



**Employment for Youth with Disabilities:  
*Past Challenges and Future Opportunities***

PRACTICAL ADVICE GUIDES AND ISSUE BRIEF SERIES

Smart Strategies and policies to employ, educate, and support youth in  
employability development programs

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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### Summer Youth Employability Communities of Practice

**Chicago, IL:** City of Chicago Department of Family and Support Services, The Robert R. McCormick Foundation

**Detroit, MI:** City Connect Detroit, The Skillman Foundation, The W.K. Kellogg Foundation

**Hartford, CT:** Capital Workforce Partners

**Houston, TX:** Goodwill Industries of Houston, Inc.

**Los Angeles, CA:** Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce

**New York City, NY:** Department of Youth and Community Development

**Philadelphia, PA:** Philadelphia Youth Network, Inc.

**Phoenix & Maricopa County, AZ:** Arizona Call-A- Teen/Youth Resources

**San Diego, CA:** San Diego Workforce Partnership

Thank you all,



Susan P. Curnan, Director

To give feedback on this publication or to order a copy of this Issue Brief or Practical Advice Guides, contact lanni@brandeis.edu. You may download a free copy at <http://cyc.brandeis.edu/reports/index.html>.



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## FOREWORD

The Practical Advice Guides and Issue Briefs are intended for youth practitioners, program managers, business and public sector worksite supervisors, funders, policymakers, and others interested in employing, educating, and supporting youth. We present lessons and information from research, Walmart's Summer Youth Employability Initiative (SYEI), and other experience to inform practice and policy.

This Issue Brief focuses on employment for youth with disabilities. Others address employment for youth with trauma histories and improving youth employment outcomes through partnerships. The Practical Advice Guides offer strategies to make work more meaningful for, and improve the employability of, young people whose supports and opportunities have been few.

### THE SUMMER YOUTH EMPLOYABILITY INITIATIVE

The Walmart Foundation invested \$13.5 million in ten cities over three summers (2011–2013) to employ, educate, and support more than 8,500 youth. Brandeis' Center for Youth and Communities documented the 2011 SYEI experiences and managed the 2012-2014 SYEI. Walmart also funded the Center to undertake this publication series and other knowledge development and dissemination activities:

- Employer roundtables—collecting data about what entry level workers need and promoting partnerships with nonprofits and public entities.
- Management and leadership academies—capacity building for leadership teams developing results-oriented partnerships to employ, educate, and support youth (for a description of the academies see <http://cyc.brandeis.edu/pdfs/CYCBrochure02.27.15.pdf>)
- Profiles of select youth employability programs.

- A November 2014 national learning exchange in Washington, DC to:
  - Ignite action and urgency about the youth unemployment crisis and the
  - value of linking real work for pay with education and support.
  - Inspire and inform interagency and cross-sector partnerships to employ, educate, and support youth.
  - Share lessons from the Brandeis partner network.

### WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO EMPLOY, EDUCATE, AND SUPPORT YOUTH?

Programs offering real work for pay, learning, and supports can help vulnerable youth bridge the gap between preparation and employer demand, improve educational outcomes, contribute to communities and family budgets, connect with positive role models, and build work-based competencies.

Teen employment in the U.S. is at its lowest level in 60 years – about 30%. Yet employers cannot find enough workers with demonstrated work competencies to meet job demands. Declining government support for youth jobs and work readiness training has led to a broken pipeline of prepared workers.

The costs of doing nothing are high. Without support, vulnerable youth face lifetime employment struggles, poverty, dependence on public welfare, disengagement from society, encounters with the law, prison, and poor health. With inaction, society faces a generation of young adults who have never held a job, increased costs for unemployment, welfare, and incarceration, lost wages and tax revenues, violence, and a shortage of entry-level and middle-skills workers.

### WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED ABOUT EMPLOYING, EDUCATING, AND SUPPORTING YOUTH?

Although a paid job is often called “the most effective social service program,” and young people want jobs,<sup>1</sup> vulnerable youth need support to become employable. SYEI lessons include:

- Opportunities to improve work readiness through learning, reflection with caring adults, and competency-based assessments to track progress help youth to succeed.
- Proper orientation and supervision on the job are important parts of enhancing employability.
- Meaningful work leads to more positive outcomes than busy work.
- Access to supports such as food, child care, and transportation increases young people’s reliability and learning.
- Learning to articulate and demonstrate their readiness to employers helps young people with future job searches.

SYEI youth surveys confirm the return on investment in summer jobs:

- One third to one half of participants earned work readiness certificates, professional certifications, and/or academic credit during the summer.
- More than half who had not planned to finish school or go on for more training or schooling changed their minds after the summer.
- Virtually all participants reported that they gained maturity and job-related skills and are now more employable.
- At least 20% went from subsidized summer jobs to long-term unsubsidized jobs.

In addition, independent studies in two SYEI cities showed that summer jobs programs reduced violence (Chicago) and increased academic success (New York). Other SYEI cities had evidence of similar outcomes, but not through formal studies.

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<sup>1</sup> Waiting lists for summer jobs programs are 10 times larger than the available slots.

For the SYEI cities, partnerships equal success. They created or strengthened partnerships and leveraged more than \$10 million in financial, political, and other support from government, business, foundations, nonprofits, and educational systems or institutions to provide jobs, work readiness opportunities, and services.<sup>2</sup> These partnerships continue to add momentum through the Walmart-Brandeis Academy. For example, in one city, employers with experience hiring youth agreed to mentor less experienced employers and to leverage new job slots among vendors and affiliates.

#### **ENOUGH IS KNOWN FOR ACTION**

We are in the midst of a perfect storm of opportunity for attaining positive outcomes for youth and communities: consider the 2014 Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, the dedication of the Federal Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs, support from the White House Domestic Policy Council, growing urgency among businesses to hire a prepared workforce, a focus on impact investing and other philanthropic innovation, advances in education and youth development practice, and emerging results-oriented partnerships across the country. The time is right, and *enough is known for action*.

Leadership, innovation, and excellence are needed to take advantage of this perfect storm and encourage more communities to employ, educate, and support youth through summer and year-round work and learning programs.

One young man who had a life-changing work and learning experience declared, “These people found my inner genius.” We need such geniuses. Employing, educating, and supporting young people will help us find them.

<sup>2</sup> These supports were especially important for the most vulnerable, such as foster care youth, youth with a history of homelessness, court-involved youth, and youth with disabilities.

# Employment for Youth with Disabilities: *Past Challenges and Future Opportunities*

## PRACTICAL ADVICE AND ISSUE BRIEF SERIES

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Smart Strategies to employ, educate, and support youth in  
employability development programs



## OVERVIEW

Many states, communities, and organizations have been struggling to improve efforts to provide employment opportunities for youth with disabilities because they believe it's the right thing to do. The 2014 Workforce Innovation and Opportunities Act (WIOA), with its calls for an increased focus on employment opportunities for youth with disabilities, provides further motivation to strengthen these efforts. This brief describes the current picture of employment for youth with disabilities, relevant historical and legislative context, the pathways to employment that have resulted from this legacy, and federal, state, and community-level efforts designed to improve the employment picture for youth with disabilities.

Although the population of youth with disabilities is rapidly expanding, they are employed at a much lower rate than youth without disabilities, and many will enter adulthood with few opportunities to support themselves and contribute to their communities through employment. This stands in stark contrast to their desire to work, their ability to work, and employers' increasing need to fill job vacancies created by overall population aging.

The brief concludes with recommendations regarding investments that can support and enhance the development of collaborations and

## Definitions

According to the Americans with Disabilities Act, *a person with a disability* is an individual with a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities; a record of such an impairment; or regarded as having an impairment.

*Developmental disabilities (DD)* are a diverse group of severe chronic conditions that are due to mental and/or physical impairments. People with DD have problems with major life activities such as language, mobility, learning, self-help, and independent living. DDs begin any time during development up to age 22 and usually last throughout a person's lifetime.

infrastructure necessary to increase the employment success of youth with disabilities.

## CURRENT EMPLOYMENT PICTURE FOR YOUTH AND ADULTS WITH DISABILITIES

Various data sources (see Table 1) confirm wide differences between the employment rate of the general adult population and that of adults with disabilities. Even among those with disabilities who are employed, few are working full-time or nearly full-time, acquiring company-paid benefits, and/or earning a living wage (Mank, 2007).

**Table 1**  
**Employment Rate Estimates by Data Source and Population<sup>3</sup>**

	2010 Current Population Survey	Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012	2011 American Community Survey
<b>Adults with Disabilities</b>	16.2%	28.4%	32.4%
<b>Adults without Disabilities</b>	75.5%	71.0%	70.5%

The disparities in employment rates widen when only individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) are considered.

Only about one in seven (14.7%) adults with IDD was employed in the community, based on data from the 2012 National Core Indicators Project

<sup>3</sup> The differences in these employment rate estimates arise from differences in how each data source defines disability and employment, the date of data collection, and the age ranges that are included.

(Human Services Research Institute, 2012), despite evidence that individuals with IDD can be employed successfully and want to be employed (Migliore et al., 2007; Migliore et al., 2008). These differences persist despite evidence of financial gains associated with employment for people with disabilities (Cimera, 2008; Cimera & Cowan, 2009).

Although few data sources focus exclusively on employment for youth with disabilities, the National Longitudinal Transition Study showed that only 26% of youth and young adults with disabilities were employed two years after leaving high school (Carter, Austin, & Trainor, 2012).

#### **SIZE AND CHARACTERISTICS OF THE POPULATION OF YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES**

Nearly 750,000 youth with disabilities in the U.S. make the transition to adulthood annually (Scal & Ireland, 2005). Future cohorts of youth with disabilities are likely to be larger as well as different in their composition. Halfon et al. (2012), based on a review of several sources of national data, found that overall childhood disability is increasing and that emotional, behavioral, and neurological disabilities are becoming more prevalent than physical impairments. In 2008-2009, 7.7% of U.S. children under 18 had a disability that limited usual activity, a fourfold increase in the prevalence of such limitations since 1960 (Slomski, 2012). For the first time in more than 30 years, mental health conditions have displaced physical illnesses as the top five disabilities in U.S. children.

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is one of the conditions on the increase. According to recent estimates from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), one in 68 children in multiple communities has been identified with ASD – roughly 30 percent higher than 2012

estimates.<sup>1</sup> Levels of intellectual ability vary greatly among children with ASD, ranging from severe challenges to average or above average ability. The CDC found that almost half of children identified with ASD have average or above average intellectual ability (an IQ above 85) compared to a third of children a decade ago. Since increasing numbers of young children are being diagnosed with ASD, increasing numbers of youth with ASD will soon be seeking connections to adult services (Migliore et al., 2014). ASD is almost five times more common among boys than girls.

Other conditions on the increase from 1997 to 2008 among children and youth with disabilities are children with attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and children with other DDs (Boyle et al., 2011).

#### **HISTORICAL AND LEGISLATIVE CONTEXT**

The current employment picture for youth with disabilities is related to history and legislative action. Deinstitutionalization created a segregated system of employment that legislative efforts since the 1970s have tried to reverse, with only some success. The current siloed and fragmented systems designed to provide employment supports to youth with disabilities are not conducive to implementing what have been identified as best practices.

***Consequences of deinstitutionalization.*** The deinstitutionalization movement in the late 1960s and into the 1970s involved closing residential institutions that housed large numbers of adults with IDDs. These closures created a need to build a residential service system to house individuals in the community and to develop day activities and employment options (Stancliffe & Lakin, 2005), leading to the establishment of more than 8000 facility-based day programs and sheltered workshops nationally (Wehman & Brooke, 2013).

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<sup>1</sup> (<http://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2014/p0327-autism-spectrum-disorder.html>)



The purpose of these programs, initially, was to give individuals something to do during the day; there was little expectation that youth and adults with disabilities would learn work tasks (Mank, 2007). However, based on prompting from families, the development of new instructional approaches, and successful demonstrations of ways in which individuals with disabilities could work, segregated day programs evolved into sheltered settings where people with disabilities could work alongside others with disabilities; then into supported and integrated group employment services; and eventually into individualized employment options (Mank, 2007). Most community agencies focused on employment for youth with disabilities, however, continue to offer segregated day and work options even as they have evolved to provide a range of work options (Mank, 2007).

Day programs and sheltered workshops, often called “facility-based,” provide employment and non-employment services in one location where the vast majority of individuals have a disability (Butterworth et al., 2013). These programs typically operate 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. weekdays, support from 50 to several hundred individuals with disabilities (Targett & Wehman, 2011), and offer skill training, prevocational training, “make-work” vocational activities (i.e., work created to keep a person from being unemployed), field trips, recreation, and special education curricula for people with more severe cognitive, physical and emotional disabilities (Wehman & Brooke, 2013).

Within these facility-based programs, services can be work-focused, non-work-focused, or a mix of the two. Work-focused programs are variously referred to as sheltered workshops, work activity

centers, or extended employment programs and generally require individuals with disabilities to demonstrate that they are employable before they qualify for assistance in finding a job in the community (Targett & Wehman, 2011). However, most programs fail to offer a continuum of services geared to help clients move toward community-based employment and thus tend to provide only segregated employment where pay is less than the minimum wage (Wehman & Brooke, 2013). Legislation dating from the National Industrial Recovery Act in 1934 – part of the New Deal – made it permissible to pay individuals with disabilities less than the minimum wage as a way to increase their access to employment (National Disability Rights Network, 2012).

**Legislative Efforts.** Legislation from the 1970s on has spawned a mix of programs in the education, vocational rehabilitation, developmental disabilities, health care, and income maintenance systems designed to help individuals access employment and the supports needed to maintain paid work. Table 2 outlines federal laws related to employment for adults with disabilities generally, youth with disabilities specifically, in each program/policy area.





**Table 2**  
**Federal Legislation Related to Vocational Training and Employment by Policy Area\***

<i>Year</i>	<i>Legislation</i>	<i>Description of Key Provisions</i>
<b>Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Programs</b>		
<b>1973</b>	Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (PL 93-112)	Extended authorization of grants to states for VR services, emphasizing serving those with the most severe disabilities. Section 504 prohibited discrimination based on disability in federal programs and programs receiving federal funds.
<b>1986</b>	Rehabilitation Act Amendments of 1986 (PL 99-506)	Defined supported employment; provided funding for supported employment projects and demonstrations.
<b>1992</b>	Rehabilitation Act Amendments of 1992 (PL 102-569)	Defined VR system responsibilities to include developing an individualized rehabilitation plan with full participation of the person with a disability, finding appropriate services and supports to implement the plan, and fostering cooperative relationships with other agencies and programs to unify the system.
<b>1998</b>	Rehabilitation Act Amendments of 1998 (PL 105-220)	Promoted increased employment of individuals with disabilities through implementing workforce investment systems under Title I of the Workforce Investment Act (WIA), which reformed the nation's job training system primarily through one-stop career centers designed to serve jobseekers with and without disabilities.
<b>2014</b>	Workforce Innovation and Opportunities Act (WIOA) (going into effect July 1, 2015) Reauthorizes WIA through 2020	Larger VR system role in transition; limitations on use of sub-minimum wage; requirements for formal cooperative agreements between VR and state Medicaid and DD agencies; definition of customized employment and of competitive integrated employment as an optimal outcome; enhanced roles for workforce system and One-Stop Career Centers in meeting the needs of people with disabilities; movement of some disability agencies to the Department of Health and Human Services; changes in performance measures; and a requirement that states spend one-half of the money they receive for supported employment on youth with the most significant disabilities, up until age 24 (Hoff, 2014).
<b>Developmental Disabilities Service System</b>		
<b>1984</b>	Developmental Disabilities Act Amendment of 1984 (PL 98-527)	Acknowledged the employability of persons with disabilities and promoted supported employment options.
<b>1987</b>	Developmental Disabilities Assistance and Bill of Rights Act of 1987 (PL 100-146)	Put national goals related to employing persons with disabilities in legislation.
<b>Education</b>		
<b>1975</b>	Education For All Handicapped Children Act (PL 94-147)	Required access for each child to a free and appropriate education in the least restrictive environment. Previously, children with disabilities had no specific legal rights to an education and many were not permitted to attend school. Some states required services for some students with disabilities.
<b>1984</b>	The Carl Perkins Act	Required schools to inform parents of vocational education opportunities by the time their child is in ninth grade and vocational assessments, special services, and career and transition counseling for students with disabilities.
<b>1990</b>	Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (PL 101-476)	Added transition planning language so that the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) would include transition goals and linkages to other agencies to support transition prior to leaving school.

Year	Legislation	Description of Key Provisions
1997	Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments of 1997 (PL 105-17)	Raised expectations for students with disabilities, supported them in the general curriculum, supported parents, and helped states determine outcomes. Increased importance of school-to-work transition planning; gave states permission to use funds to develop and implement transition programs.
2004	Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEIA) (PL 108-446)	Established parameters to guide VR counselors' participation in transition planning.
<b>Health Care</b>		
1981	Medicaid Home and Community-Based Services Waiver Program of 1981 (PL 97-35)	Identified and supported employment services as an appropriate means for assisting individuals with significant disabilities.
<b>Income Maintenance</b>		
1999	Ticket to Work and Work Incentives Improvement Act of 1999 (PL 106-170)	Established funding for the ticket to work program (to help Social Security disability beneficiaries obtain employment and work toward greater independence and self-sufficiency). Included work incentives to allow beneficiaries to explore work options while still receiving health care and cash benefits.

\* The table utilizes information reported and organized by Wehman, 2013.

**Pathways to Employment Are Largely Siloed and Fragmented.** These separate legislative efforts have led to a fragmented system characterized by vast differences across states in the services and supports available; in eligibility criteria for entrance into different systems; and in limits on access due to funding

restrictions, since there is no entitlement to services (Hall et al., 2007; Wehman & Brooke, 2013). Table 3 compares the definitions of disability used by the systems designed to support employment for youth with disabilities.

**Table 3**  
**Comparison of Systems Designed to Support Employment for Youth with Disabilities**

	Vocational Rehabilitation (VR)	Developmental Disabilities Service System	Education (from Individuals with Disabilities Education Act)
<b>Definition of Disability</b>	In the Vocational Rehabilitation Act, a "disabled individual" is "any person who (1) has a physical or mental impairment which substantially limits one or more of such person's major life activities; (2) has a record of such impairment; or (3) is regarded as having such an impairment."	State-specific example: Adults who are eligible for services from MA DDS have "a diagnosis of mental retardation as defined in Department regulations. Mental retardation means significantly subaverage intellectual functioning existing concurrently and related to significant limitations in adaptive functioning. Mental retardation manifests before age 18" (see <a href="http://www.mass.gov/eohhs/docs/dm r/masscap-faq.pdf">http://www.mass.gov/eohhs/docs/dm r/masscap-faq.pdf</a> ).	"Child with a disability" means a child evaluated as having mental retardation, a hearing impairment (including deafness), a serious emotional disturbance, an orthopedic impairment, autism, traumatic brain injury, another health impairment, a specific learning disability, deaf-blindness, or multiple disabilities, and who, by reason thereof, needs special education and related services.

The pathway to employment for youth receiving Social Security Insurance (SSI) or Social Security

Disability Insurance (SSDI) presents additional barriers. This is an important subgroup of the

population of youth with disabilities. To qualify for SSI, which provides cash benefits and access to health insurance, children under age 18 and their families must meet strict income, asset, and disability eligibility criteria (Luecking & Wittenburg, 2009). These youth and families face a critical challenge and penalty when they work and earn income: such income diminishes their benefits. Although the Social Security Administration (SSA) has developed work incentives to circumvent this challenge, the majority of SSI recipients ages 14 to 17 have not heard of or used these benefits (Wittenburg & Loprest, 2007).

### ***Competitive and Integrated Employment.***

Legislative efforts over the past forty years have attempted to build a system of vocational training services that can provide youth and adults with disabilities with more individualized choices and options for competitive employment (Nord et al., 2013). These efforts have focused on new employment models that research has identified as successful.

Competitive employment models focus on attaining “real work for real pay” (Targett & Wehman, 2011). Kiernan et al. (2011) define competitive integrated employment as a job that is compensated by the minimum or prevailing wage, provides similar benefits to all employees, occurs where employees with disabilities interact continuously with employees without disabilities, provides opportunities for advancement, and is full-time unless the employee desires or needs a part-time schedule. Three common approaches to competitive employment are (1) supported employment; (2) customized employment; and (3) self-employment (Targett & Wehman, 2011).

- *Supported employment* enables individuals with significant support needs to become employed in the community. When supported employment began in the 1970s and 1980s, groups of individuals with disabilities would work together in a business under an adult service provider’s

supervision (Targett & Wehman, 2011). In the last twenty years, however, individualized approaches to supported employment have been developed in which a vocational rehabilitation specialist (also known as a job coach or employment specialist) provides an array of supports (e.g., on-the-job skills training, arranging for assistive technology, facilitating communications and relationships with co-workers, etc.) to assist an individual with significant disabilities to obtain and maintain a competitive job (Targett & Wehman, 2011).

- *Customized employment* shares many features of supported employment but is further characterized by the following principles (Elinson et al., 2008; U.S. Department of Labor, 2007): (1) the individual who is seeking a job decides the direction of the job search; (2) the individual controls the planning process in order to maximize his or her preferences, interests, and connections in the community; (3) time is taken to explore the individual’s unique needs and abilities; (4) the employer negotiates specific job duties and employee expectations; and (5) the job that emerges meets both the employer’s needs and the needs, strengths, and interests of the job seeker. The goal of utilizing these principles is to yield a job that is a good fit and creates the possibility for advancement. Sometimes a personal representative assists an individual through the customized employment process (Targett & Wehman, 2011).
- *Self-employment* opportunities begin with matching a person’s talents and desires with a defined product, service, or activity (Targett & Wehman, 2011). Individuals - alone or with professional and/or family support - do person-centered planning to formulate an idea. They then develop a business plan and assess the idea’s feasibility and likelihood for success. Those

plans that seem most viable are then implemented.

Despite legislative efforts to improve employment outcomes, national surveys of the over 8000 community rehabilitation providers (CRPs) that offer vocational and related services to individuals with disabilities reveal little focus on competitive employment (Butterworth et al., 2013). For example, based on the 2010-2011 National CRP Survey, over 70% of those served by CRPs are individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (Butterworth et al., 2013); of these, however, only 19% participated in individual, integrated employment services while 25.2% participated in facility-based work and 43% participated in non-work services. Participation in integrated employment services represents a drop from a high of about 25% in 2001; participation in non-work services increased about 10% since 2002 (Sulewski, 2010).

These low rates of competitive employment and substantial increases in non-work activities mask tremendous variation among states. The 2010-2011 National CRP Survey gathered extensive data from 37 states on day and employment services for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities from 1999 to 2011. Twenty-one (57%) of these 37 states *reduced* the number of individuals receiving integrated employment services over this time period. The remaining 16 states (43%) *increased* the number of individuals in integrated employment. In eight of these states, the number of individuals in integrated employment increased by more than 500 individuals (Butterfield et al., 2013).

Few resources reward integrated community employment (Niemeic et al., 2009). An investigation into what facilitated success in the 16 “high performing” states (Hall et al., 2007), where integrated employment increased, found the following common characteristics:

- a. Flexible policies that identify employment as the preferred outcome with latitude for service providers to innovate.
- b. Flexible funding to accommodate each person’s changing employment support needs.
- c. Effective weaving and braiding of multiple funding sources.
- d. Incentives to guide the service delivery system to implement integrated employment services.
- e. Use of data to monitor and evaluate progress and goal attainment.
- f. System investment in effective training and development of employment support professionals.<sup>4</sup>

Research on employment success for youth with disabilities identified two factors associated with employment two years post high school (Carter et al., 2012):

- a. Hands-on, authentic work experiences.<sup>5</sup>
- b. High parent expectations.



<sup>4</sup> Such investment yields more community-based job placements and more placements with high wages, more work hours per week, and greater job retention (Migliore et al., 2012; Butterworth et al., 2012).

<sup>5</sup> Work should be part of, and an expectation of, education in order to achieve youth employment success (Carter et al.,

2011; Timmons et al., 2011). Work experiences created jointly by schools and adult service providers show success helping youth gain employment and make seamless transitions into adulthood (Certo & Luecking, 2006).



## CURRENT EFFORTS TO CHANGE THE EMPLOYMENT PICTURE FOR YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES

### ***System-level efforts: Employment First and the State Employment Leadership Network***

Under the Employment First approach – designed to facilitate the full inclusion of people with the most significant disabilities in the workplace and community – community-based, integrated employment is the first option for employment services for youth and adults with significant disabilities. The Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) promotes Employment First policies and their implementation through the Employment First State Leadership Mentor Program, which helps states align policies, regulations, and funding priorities to encourage integrated employment as the primary outcome for individuals with significant disabilities (<http://www.dol.gov/odep/topics/EmploymentFirst.htm>).

The State Employment Leadership Network (SELN) brings together state DD agencies for sharing, educating, and providing guidance on employment practices and policies to its members. SELN members meet regularly to connect, collaborate, and share information and lessons learned across state lines and system boundaries. SELN activities include building business leadership networks to connect businesses to qualified job candidates and developing Employment First training requirements for case managers and providers ([www.seln.org](http://www.seln.org)).

### ***National Youth Transition Demonstration***

The Social Security Administration (SSA) is conducting the Youth Transition Demonstration in multiple sites across the country. It seeks to improve transitions to adulthood for youth with severe disabilities who are eligible to receive SSI or SSDI by providing employment-related services and waivers to increase the likelihood that participants will become employed, earn enough to reduce

their disability benefits, and eventually leave the disability rolls.

### ***Project SEARCH***

The Project SEARCH High School Transition Program is a unique, business-led, one-year, school-to-work program that takes place entirely at the workplace. Total workplace immersion facilitates a seamless combination of classroom instruction, career exploration, and relevant job-skills training through strategically designed internships. Project SEARCH involves an extensive period of training and career exploration, innovative adaptations, long-term job coaching, and continuous feedback from teachers, job coaches, and employers. At the completion of the training program, students with significant intellectual disabilities are employed in nontraditional, complex, and rewarding jobs ([www.projectsearch.us](http://www.projectsearch.us)).

### ***Capacity Building***

Investment in the employment support workforce is a key characteristic in providing greater access to integrated employment (Nord et al., 2013). Promising efforts have emerged in this area. Effective training of employment support professionals has been shown to lead to better employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities (Butterworth et al., 2012). Strategies include development of a certification initiative and a process to build a network of professionals with skills and knowledge to provide quality integrated employment services to youth with disabilities.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Decades of experience have identified best practices and supporting infrastructure to improve employment opportunities for youth with disabilities. The new WIOA legislation provides an important impetus to better apply our knowledge to action by supporting the following four initiatives:

1. Fund communities of practice to focus on the implementation of WIOA. Bring together teachers, VR providers, employers, post-secondary institutions, youth and families.
2. Fund training on self-determination for youth so they can learn to self-direct their transition to employment and/or additional education after high school.
3. Fund the development and implementation of training for families about transition and the new legislation.
4. Fund efforts to continue to generate new knowledge, particularly concerning broad-scale implementation strategies and best practices for the growing population of youth with more varied social, emotional, and behavioral disabilities.



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