



Advancing Career Development as a Positive Youth Development Strategy

WCFR is redefining career development from a historical focus on career choice and decision-making to a new paradigm focused on positive youth development (PYD). As a PYD effort, career development using ICPs, is understood as a powerful developmental process that builds youth agency, identity, and adaptability.

Through its research on the nature and value of Individualized Career Plans (ICPs), a distinctive and field-shaping contribution of WCFR's national and international leadership has been **the intentional repositioning of career development from a singular focus on career choice and occupational decision-making to a developmental intervention grounded in Positive Youth (PYD)**. Historically, career education in schools has focused narrowly on helping students identify interests, select occupations, and make postsecondary decisions. WCFR's work challenges this limited framing and instead advances a broader paradigm: that career development is fundamentally about **identity formation, agency development, and the cultivation of adaptive capacities needed to navigate a complex and uncertain life course**.

Through WCFR's scholarship and applied systems work, ICPs are conceptualized as structured career development processes that actively build core PYD competencies, including goal setting, self-regulation, reflection, identity development, resilience, and personal agency. Within this framework, career development is not simply a planning exercise, but a **pedagogical and relational process** through which individuals learn the skills needed to understand themselves, make meaning of their experiences, exercise voice, and take ownership of their future pathways.

Embedding PYD in ICP Practices

This reframing represents a significant paradigm shift in the field. Rather than asking, "What career should this student choose?", WCFR's model asks, **"How do we design educational systems that help young people develop the capacities to continually adapt and thrive across multiple life transitions?"** In this view, career development becomes a primary mechanism for cultivating developmental assets that support high school to adult transitions, but lifelong learning, wellbeing, and civic participation.

WCFR has further advanced this paradigm by embedding PYD-aligned ICP practices into system design efforts with states and districts. This includes advocating for implementation approaches that emphasize:

- Student voice and ownership over the planning process
- Access to mentoring through adult-youth developmental relationships
- Reflection as a core learning practice
- Iterative goal-setting using authentic learning experiences
- Cultural responsiveness and affirmation of students' lived experiences
- Strengths-based approaches that build on emerging skills and talent

As a result, career development using ICPs is increasingly understood as a **developmental infrastructure that enables youth to proactively engage in reaching self-defined academic and life goals. It is a** means by which schools operationalize youth agency, belonging, purpose, and future orientation at scale. This shift is now evident in state and district career readiness policies and how youth-serving organizations articulate the role of career development in supporting whole-child outcomes.

In advancing this paradigm, WCFR has helped move the field beyond career choice toward a more ambitious and human-centered vision: **career development as a cornerstone of positive youth development and equitable opportunity across the life course.**