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Improve intervention plan for low-performing students

Mending NC's Personal Education Plan program is vital for parents, students.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Mending the state's Personal Education Plan program is vital for parents and students.
- Forty-nine percent of students in grades three through eight did not earn the equivalent of a passing grade on end-of-grade reading and math tests during the 2007-08 school year.
- Schools must do a better job of utilizing personal education plans to help students before they fail.
- Legislators should support HB 804, which amends the law regarding personal education plans, so that schools are collaborating with parents and providing remediation plans for every student at risk of academic failure.

The North Carolina General Assembly was on the cutting edge of education reform back in 2001 when it created the state's Personal Education Plan statute, which requires schools to create individualized learning plans for every student at risk of failing. This means that schools must apply focused intervention and instruction that is specifically designed to help students improve, and they should work with parents so that complementary intervention is happening in the home.

In the years since the law was created, personal plans have gained popularity around the nation. Everyone from policy experts such as Stanford education professor Linda Darling-Hammond to U.S. President Barack Obama have pushed states to use individualized plans to make educators more responsive to the varied needs of students. Research shows that individualized learning plans are particularly effective at improving achievement for new English-language learners, low-income students, and students with disabilities.

Unfortunately, in North Carolina, few students are reaping the full benefits of personal plans, because many districts are not utilizing them in the way that the legislature intended.

Lawmakers and advocates who supported the original personal plan statute envisioned a process that would allow low-performing students, their parents, and their teachers to create a game plan for the school year that could include everything from the parent committing to buying their child glasses and getting them to bed on time to the school agreeing to connect the student with a literacy coach or offering math tutoring on the weekends.

At most school districts, what is happening instead is that schools are rubber-stamping one-size-fits-all plans that entail no more efforts for any particular student than would otherwise be expended. And many students aren't getting plans at all due to loop holes in the original statute that leave room for wide interpretation about which students should get Personal Education Plans and whether schools are required to create them before students fail or afterwards.

House Bill 804 attempts to clear up the confusion by stating explicitly that at the beginning of each school year, teachers should create personal plans that include intervention strategies and benchmarks for success for all students who appear to be at risk of academic failure based on grades, observations, or standardized test results.

The bill would also make an important change to the statute by requiring schools to notify parents that the plans are being created and include them in the implementation and review process. The current statute encourages schools to consult with parents but stops short of requiring it.

The public supports this type of parental involvement, particularly when it comes to helping at-risk students. According to a recent Gallup poll, 86 percent of the general public believes that support from parents is the most important way to improve schools. And research shows that parental involvement makes it more likely for children to do their homework, improve their language skills, and have low school absentee rates. Students benefit when parents establish home environments that support learning and help with homework and other curriculum-related activities, decisions, and planning. But many parents lack the resources and skills to adequately support their children

By requiring schools to include parents in the personal education planning process, lawmakers would provide an important opportunity for schools to share ideas and strategies with parents of students who would benefit from parental involvement the most.

Back in 2001, when nearly 30 percent of North Carolina's students in grades three through eight were not earning the equivalent of a passing grade on end-of-grade reading and math tests, personal plans were expected to become an important tool for teachers, who must adhere to rigorously enforced testing guidelines, and the thousands of students who cannot keep up with the unforgiving pace dictated by testing calendars. That didn't happen and achievement levels have fallen even lower. During the 2007-08 school year, 49.1 percent of students in grades three through eight did not earn the equivalent of a passing grade on end-of-grade reading and math tests.

North Carolina took an important step when it required schools to provide individual support to students who struggle to navigate the educational system. But the statute is toothless if schools can wiggle out of providing truly individualized plans to students before they fail to make the grade.

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