wide array of opportunities for them. Tapping into the local and regional community talent pool can increase student exposure to a broader context of career opportunities and increase the range of options overlapping with their personal skills and interests.

The involvement of community members who volunteer their time and expertise to foster student career exploration is a significant contribution in supporting the continuum of experiences for student growth. All three schools focused on career fairs as opportunities for students to investigate available occupations within the community and encouraged the exploration of careers that students have not had prior experience with. The larger career fairs were augmented by guest speakers in advisory settings where guest speakers come and further explore topics with students who have had a chance to gauge their personal interest. Ms. Green explained how School C strives to support and partner with students in finding solutions. Throughout the school experience community members were brought in to engage students around career exploration activities. She elaborated, “During advisory we would bring in people. We had our local banker come in and talk about how to start a checking account. We had a local tax expert come in to help kids understand how to do their taxes” (personal communication, March 1, 2021). In addition to answering student requests for real-world relevant presentations these experiences introduced them to a variety of career opportunities within the community. Ms. Greene said the school was excited to, “Try to do things like that, to help bring in those community resources so that our kids could see what was available” (personal communication, March 1, 2021).

Students advance through their course work and have the opportunity to develop skills through the option of job shadows and/or internships. These partnerships can lead to student exploration through immersion in a given occupational field. This effort has become a project of significant scope in School B as Ms. Brown explains their level of community support, “I’ve just been amazed at our business and industry support with the program. You know that we can have 50 students for internships during Covid just blows my mind.” (personal communication, March 1, 2021). This was one aspect of community engagement that Ms. Rose discussed as an area for continued focus and growth in School A:

Getting more businesses involved in our work-based learning has been a slow moving process for us. It’s one of those things, you have all these things you want to do but you only have so much time to do it and so we’ve slowly been adding more businesses who are willing to take students. Obviously, this year has been kind of difficult because they’ve had to turn away some students, especially in our medical fields because that’s where we’ve had a big influx of students who usually do it. But definitely I want to see more support from my community with the work-based learning and opportunities that we can allow for our kids to do because there is a lot of things here ... that maybe our kids don’t necessarily know are here. (personal communication, March 1, 2021)

Developing the relationships with community members to arrange work-based learning experiences for students was no easy task as it was necessary to develop assurances that students are academically, technically, and socially/emotionally ready to participate and contribute in a real-world setting.

Collaborative Partnership

Through the examination of the participant interviews, a clear connection presented between the development of work-based learning and collaborative partnerships as supportive of community engagement. Work-based learning was dependent upon collaborative partnerships which are institutional, organizational, and personal relationships developed over time establishing shared understandings and priorities within and for the community. The importance of these relationships was illustrated by Ms. Brown as a strong partnership with economic development which was mentioned as a significant aspect of community support. The relationship has adapted and grown over the years. The current state support of ACT WorkKeys testing was predated in the community by the support of the economic development partner who had previously paid for any student wanting to take the test. She mentioned, “They helped with promotion [of the test] ... coming and proctoring it, and still helped us proctor it this year because we did it online for the first time with the state testing” (personal communication, March 1, 2021). The ACT WorkKeys is series of tests which assess workforce readiness for students on the basis of applied academic skills (see Figure 4.5).

Why
ACT®
WorkKeys?

Work Keys as Part of the IPS portfolio

- *Understand* Job Skill Requirements
- *Measure* Individuals' Skills
- *Develop* Skills to Match Requirements
- *Certify* Individuals in Essential Skills
- *Research* to Validate Outcomes

7

Figure 4.5.
Work Keys Graphic

The slide in Figure 4.5 was an artifact submitted for discussion by Ms. Brown and illustrated the importance of the ACT WorkKeys in aligning school learning with the needs of business and industry partners. This establishes an important foundation for the shared interest and collaboration between school staff and community partners. This collaborative understanding needs continuous annual messaging to maintain relationships as critical business and industry partners as well as school staff are replaced in positions by new personnel. Careful nurturing of the collaborative partnerships pays dividends for students through the creation of exploratory experiences.

According to Ms. Brown, the local chamber of commerce has been another strong aspect of community support through providing, “people or supplies or expertise and our students help with so many of their projects.” As mentioned in the section on work-based learning this relationship has contributed to scaling the student internships throughout the community. The alignment between work-based learning and academic readiness is further reinforced in the interview with Ms. Green who described the effort to foster success for students entering into

these community partner programs through support for student preparation. Ms. Green explained, “An ACT boot camp: twice a year to provide ACT free training for our students. We have a special fund from our communities so we can pay that fee for that kid. You know trying to cut down on barriers as we do have a high-level socioeconomic need” (personal communication, March 1, 2021). Very similar community support exists within School B explained by Ms. Brown as the key involvement of the community foundation and their important contributions:

We’ve worked with our community foundation in identifying that we do have students where income is a barrier to the concurrent credit and have worked with them to help identify students. They set up a special fund for scholarships that is specifically for low-income students taking concurrent credit in high school, which is excellent. (personal communication, March 1, 2021)

The recognition by the community of the importance in supporting disadvantaged students in overcoming barriers to equitable access was a strong foundation leveling the playing field for students striving for postsecondary success. Ms. Rose explained:

Our education foundation supports us with grants, a lot of things that our teachers do, so that could be anything from activities like the musical that our music department puts on to our teachers put out wish lists in their departments to get things that can help students succeed. So that foundation does a lot grant-wise. (personal communication, March 1, 2021)

The difficulty of maintaining the relationship with economic development groups was detailed by Ms. Rose as the group has seen significant turnover and continuing engagement has been a significant challenge requiring time and communication.

Postsecondary Institutions

Valuing the connection between postsecondary and secondary programs to create effective transition of students from high school into postsecondary education is by no means a new concept. Where the three participants shared new understandings and important trends in development was the level and degree that the postsecondary institutions have become critical partners within the high school. These institutional partnerships support students' pre-postsecondary experiences and in developing student strengths and aptitudes which inform their decision-making abilities with knowledge of the programs and structures that are and will be available to them. In this way postsecondary institutions have become critical partners in community engagement sharing a wealth of knowledge and opening the door to experiential learning for high school students.

Ms. Rose described the importance of nurturing these relationships and the connection between exposing students to a wide range of experiences connected with their strengths. These are important experiences to inform students about postsecondary opportunities. One of the strongest community partnerships discussed by Ms. Rose was the relationship with the local postsecondary institution:

[They are] One of our biggest partners and... We have the junior/senior option for multiple programs such as cosmetology, welding, precision ag, and diesel tech. We backed it up a year and we are allowing kids to start doing the college experience their junior year. Most kids who go through can get an associate degree, a certification no doubt, by the time that they graduate in a certain program and do not have to go beyond that if they want to go ahead and get a fairly well-paying job. (personal communication, March 1, 2021)

One example of these partnerships highlighted by Ms. Rose that demonstrated successful student outcomes in partnership with the local postsecondary institution was explained as:

I have a girl in cosmetology right now who wouldn't have even thought about going to school without the junior/senior option. She did cosmetology last year, she's in her second year this year, and she has to pay for one semester of college and that's it. So that to me, that partnership we have with the technical school is one of the biggest things that has helped a lot of our students who wouldn't ever look twice at some sort of post-secondary education.
(personal communication, March 1, 2021)

Ms. Brown describes School B as pretty fortunate to have the advantage of a local community college branch that is eager to, “partner... a lot with our concurrent credit and students can take classes there, they come in and help with our Apply Kansas effort of course. They are here when we have events and are willing to provide information” (personal communication, March 1, 2021). In addition to the community college support, a local area technical school was also highlighted for the important contribution to student opportunity.

We've had nights where local area tech came in and they brought a representative from each department and did an overview on the value of a tech school. But then also here's all the programs we offer and then it was more come down and talk and get information with the department that you want. (personal communication, March 1, 2021)

The action of being present and providing information on student opportunities for educational training programs opened the world of opportunities to the student and introduced them to possibilities of which they had previously been unaware. The tech school also made the positive step of opening a satellite branch to meet students where they are and overcoming the barriers faced by transportation through increased proximity. Ms. Brown explained, “I am

definitely seeing the energy from them. Really, like if you can get three people in this class, we'll offer it with three people, and we've got this technology they can zoom in. They are really bending over backwards to help us" (personal communication, March 1, 2021). The technical college brought instructors from every department and brought staff to specifically help students with the FAFSA [Free Application for Federal Student Aid], answering questions, or filling out the application. The event aligned with the Apply Kansas event which was adapted this year. Instead of just applying for universities the school promoted looking at technical colleges and the work-based internship opportunities and included representatives from all of those areas at the technical college. The early introduction to opportunities for postsecondary education through dual enrollment programs was presented to students in order to foster successful transitions following high school graduation into postsecondary or the workforce through advanced credentialing opportunities.

The interview discussion with Ms. Green about the community involvement present in cooperation with School C reinforced the importance of postsecondary institutions highlighting an initiative with the local community college. Through collaboration the school district pays for concurrent credit classes in the high school directly to the community college and then the students only pay twenty dollars a credit hour. The students can take Composition, a three-credit hour class, for 60 dollars. The district has gone one step further and purchased the books, so students do not have that barrier. The district has also expanded relationships with other neighboring postsecondary institutions for career and technical education coursework not existing in the local community college.

Through the focus groups discussion, the perspectives shared among participants reinforced the importance of postsecondary institutions and developing the relationships between

institutions as central to their plans for school improvement. The three participants expressed a shared priority of close relationships with technical and community colleges for making opportunities around career paths and advanced skill training viable for students. Each spoke to the importance of dual credit programs available to students as options for advancing their academic achievement and career path training. These community partnerships often take years to coordinate offerings. Pairing student interest and institutional structure are difficult when considering the addition of specialized equipment and the hiring of skill instructors. These are significant investments for institutions. Support for establishing the shared priorities of the communities required consistent engagement by district leadership with technical and community leaders, local government officials, chambers of commerce and business leaders at large. Each of the participants also described their role in engaging with community leaders to form collaborative partnerships and in supporting school staff, students, and families in taking advantage of the opportunities created through the shared vision of student success.

Summary

The data collection from three participants included individual semi-structured interviews, a focus group discussion, and artifact submittal. The ecological systems theory was used to create the three themes of investigation a priori. Three school counselors shared their experiences as they engaged in supporting the implementation of individual plan of study. The central themes established through data collection were Family Engagement, Staff Engagement, and Community Engagement. Examination of these themes revealed shared categories of emphasis from the three participant perspectives. The promising practices outlined through data collection will be evaluated within each district overtime to gauge impact and effect through the

graduation and postsecondary success metrics of each district. Chapter five will discuss the research findings within the context of the theoretical framework and literature study.

Chapter 5 - Discussion

The Role of Ecological Systems Theory

This study examined the implementation of the individual plan of study through the collection of data representing three Kansas comprehensive high schools. Data was collected and examined through the lens of ecological systems theory to reveal the important convergence of support necessary for student success. Ecological systems theory served as a framework for the conceptualization of social interactions supporting the individual plan of study as mesosystem and exosystem influences were examined for interactions with the microsystem, which was centered upon the student (see Figure 5.1 below).

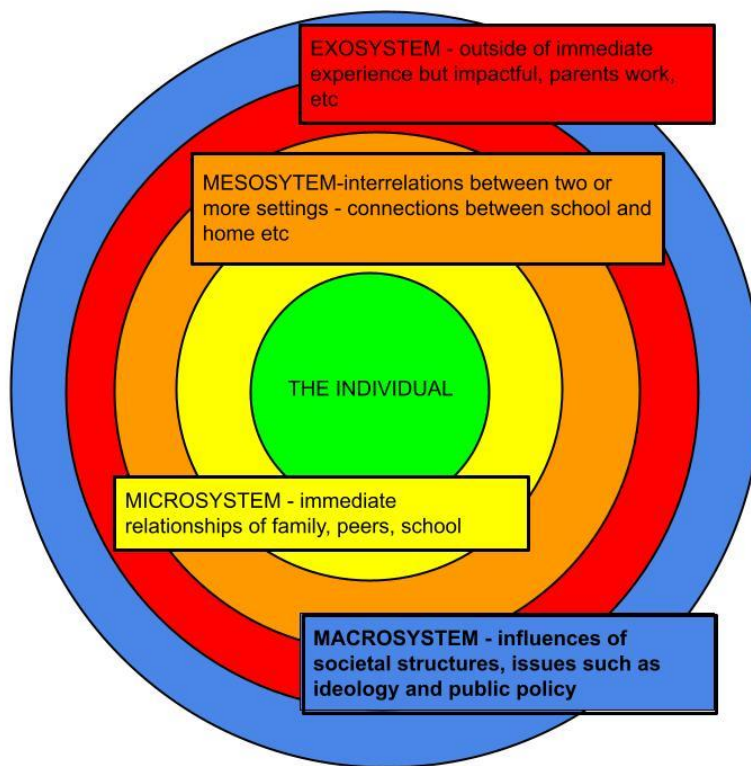


Figure 5.1.
Ecological Systems Theory

Bronfenbrenner (1979) developed ecological systems theory as a foundational construct for examining the impact of actions by diverse members of an ecology in relationship to the individual. The external macrosystem circle represents societal or cultural context and other geopolitical factors which may impact the student's educational experiences. In this study, the mandate for an individual plan of study, the impact of COVID-19 and virtual settings, changing technology, and other macrosystem issues were discussed and evidenced in findings reflective of state policy pressure on local schools, health impact of a pandemic placing stress on families as a result of health concern, social anxiety and economic uncertainty, and the changing expectations of the delivery of education, respectively. Understanding the impact of the ecological macrosystem and the resulting effect upon educational choices and decision-making for members of the ecology was important in developing successful interventions to support student success. The next circle of influence in the ecology, described as the exosystem, was typified by people or actions which have an impact upon the life of the child but may be unrecognized or unseen. These could include the families' work settings or peers, community members, school staff beyond the classroom, such as the school nurse, etc. Nested within the context of the macrosystem and exosystem is the mesosystem which reflects cross communication, or interaction between participants of the student's microsystem. These interactions are often not witnessed by the student but indirectly can have a significant impact. The presence of these influences was evidenced within the study through the identification of the community members who chose to support the individual plan of study through working with schools to assist in FAFSA. Many community partners chose to work with schools to create internship opportunities. In one of the community's, community partners collaborated with the school through the Chamber of Commerce to create connections between students and adults to create real world

application of learning. The student is centered within the concentric circles within Figure 5.1 and is surrounded by the members of the microsystem of the ecology. The most significant and impactful interactions and relationships of the ecological systems experienced by the student, are those in the daily lives of the child, generally including the family, school, and peers. Significant support for microsystem interactions were evidenced by all three schools within the study through family meetings which placed the student at the center of the discussion and students were supported in developing their plans and sharing that progress with significant adults in their lives (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Herr, 1996).

The school counselors who participated in this research study developed and implemented an individual plan of study approach which was visible through the planning of a scope and sequence of activities across the school year. These explicit activities were planned and predictable which enabled school staff to receive training and support for the successful facilitation of activities which fostered agency in supporting successful student, family, and community participation. The successful inclusion of the members of the ecological system afforded students access to knowledge, support, resources, and opportunities. The unifying element of the student led conferences, organized, and supported by the school counselors was central for tying together the many activities and highlighted the opportunities around each students' unique skills, interests, and exploration.

The recognition of the ecological systems theory as a foundational structure supported the conceptualization of actions which might be taken by these participants to assume and exert control within the context of the individual plan of study. As an organizing entity, the school counselor was shown to be empowered to act for the benefit of the student through the layers of the ecological system. It was through an understanding of the impact and influence of societal

pressures and constraints on community involvement, and the microsystem impact upon decision making that the student was thus empowered to assume an active decision-making role within the ecosystem (Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Priestley et al., 2015).

Three central themes were identified a priori from the ecological systems theory which served as a lens to view the research data from this study. This was significant in examining the school initiatives including family engagement, staff engagement, and community engagement. The activities implemented in each school to support the three themes were often unique but organized around strategies aligned with recommended practices identified by the American School Counselors Association (2021). The school strategies identified through the research study were categorized as family meetings, student ownership, communication outreach, leadership, advisory, applied learning, work-based learning, collaborative partnership, and postsecondary institutions.

The activities implemented within schools in support of the individual plan of study represented the adaptability necessary to provide site-based solutions for circumstances particular to the local school community. School counselors within the study were actively engaged in the development of the individual plan of study through the involvement and empowerment of the three central agents of the ecology including families, staff, and community which was empowered to support student achievement. The emphasis of secondary schools in developing the career attributes of students in support of postsecondary success achieved more than fulfilling a career path, in that students experienced an “immediate positive impact ... that academic coursework offers them foundational skills needed to pursue their objectives” (Solberg, 2019, p. 2). This positive support of student agency and resulting student realizations were the outcome of continuing experiences overtime supported at many levels by the diverse agents of

the ecology in which they study and learn. Through organized and coordinated activities developed by school leaders of the individual plan of study implementation, the efforts of collaborators within the ecological system strengthened. The student was empowered to act through the knowledge/skills obtained and the support of discussion, and progress across measurable benchmarks. The family was empowered and connected in search of positive discourse and opportunity to support student achievement and outcomes. The community was invited to reveal opportunities connected to skills and knowledge which reinforce student effort through schooling and further supported student integration into the community as an active contributor. The positive interactive behavior of the participants was the resultant efforts of the school counselors' efforts to support the ecology which strengthened outcomes relative to each agent and supported the successful implementation of the individual plan of study (Herr, 1996). Each of the three school counselors of this research were evidenced as instrumental leaders, acting on behalf of students by engaging multiple entities with the students' ecosystems to participate in an exchange of affordances which fostered opportunities for students to engage, grow, and develop.

Related Findings to the Literature Review

The review of previous research was undertaken to identify actionable strategies as well as issues related to the implementation of the individual plan of study which might have an impact on the ecological system and the ability of the school counselor to support student achievement through the members of the ecology. Important considerations were identified relative to career development and the lifelong lens which showed the increasing rate of technological change and the resultant paradigm shift for family expectations of successful outcomes for their students (Feller & Wichard, 2005; Perna 2018). The tensions discussed

relative to chaotic upheaval and disruption are of striking pertinence to the incoming group of freshman students entering high school who have spent the last year listening to the news about economic downturn, perhaps seeing their family displaced as a result of a business shutdown. This group has particular concerns as they were born during the great recession and may have spent the first years of their life watching their family struggle with economic uncertainty or hardship. Certainly, the next several years will see educators striving within a difficult context as they support students, families, and communities in engaging in critical activities as students engage in the development of skills and knowledge informing the decisions they will be making. With identified scope and sequence of activities across multiple grades and established advisory responsibilities dispersed across school staff, the research cohort were strongly positioned to achieve supportive ecological systems within the coming year.

The literature review further revealed career development activities, applied learning, contextual learning, and community-based learning as important opportunities for student participation (Alfeld et al., 2013; Broderson et al., 2021; Frey, 2019; Gray & Herr, 2006; Gysbers, 2013; Hughey & Hughey, 1999; Perna, 2018). Identified by this research, through the individual plan of study scope and sequence, students had diverse opportunities to apply learning within a chosen context in these three schools. Organized activities such as field trips and job shadows early in the high school or middle school career inform students on their future course decisions which can lead to internships or other work-based learning opportunities (ACTE, 2018). These were important features of implementation within the schools in this study. These will be the critical activities that educators in these schools utilize to support students on their journey and through the many scheduled family engagement activities. Through which there will

be frequent opportunities to support discussion and knowledge sharing between family and student.

Discussion of the Research Question

This study investigated the state of the individual plan of study and the progress toward successful interventions to support students in three midwestern comprehensive high schools in Kansas. Ecological systems theory served as a lens for examining the interactions of the school counselor, student, family, school staff, and the community. For the purpose of investigating the individual plan of study, this study examined perceptions relative to the following research question:

How do school counselors engage members of the school community's ecological system to support the development of the student's individual plan of study?

School counselors in the State of Kansas are supported in the development of the individual plan of study by a State Board of Education mandate and the important role that mandate plays in school accreditation. This study found that school counselors were supported in the development and implementation of the individual plan of study through support of the State Board of Education's mandate for all students to have an individual plan of study which was further strengthened by district and building level administration which had thus placed a point of emphasis on the initiative to support the success of each student (Gray & Herr, 2006; McCalla-Wriggins, 2009; Solberg, 2019). The data showed that actions related to the individual plan of study were strengthened through the foundational elements and that the implementations of the individual plan of study were robust in support of student agency in three key ways. Significantly, school counselors' actions were strengthened by organizational elements like the scope and sequence of individual plan of study activities which organized interventions across

the school year and allowed for activities to be dispersed to fellow school staff. The study showed that this encouraged wider participation within the individual plan of study and fostered student agency through the development of relationships which focused upon the student-centered priorities in addition to the focus of academic curriculum. Additionally, the development of family meetings with student led conferences engaged families to participate as students shared demonstration of learning and academic planning based on their strengths and interests. This was another way in which school counselor actions directly impacted and supported student agency as well as that of their family. Even students and families who may face significant constraints were supported in a cycle of iterative meetings which develop capacity and agentic action over time. Furthermore, the school counselors' actions were enhanced through the connection of the individual plan of study to applied learning and career and technical education opportunities for the student. As students were introduced to these learning opportunities, the fact that student choice was involved meant that students were empowered to make decisions, increasing their agentic abilities, as were the teachers who focused upon the development of student skills in a collaborative effort with a willing student who had chosen the opportunity in lieu of other available opportunities.

Throughout the investigation of the research question designed for this study it was shown and will be discussed below, that school counselors were seen to have engaged members of the ecological system in three key areas of findings. First, the activities of the individual plan of study had been dispersed across the school staff to provide support for student success. Second, key partners within each community served to support the individual plan of study. Finally, families in each school were supported in their participation in the individual plan of study.

This study revealed that activities of the individual plan of study had been dispersed across the school staff to provide support for student success. The scope and sequence of the individual plan of study acted as strategies and plans through which school counselors supported a network of staff members engaging in activity to support the student in the development of their individual plan of study. From advisory periods structured to provide mentor relationships in support of students to academic connections with applied learning principles, staff in the schools studied were not only participants but active members in driving reform minded change which intersected in part with the individual plan of study. With this reform in mind, it was important to scrutinize school implementation and this study reaffirmed that even in schools with great records of individual plan of study implementation there are as Solberg (2019) described, “Educators who were disengaged and many youths and families frustrated that they were not placed with educators who had ‘bought into’ ILPs” (p. 22). This was of a particular concern as vulnerable populations of students most difficult to serve certainly need this support to take advantage of the systems and structures that exist within society and afford opportunity to future education, training, and employment (Herr, 1996). Professional development for school staff to develop the individual plan of study implementation will need to be ongoing effort to support all families in access to quality career advising experiences.

Staff in the study were supported with a scope and sequence of activities with which to engage students for self-exploration which was instrumental in providing opportunities for student learning (Solberg, 2019). This framework was necessary to provide structure and continuity to student experiences and was of support to school staff in providing a useful directional model helping with classroom management. Over time and with experience students were empowered to look at contextual learning opportunities available through the school or

local postsecondary institutions increasing their familiarity with pathways toward careers (Perna, 2018)

The remaining challenge for these schools will be the staff who have not bought in to the school reform and do not support the individual plan of study scope and sequence of activities. The school staff's actions can be supported in changing the paradigm of schooling to include student centered interventions which support multiple ways to win. Conveying these messages may not inspire teacher buy in for all staff but can be a tool in identifying those staff capable of serving the students most in need of positive interventions. Long term development of the abilities of school staff will be an ongoing task for building level administrators charged with staff evaluation and support for the individual professional development plans. Until staff have had training to be successful in the individual plan of study and demonstrate the willingness to do so, student agency for individual plan of study activities will continue to be a challenge.

The study revealed that key partners within each community served to support the individual plan of study. The importance of community participants in supporting the individual plan of study was identified as a component of school implementation. (Frey, 2019; Gysbers, 2013). The three schools all placed priority in connecting students to real world learning experiences to inform their career path decisions and help them align their academic plans. The school counselor's actions were increased through the actions of community members engaged in individual plan of study activities. Where community members were active agents within the ecological context, students were presented with real-world opportunities connected to their skills and talents and presented with connections and the purpose of secondary and postsecondary education opportunities. The most advanced levels of community participation evidenced were the characteristics of the WorkReady Communities (see Figure 4.5) in School B.

Where structures of economic development overlap with the priorities of learning institutions then formal partnerships have been created which strengthen employer knowledge of when, how, and where to interact to benefit students. The real clarity provided for students was the direct connection to the academic prerequisites linked to the occupational descriptions. This information can help drive not only course taking but postsecondary planning. Where employers were engaged and connected with schools in providing early career experiences, student agency was developed, and students can apply employability skills within a context that further develops their career experiences and informs their decision making.

The study further revealed significant growth within the dual enrollment courses impacting student agency through knowledge of and access to the local postsecondary institutions. These were powerful experiences that helped students develop early college experiences and see if they were on the path that fits best for them. This early exposure served as a bridge to their experiences after high school. The study also found that in addition to dual enrollment postsecondary institutions were filling a role in the career exploration activities within school districts. Many community colleges and technical schools were offering field trips and tours of their technical training facilities and exposing students to stem careers. In addition, schools were also engaged in the junior and senior year events at local high schools to provide information on FAFSA completion, scholarships, signing activities etc. The overlap in programing and instruction between secondary and postsecondary institutions has created a great deal of partnership and works well in informing students and their families of the options available to them.

This study found that families in each school were supported in their participation in the individual plan of study. Intentional strategies were scaffolded to change with student

development and concerns overtime. These were critical to engage families and support their successful interaction with the school and their student on the path to success. (Gray & Herr, 2006; Perna, 2018). Kansas schools were actively engaged in improving individual plan of study for students so that each student had access to quality support in the development of their “self-defined career and life goals” (Solberg, 2019, p. 22). Schools within this study reported a wide range of need for family support and also a great range in the degree of participation by the family. These schools were responsive and flexible toward meeting those needs. Of particular note were the forms of communication outreach which were implemented with Covid 19. Having seen success through those interventions it is possible that those measures may become an important form of outreach in future efforts.

The research from this study illustrated that the traditional conferences were not the optimal method of engaging families in the individual plan of study implementation. Instead, families were engaged across an intentional sequence of experiences which fostered family participation with the school and their student to inform and support decision making processes around key milestones in student development. The student led conferences explained in this study were intended to lift and elevate the student voice and empower students in the development of their decision-making skills as they shared and navigated the milestones on their path to graduation. Students were supported by advisors in preparing information for presentation to their families for the purpose of generating discussion and understanding and thus were empowered as active participants in the decision-making process.

An additional finding from this study supporting family engagement were the communication strategies implemented during the Covid 19 pandemic which affected traditional forms of information communication to families. Early in the school year it became critically

important to utilize nontraditional forms of communication available through the internet and/or cellular service, including aspects of social media, web platforms and direct data such as text messaging. These were demonstrated as important vehicles which increased connectivity between families and made possible the dissemination of information necessary to support their student. Usage of platforms by families was varied and diverse and it was necessary to have multiple routes of communication available for providing information based upon the needs of families. Involving family voice in the development of individual plan of study strategies for communication can be important source of innovation for iterative design of program support including effective communication.

Significance of the Study

The development of the individual plan of study holds the promise of supporting student development and increasing successful outcomes for the student through the alignment and convergence of family, school staff, and community to arrange resources and effort in support of the student. The successful planning and convening of members of the ecological system provided support to the organization and delivery of individual plan of study and ensured that each student had access to resources and support. This study illustrated the actions of the school counselor in support of the individual plan of study and demonstrated the benefit of a wide range of agents mobilized to provide support through diverse means. This task was complicated and benefitted from the approach of implementation teams to coordinate the many initiatives and make possible the convergence of the family, school staff, and community.

Recommendations for Practice

The findings within this study have the potential to impact the services afforded to each student in the completion of an individual plan of study. The section of literature review in this

study illustrated the alignment of the individual plan of study with key support from members of the ecology. The research findings of the study have application across all Kansas schools and should serve to support school counselors as they organize and facilitate actions, through a responsive and flexible approach to supporting each student's ecological system.

Identifying professional development for staff aligned with the data findings contained in this study has the potential to dynamically change the personal interactions between staff, students, family, and community. These changes take time to implement, and staff should be supported in both short and long-term planning and professional development which will develop capacity over time.

While the school counselor charged with organizing the individual plan of study in each school will see immediate connection to the research of this study, the information is beneficial for school boards, superintendents, principals, teachers, families, and community members as they seek to have a positive interaction with and support students.

Recommendations for Further Study

Ecological systems theory proved useful in the investigation of the individual plan of study. In the later stages of his career Bronfenbrenner developed a Bioecological Systems Theory which was advanced to recognize the biological and psychological implications of the student at the center of the theory. The utilization of the later theory has the potential to provide a focus on the special needs of each student which can have a biological or psychological basis. This would recognize the unique, special circumstances of many students and the particular support that they need to effectively interact and collaborate to be successful. It is true that the individualized education plan affords some guarantees for the student and family, yet it is worthy of research to study whether the agency created affords opportunities consistent with the

individual plan of study in access to opportunities such as applied learning, work-based learning and postsecondary participation.

A second recommendation for further research to be conducted is based upon reflection of the pool of schools within this study. The schools are neither small rural schools nor large urban schools. Each of these characteristics pose circumstances which may be seen as a benefit or a challenge. Where urban schools often have diverse CTE programs providing valuable student experiences, they also have a wide range of demographics which may represent cultural challenges which require careful planning and thoughtful support. Where rural schools often have cohesive communities, which may connect with student learning opportunities, they often find it challenging to offer CTE programs due to the scale necessary for specialized hires. Nuances of school identity may benefit from analysis to investigate which aspects of the individual plan of study most need support and development and what iterative solutions might most benefit each school. Studying a diverse range of schools has the potential to share a broader set of solutions that schools are implementing to serve their students. These tools would be valuable to efforts within schools to strengthen the individual plan of study.

A further recommendation for study would be to research through survey or interview the families, school staff, community, and students for perspectives unique to their participation in the individual plan of study as key agents of the ecology. These data would be insightful and useful as would a follow up of the participants one year, four years and ten years after graduation. The impact and outcomes of the individual plan of study may certainly be unique when examined in lieu of life experiences such as Covid19, and other incidents of social or economic impact as experienced by grade cohorts.

Implications for Researcher

The researcher chose this study as the result of years as a secondary teacher encouraging aspects of the individual plan of study through classroom activities with students. This led to my position with the KSDE where the fulfillment of my passion has become supporting, through professional development and tools, a more effective implementation of the individual plan of study. This study has been a significant support in the professional development of the researcher as the individual plan of study was examined through a different lens which honors the perspectives of ecological agents and the context in which the individual plan of study may be approached.

The review of the literature was powerful in providing affirmation that the effort in Kansas to support each student with an individual plan of study was aligned with national best practices and possesses the promise to increase a student's successful transition to adulthood after high school graduation. The review also provided invaluable information necessary to organize the research into the case study. The interviews with education professionals were rewarding beyond expectation as the professional experience and energy conveyed through each instance was inspiring. The work being done in Kansas schools today will impact a generation of Kansas citizens and propel our communities forward. This research has been insightful for the researcher and the ideas reflected herein continue to shape plans for future learning.

Summary

The American public institution of education continues to grow and adapt to the modernization of our society in the service of children for the purpose of developing their potential for the future. The broad range of outcomes for each student which public schools in Kansas are charged to support include academic knowledge, cognitive development, technical

skill, civic engagement, and social emotional learning. The individual plan of study brings together these outcomes, unifies these potential silos, and may facilitate, as shown by this study, a means of convening and empowering the family, school staff, and community from whom the student can find support and encouragement. Part of the role of schools in Kansas today is to support the whole child and the development of each child, to the best of their abilities, to participate in the determination of their own destiny.

References

- ACTE. (2018). *Career exploration in middle school: Setting students on the path to success*. Retrieved from <https://www.acteonline.org/career-exploration-in-middle-school-setting-students-on-the-path-to-success/>
- Advance CTE. (2018, February 01). The State of Career Technical Education: Career Advising and Development. Retrieved from <https://careertech.org/resource/state-cte-career-advising-development>
- Alfeld, C., Charner, I., Johnson, L., & Watts, E. (2013). *Work-based learning opportunities for high school students*. National Research Center for Career and Technical Education.
- American School Counselor Association. (2021). ASCA Student Standards; Mindsets and Behaviors for Student Success.
- Aragon, M. B., III. (2021). *Perceptions of cte teachers and administrators: How CTE influences student classroom behaviors*. [Doctoral dissertation, Brandman University]. (Order No. 28650405). Available from ProQuest One Academic. (2565220229). <https://er.lib.k-state.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.er.lib.k-state.edu/dissertations-theses/perceptions-cte-teachers-administrators-how/docview/2565220229/se-2?accountid=11789>
- Bhattacharya, K. (2017). *Fundamentals of qualitative research: A practical guide*. Routledge.
- Biesta, G. (2015). What is education for? On good education, teacher judgement, and educational professionalism. *European Journal of Education*, 50(1), 75-87.
- Biesta, G. & Tedder, M. (2007). Agency and learning in the lifecourse: Towards an ecological perspective. *Studies in the Education of Adults*, 39. 132-149.
- Broderson, M., Gagnon, D., Liu, J., & Tedeschi, S. (2021). *The impact of career and technical education on postsecondary outcomes in Nebraska and South Dakota*. Institute of Education Sciences. Retrieved from https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/central/pdf/REL_2021087.pdf.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Harvard University Press.
- Bryan, J., Moore-Thomas, C., Day-Vines, N. L., & Holcomb-McCoy, C. (2011). School counselors as social capital: The effects of high school college counseling on college application rates. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 89(2), 190–199. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6678.2011.tb00077.x>
- Chen, C. P. (1999). Human agency in context: Toward and ecological frame of career counseling. *Guidance & Counseling*, 14(3), 3.

- Creswell, J. W. & Poth, C.N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design*. SAGE Publications.
- Cuban, L. (2013), "Why so many structural changes in schools and so little reform in teaching practice?", *Journal of Educational Administration*, Vol. 51 No. 2, pp. 109-125. <https://doi.org/10.1108/09578231311304661>
- Darling-Hammond, L. (2010). *The flat world and education: How America's commitment to equity will determine our future*. Teachers College Press.
- Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and education: JOHN DEWEY*. Internet Archive. <https://archive.org/details/ExperienceAndEducation/page/n11/mode/1up?q=exporientil%2Bcontinuum>
- Emirbayer, M., & Mische, A. (1998). What is agency? *American Journal of Sociology*, 103(4), 962-1023.
- Feller, R., & Wichard, J. (2005). *Knowledge nomads and the nervously employed: Workplace change & courageous career choices*. Caps Press.
- Frey, C. (2019). Building bridges coming to NHS. *The Kansan*. Retrieved May 1, 2019, from <https://www.thekansan.com/news/20190205/building-bridges-coming-to-nhs>
- Gray, K. & Herr, E. (2006). *Other ways to win: Creating alternatives for high school graduates*. Thousand Oaks, California: Corwin Press.
- Gysbers, N. C. (2013). Career-ready students: A goal of comprehensive school counseling programs. *The Career Development Quarterly*, 61(3), 283-288.
- Hill, N. E., Ramirez, C., & Dumka, L. E. (2003). Early adolescents' career aspirations: A qualitative study of perceived barriers and family support among low-income, ethnically diverse adolescents. *Journal of Family Issues*, 24(7), 934-959. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X03254517>
- Herr, E. (1996). Perspectives on ecological context, social policy, and career guidance. *The Career Development Quarterly*, 45(1), 5-19.
- Hughey, K. F., and Hughey, J. K. (1999). Preparing students for the future: Making career development a priority. *Journal of Career Development*. 25. 203-216. 10.1023/A:1022937506326.
- Kansas Comprehensive School Counseling Program. (2021) Kansas State Department of Education. Retrieved from [https://www.ksde.org/Portals/0/CSAS/Content%20Area%20\(M-Z\)/School%20Counseling/Kansas%20Comprehensive%20School%20Counseling%20Program%20081821%20v.1.1.pdf?ver=2021-08-24-104214-577](https://www.ksde.org/Portals/0/CSAS/Content%20Area%20(M-Z)/School%20Counseling/Kansas%20Comprehensive%20School%20Counseling%20Program%20081821%20v.1.1.pdf?ver=2021-08-24-104214-577).

- KSDE. (2015). *Final KSDE Recommendation to State Board of Education* [PDF file]. Retrieved from <https://www.ksde.org/Agency/Division-of-Learning-Services/Career-Standards-and-Assessment-Services/Content-Area-F-L/Individual-Plans-of-Study-IPS-Student/>
- KSDE. (2018). *Kansas report card 2016-2017*. Retrieved from https://ksreportcard.ksde.org/ccr.aspx?org_no=State&rptType=3
- KSDE. (2020). *Individual Plans of Study Fact Sheet*. Retrieved from https://www.ksde.org/Portals/0/CSAS/CSAS%20Home/Plan_Of_Study/IPS%20Fact%20Sheet%20July%202020.pdf?ver=2020-09-30-141131-187
- KSDE. (2021a). *2019-2020 Annual Report: IPS Information*. Kansas State Department of Education. Retrieved from https://www.ksde.org/Portals/0/CSAS/CSAS%20Home/Plan_Of_Study/IPS%20Fact%20Sheet%20July%202020.pdf?ver=2020-09-30-141131-187
- KSDE. (2021b). *Individual Plan of Study Digital Reference Guide*. Individual Plan of Study. Retrieved from https://www.ksde.org/Portals/0/CSAS/CSAS%20Home/Plan_Of_Study/Individual%20Plan%20of%20Study%20Digital%20Reference%20Guide%20072321.pdf?ver=2021-07-23-114459-107
- Labaree, D. (1997). Public schools for private advantage: Conflicting goals and the impact on education. In *How to succeed in school without really learning: The Credentials Race in American Education* (pp. 15-52). Yale University Press.
- Leonard, J. (2011). *Using Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory to understand community partnerships: A historical case study of one urban high school*. [Doctoral dissertation, University of Massachusetts Boston]. Urban Education, 0042085911400337
- McCalla-Wriggins, B. (2009). Integrating career and academic advising. Retrieved from <http://www.nacada.ksu.edu/Resources/Clearinghouse/View-Articles/Integrating-career-and-academic-advising.aspx>
- Merriam, S. B. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education. Revised and expanded from "case study research in education"*. Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Perna, M. C. (2018). *Answering why: Unleashing passion, purpose, and performance in younger generations*. Greenleaf Book Group.
- Priestley, M., Biesta, G., & Robinson, S. (2015). *Teacher agency: An ecological approach*. Bloomsbury Publishing. https://www.sme.org/uploadedFiles/About_SME/Industry_Focus_Areas/WFD/Career_Counseling_White_Paper.pdf
- Reed, K. (2014). *KSDE IPS recommendation to State Board of Education*. Retrieved from https://www.ksde.org/Portals/0/CSAS/CSAS%20Home/Plan_Of_Study/KSDE%20IPS%20Recommendation_final.pdf

- Rose, J., & Johnson, C. W. (2020). Contextualizing reliability and validity in qualitative research: toward more rigorous and trustworthy qualitative social science in leisure research. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 51(4), 432-451. <http://dx.doi.org.er.lib.k-state.edu/10.1080/00222216.2020.1722042>
- Saladana, J. (2016). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. SAGE Publications.
- Schanfield, M. (2010). *High-school-advisory*. Retrieved from <https://www.nacada.ksu.edu/Resources/Clearinghouse/View-Articles/High-school-aDvisory-programs.aspx>
- Solberg, V. (2019). *Making school relevant with individualized learning plans: Helping students create their own career and life goals*. Harvard Education.
- Solberg, V. S., Phelps, L. A., Haakenson, K. A., Durham, J. F., & Timmons, J. (2012). The nature and use of individualized learning plans as a promising career intervention strategy. *Journal of Career Development*, 39(6), 500-514.
- Stake, R. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Sage Publications.
- Tierney, J. (2013, May 28). *Why high-school rankings are meaningless-and harmful*. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2013/05/why-high-school-rankings-are-meaningless-and-harmful/276122/>.
- Ujifusa, A. (2020). Polarized environment shapes policy debates on key K-12 issues. *Education Week*, 39(19), 8.
- U.S. Department of Education. (2015, July 27). Fact sheet: Focusing higher education on student success. *U.S. Department of Education*. Retrieved from <https://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/fact-sheet-focusing-higher-education-student-success>
- U.S. Department of Education. (2021, July 2). College affordability and completion: Ensuring a pathway to opportunity. *U.S. Department of Education*. <https://www.ed.gov/college>.
- Vanderstraeten, R., & Biesta, G. (1998). Constructivism, educational research, and John Dewey. Paper presented at the Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy. Retrieved from <http://www.bu.edu/wcp/Papers/Amer/AmerVand.htm>
- Yin, R.K. (Ed.) (2003) *Case study research: Design and methods* (3rd ed.). Sage Publications.

Appendix A - School A Scheduled Grade Level Activities

		7th	8th	9th	10th	11th	12th
8/22	SH	Explain CC	Explain CC	Explain CC	Explain CC	Explain CC	Explain CC
8/29	SH	Goal Setting	Goal Setting	Goal Setting	Goal Setting	Goal Setting	Goal Setting
9/5	JL	Organizational Skills	Organizational Skills	Time Management	Time Management	Junior Year Checklist	Senior Year Checklist
9/12	JL	ASP	ASP	ASP/Credit	ASP/Credit Checks	ASP/Credit Checks	ASP/Credit Checks
9/19	SB	Homecoming Fun-STUCO	Homecoming Fun	Homecoming Fun	Homecoming Fun	Homecoming Fun	Homecoming Fun
9/26	JL	Academic Integrity	Academic Integrity	Test Taking Strategies	Test Taking Strategies	Staying Motivated	Staying Motivated
10/3	KW	Anti-Bullying	Anti-Bullying	Anti-Bullying	Anti-Bullying	Anti-Bullying	Anti-Bullying
10/10	TS	Kindness	Kindness	Kindness	Kindness	Kindness	Kindness
10/17	TS	Social Media	Social Media	Social Media	Social Media	Social Media	Social Media
10/24	NF	Red Ribbon	Red Ribbon	Red Ribbon	Red Ribbon	Red Ribbon	Red Ribbon
10/31	TS	Halloween fun	Halloween fun	Halloween fun	Halloween fun	Halloween fun	Halloween fun
11/7	CL	Fall Clean Up	Fall Clean Up	Fall Clean Up	Fall Clean Up	Fall Clean Up	Fall Clean Up
11/14	JL	Xello	Xello	Xello	Xello	Xello	Xello
11/28	JL	Career MatchMaker	Career MatchMaker	Career MatchMaker	Resume Builder	Resume Builder	Resume Builder
12/5	NA	Senior Citizens Dinner	Senior Citizens Dinner	Senior Citizens Dinner	Senior Citizens Dinner	Senior Citizens Dinner	Senior Citizens Dinner
12/12	KW	Season's Greetings (Appreciation Notes)	Season's Greetings (Appreciation Notes)	Season's Greetings (Appreciation Notes)	Season's Greetings (Appreciation Notes)	Season's Greetings (Appreciation Notes)	Season's Greetings (Appreciation Notes)
1/9	JL	Career Expl/CC My Skills	Career Expl/CC My Skills	Career Expl/CTE Pathways	Future Plans/CTE Pathways	Future Plans/College Search	Future Plans/Scholarships
1/16	JL	Xello	Xello	CTE/Pathways	CTE Pathways	CTE Pathways	Cr Checks/Scholarships/Plans
1/23	JL/KW	Student-Led	Student-Led	Student-Led	Student-Led	Student-Led	Student-Led

		Conference s	Conference s	Conference s	Conference s	Conference s	Conference s
1/30	JL/KW	Student- Led Conference s	Student- Led Conference s	Student- Led Conference s	Student- Led Conference s	Student- Led Conference s	Student- Led Conference s
2/6	KW	Stress Manageme nt Fun	Stress Manageme nt Fun	Stress Manageme nt Fun	Stress Manageme nt Fun	Stress Manageme nt Fun	Stress Manageme nt Fun
2/13	CT	Teacher's Alma Mater	Teacher's Alma Mater	Teacher's Alma Mater	Teacher's Alma Mater	Teacher's Alma Mater	Teacher's Alma Mater
2/20	BC	Jobs in Teacher's Subject	Jobs in Teacher's Subject	Jobs in Teacher's Subject	Jobs in Teacher's Subject	Jobs in Teacher's Subject	Jobs in Teacher's Subject
2/27	TS	OOH - Highest Paying Occupation s / Fastest Growing Occupation s	OOH - Highest Paying Occupation s / Fastest Growing Occupation s	OOH - Highest Paying Occupation s / Fastest Growing Occupation s	OOH - Highest Paying Occupation s / Fastest Growing Occupation s	OOH - Highest Paying Occupation s / Fastest Growing Occupation s	OOH - Highest Paying Occupation s / Fastest Growing Occupation s
3/6	JL	Career Fair Reflections	Career Fair Reflections	Career Fair Reflections	Career Fair Reflections	Career Fair Reflections	Career Fair Reflections
3/20	JL	Communic ation Skills	Communic ation Skills	Communic ation Skills	Communic ation Skills	Interview Skills	Interview Skills
3/27	JL	JH Electives for next year	Enrollment Handbook & Course Planner on CCruising	Enrollment Handbook & Course Planner on CCruising	Enrollment Handbook & Course Planner on CCruising	Enrollment Handbook & Course Planner on CCruising	Scholarship s/College Acceptance Pics
4/3	JL	Pre- Enrollment	Pre- Enrollment	Pre- Enrollment	Pre- Enrollment	Pre- Enrollment	Scholarship s/Update resume
4/10	JL	Pre- Enrollment	Pre- Enrollment	Pre- Enrollment	Pre- Enrollment	Pre- Enrollment	Scholarship s/Update resume
4/17	JL	Intro to IPS	High school IPS	Update IPS	Update IPS	Update IPS	Scholarship s/Update resume
4/24	SH	Goals / Updates	Goals / Updates	Goals / Updates	Goals / Updates	Goals / Updates	Goals / Updates
5/1	SH	May Day thanks?	May Day thanks?	May Day thanks?	May Day thanks?	May Day thanks?	May Day thanks?
5/8	CL	Volunteeri ng	Volunteeri ng	Volunteeri ng	Volunteeri ng	Volunteeri ng	Life after high school
5/15	ALL	Finish strong!	Finish Strong!	Finish Strong!	Finish Strong!	Finish Strong!	Finish Strong!