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Youth with Disabilities: A Maine Workforce Development Review

Ahmen Cabral

University of Southern Maine

Margaret Vishneau

University of Southern Maine, Muskie School of Public Service

Marty Zanghi MSW

University of Southern Maine, Muskie School of Public Service

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Youth with Disabilities:

A Maine Workforce Development Review

Muskie School of Public Service

January 2010

Written By:

Ahmen Cabral

Margaret Vishneau

Marty Zanghi

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Note: Cover photographs include models, and are used for illustrative purposes only.

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A special thank you also goes to the following programs who generously contributed their time, knowledge, and expertise for this paper. Without their willingness to be interviewed, this paper would not have been possible. They are exemplary programs that are committed to providing and enhancing quality workforce development activities for youth with disabilities.

- Augusta CareerCenter
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- Machias CareerCenter
- Maine Medical Center Department of Vocational Services
- Mobius Inc. (Damariscotta)
- The Maine Transition Network (Machias)

Executive Summary

Legislation that has occurred over many years, including the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and the Workforce Investment Act, has come together with advances in educational strategies to create a climate in which young job seekers with disabilities are able to develop their skills and advocate for necessary accommodations in the workplace. It is well known in the workforce development community that early exposure to the workplace itself and to workforce development programs can improve the employment outcomes for persons with disabilities by enabling youth to develop workforce skills and areas of career interest. However, even though knowledge and interest in workplace supports for young people with disabilities have increased, unemployment rates for these youth remain disproportionately high.

The 2009 national employment-population ratio for persons with a disability was 18.6 percent, compared with 63.3 percent for persons with no disability (December 2009 Bureau of Labor Statistics). According to the U.S. Census Bureau in 2006, there were approximately 131,000 working-age adults with a disability living in Maine. Of these, only 52,000 were employed. The employment rate of people with disabilities (40 percent) is about one-half the rate of those with no disability (81 percent).

Some programs in Maine are very successful in providing workforce development opportunities for youth with disabilities. These programs implement successful practices that, when clearly articulated and disseminated, can expand the expertise of practitioners working in the field of workforce development for youth with disabilities.

The following summary of observations has emerged from a review of the disability and workforce development literature, as well as interviews with successful workforce development programs in Maine that focus on connecting youth with disabilities with meaningful work-related training and experiences.

Youth Development & Engagement

- There are recommended practices in engaging youth with disabilities in workforce development activities. However, it is very important that programs and service providers have the flexibility to adapt their services to meet the needs of each individual youth.
- Building self-determination skills, such as goal-setting, problem-solving, decision making, self-advocacy and self-management, should be included in plans for all youth with disabilities.
- It is important to provide regular opportunities for youth to exercise leadership and build their self-esteem by leading meetings or taking part in committees.
- Person-centered planning is a well established framework that ensures that youth are active participants in developing their plans and career goals.

Caring Adults

- It is very important for youth to have a strong connection to caring adults, both paid (professional practitioners) and unpaid. If relationships with caring adults don't exist, practitioners should make an intentional effort to support youth in identifying and creating these relationships.
- Person-centered planning teams provide an effective platform for identifying the caring adults in a young person's life and engaging those supportive adults in helping the youth reach and maintain his/her employment goals.

Work Based Learning & Career Exploration

- There is significant value for youth in participating in work-based learning experiences, both paid and unpaid, so that youth are able to make informed choices about their career.

- Education and developmental activities related to future employment should start by 13-14 years of age.

Employer Engagement

- When practitioners work collaboratively with employers, they are able to understand the types of skills employers are seeking in prospective employees, and are then able to better prepare youth to meet or exceed the employer's expectations.
- The Dual Customer Model is a successful approach to meeting the needs and concerns of both the employer and job seeker. The employer is able to ensure that a young person understands and is trained for a particular work site and business need; the young person is able to receive a meaningful work-related experience that expands his/her career horizons.

Service Provider Competencies

- Collaboration among youth serving agencies is critical to an effective work-related experience for youth. It is essential that practitioners overcome the barriers to sharing information among programs, continue regular communication across all of agencies; and coordinate the supports that a young person receives.
- For effective coordination of services, it is important for providers to establish a relationship with the caring adults and supports in a young person's life, putting aside personal judgments to focus on building a relationship that will support the youth in his or her employment goals.
- Providers are most effective when they have a solid understanding of the community resources that are available to meet the needs of youth and their families. In addition, in order to develop activities that best meet the needs of each youth, it is necessary for practitioners to have a thorough understanding of the assessment tools used in education, youth leadership and workforce development programs.

Other

- Establishing a system of documenting program and outcome data is imperative to demonstrate impact and positive outcomes for youth and employers.
- Integrating current research into program design is critical. When developing a workforce development program for youth with disabilities, seeking out best practices and tested strategies can provide a proven path for goals and activities. Programs based in research suggest validity and soundness to students, families, schools, communities, and potential funders.

Introduction

The CHOICES CEO Project (Continuing Health Options and Incentives via Coordinated Employment Services), a Medicaid Infrastructure Grant from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS), focuses on creating more opportunities for people with disabilities who want to enter the workplace and enhancing the experience of those who are already part of the workforce (<http://choices.muskie.usm.maine.edu/>). Recent and proposed project activities have focused on addressing barriers to employment by expanding connections between employers and job seekers with disabilities, as well as with the workforce development system.

Our methodology included a literature review that identified the elements of successful workforce development, including the key supports necessary for success, and focused on the practices that successful programs utilize to serve youth with disabilities. Local experts were called upon to identify exemplary programs that provide workforce development services to youth with disabilities. Staff from these programs were interviewed to gather practitioner expertise and examples of successful workforce development strategies. The interviews were then analyzed for common themes to identify components of successful youth workforce development strategies.

Our report is based on a review of the literature and qualitative interviews with six programs that are providing leadership and workforce development programming for youth with disabilities. The primary limitation of this review is that it does not include program evaluation or outcome data from the interviewed programs. Another limitation to this work is that we did not have the opportunity to include the critical perspective of employers, youth or their families. This paper would present a much fuller picture of current exemplary practice if these voices could be included; we hope to enhance this review by including these primary stakeholders in the future.

The following document will provide an overview of the research on workforce development for youth with disabilities and highlight the common threads between the literature and the interviews with Maine programs working directly with youth. These themes are referred to throughout the paper; the results of the literature review and the interviews are aligned to highlight those practices that would be most useful to the youth disabilities workforce development field.

Literature and Program Summary

Numerous legislation and policy initiatives are aimed at supporting both workforce development and employment for youth with disabilities. However, even though there is considerable legal protection for people with disabilities and interest in promoting meaningful work experience for them, these individuals continue to experience barriers to participation in work-based learning opportunities, employment, and careers (National Council on Disability, 2000). According to a 2003 study by the Urban Institute, only one third of youth with disabilities finish high school and only 38.1 percent are employed (Loprest & Maag, 2003). In Maine, individuals with a disability tend to have low levels of education relative to the population as a whole. Results from the 2006 American Community Survey show that 18 percent of adults with a disability in Maine do not have a high school diploma, versus only six percent of non-disabled adults and that only 11 percent of adults with disabilities had a college or professional degree, versus 29 percent of other Maine residents. These are disturbing numbers, since lack of education and unemployment among youth both with and without disabilities has significant implications for the economy. Presently there is a large number of youth with disabilities that are not entering the labor market; the economy is not benefiting from their productivity, skills, and abilities.

Transition from youth to adulthood presents challenges for almost every young person today. Youth with disabilities often need additional supports throughout their transition period in order to make informed career choices and become self-sufficient adults. A look at practice in the fields of youth development and workforce development reveals commonalities that enhance each area of expertise. The literature identifies competencies for practitioners in workforce development, youth development, and employer engagement. Taken together, these competencies demonstrate the importance of collaboration across disciplines, since no one approach can provide the full spectrum of services and opportunities for youth with disabilities.

Research by the National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability (NCWD) created the following *Guideposts for Success*. These Guideposts affirm that all youth need the following to successfully transition to adulthood:

- Access to high quality standards-based education, regardless of the setting
- Information about career options and exposure to the world of work
- Opportunities to develop social, civic, and leadership skills
- Strong connections to caring adults
- Access to safe places to interact with their peers
- Support services and specific accommodations to allow them to become independent adults

Research also strongly indicates that model programs merge the fields of workforce development with youth development and youth leadership. Youth development and leadership is crucial for youth with disabilities so that these young people can develop the skills they need to control and direct their own lives, based on informed decisions. This approach emphasizes the importance of self-determination and leaderships skills for young people, both generally in their lives and specifically in the area of employment. “For youth with disabilities to

become valued and contributing community citizens, they must be taught to advocate for their needs and actively support the needs of others” (Morgan & Morgan, 2006).

Youth Development & Engagement

Self-determination and self-advocacy are especially important for youth with disabilities who are often not given opportunities to develop these skills. Wehmeyer (2001) discusses research that shows that self-determined people have better outcomes after high school. He defines self-determined individuals as being “causal agents in their lives; they act to make positive things happen and to achieve personally valued goals instead of being acted upon” (p.42). Skills such as goal-setting, problem-solving, decision making, self-advocacy, and self-management are all important components of self-determination. Building self-determination should be included in plans for all youth with disabilities so that they will be better equipped to make important decisions for themselves as adults.

Leadership Skill Development

Youth learn to develop leadership skills by having opportunities to exercise leadership, such as leading team meetings or being part of task forces, committees, or boards. Opportunities to exercise leadership build young people’s self-esteem, an important element for success at school, work and all areas of life. Programs should continually challenge youth to make progress and master new skills. One program noted how

Self Determination:

One young man stated that he wanted to work in a masculine work environment with cars. Instead, the program placed him in a retail store; he did not enjoy the retail environment and the tasks that he was required to perform for the position. This year, the young man was able to be placed with an automotive shop. The program was concerned that he would not be able to handle the busy environment, but he did very well. This was a successful experience and the young man was more committed because his personal goal was achieved. The experience was so successful that the employer would have hired the young man, if funds were available.

important it is not to just have expectations for the youth, but also to continually raise the bar for them so that they can progress like everyone else. When the adults in their lives have high expectations for them, youth are also more likely to have these same expectations for themselves.

Youth experience self-efficacy – the perception that one can achieve desired goals through one's own actions – through participating in decision-making. These decisions should certainly be about the youth's own involvement in a program or activity, but also about the direction and structure of those programs and activities. Self-confidence is built through involvement in decision-making, including opportunities for youth to communicate and formally request appropriate supports and reasonable accommodations in education, training, and employment settings. The stronger the perceived self-efficacy, the higher the goals youth set for themselves, and the firmer their commitment to them (Locke, Frederick, Lee & Bobco, 1984). Youth's determination of their own employment preferences is important for several reasons: it is important for integrating youth into the community; it empowers individual youth; it improves quality of life for the young person; it is supported by federal legislation; and it is linked to improved work outcomes (Luecking & Fabian, 2000).

Person-Centered Planning

The National Center on Secondary Education (NCSET 2004) identifies person-centered planning as an excellent framework to use with youth with disabilities. Person-centered planning focuses on disabled people and their needs by putting them in charge of defining the direction for their lives, not on the systems that may or may not be available to serve them. This ultimately leads to greater inclusion as valued members of both community and society. All the programs interviewed stressed the value of using person centered planning with youth. Interviewees echoed the importance of working with youth from where they are developmentally, making sure that they actively participate in developing plans and career goals so that their voice is

heard. Although this process can be time consuming, it is an effective method to enhance a young person's skills. Through their own participation in planning and organizing a meeting, for instance, youth identify who they would like to attend and which parts of the agenda they would like to lead. To be successful in the workplace, youth need to be able to identify and achieve self-defined goals related to their employment. Clark and Davis (2000) note that full participation of youth in person-centered planning is what makes it successful because the young people are then more dedicated to both the process and the plan. Youth will ultimately accept and find more meaning in a plan that they created in partnership with the important adults in their lives.

Consistent with the literature, the programs referred to the importance of making sure that youth are connected to formal and informal supports and, if they are not, the need to involve them in engaging these supports in their lives. Person-centered planning is a framework that encourages this process of connecting youth with their support network that can serve as a resource in implementing a youth's plan. Lack of

One program requires that the foster parents or guardians pick up youth at their job site. This ensures that natural supports are in place for the young person and also promotes regular communication and relationship building between the job site and parent.

transportation is one of the primary barriers to employment for youth with disabilities, as it is for many youth in Maine. A number of programs mentioned using natural supports to help youth with transportation to program activities or workplaces. All youth have a need for connectedness to many different types of people in their communities, including peers, caring adults, services and community resources. One program noted that members of the youth group maintain contact with one another long after they graduate from the program, continuing to offer support and guidance for one another through facebook, myspace, email and phone.

Caring Adults

The *NCWD Guideposts* cites “strong connections to caring adults” as a critical component of a successful transition to adulthood. Youth need caring adults to support them, offer guidance, and serve as role models on their journey toward independence. In addition to including professionals and service providers, it is essential that person-centered planning teams include individuals who are familiar with the abilities, interests, and needs of the young adult in work, school, or social settings, and who are willing to help. These supportive individuals or “natural supports” can be family members, friends, neighbors, former teachers, or other caring and knowledgeable individuals who know the young adult. A strategy of person-centered planning involves engaging teams of formal and informal supports to surround the youth; person-centered planning teams have been found to be most effective when they include caring adults as natural supports that can help the young person approach problems creatively, often differing from the traditional strategies typically used by professionals. Nurturing the relationships with caring adults that already exist naturally in the young person’s life can have a tremendous impact on the success of the young person’s plan by maintaining the connections that can be supportive in ways that systems and professionals cannot.

Caring Adults:

A program described a young man who originally declined a grocery store position because of lack of confidence. After encouragement from a foster parent, he accepted the position; a natural support developed at the store when a cashier volunteered to train and support the young person. This led to a highly successful experience for the young man – he was eventually hired in a permanent position.

Adults who work with young people continually try to assess the level of motivation a youth has to participate in the workplace. A primary function of supportive adults is to provide motivation

and encouragement for young people until they can begin to believe in themselves. A consistent theme throughout the program interviews was the importance of engaging these natural supports of caring adults and helping young people maintain them when they appear.

All of the interviewed programs try to engage natural supports of caring adults for the youth at the work site. NCWD defines natural supports as “personal associations and relationships typically developed in the community that enhance the quality and security of life for people, including, but not limited to, family relationships; friendships reflecting the diversity of the neighborhood and the community; association with fellow students or employees; and associations developed through participation in clubs, organizations, and other civic activities.”

For example, a shift leader may be the point person for the youth to go to for questions or issues that arise on the job. The shift leader already knows the position, culture and expectations of the worksite and therefore can serve as a more natural support than an outside job coach. Besides a formal supervisory relationship, there are also situations when a natural relationship will form with an employee at the job site and the youth will turn to that adult for guidance and support.

Mentoring:

One of the interviewed programs provides employers with basic information about working effectively with youth, specifically youth in the foster care system. In the training the employers are called “business mentors” to highlight their importance in providing youth with direct support, modeling, and encouragement at the worksite. Business mentors enable youth to capitalize on natural supports in the workplace rather than relying on external job coaches.

Work-Based Learning & Career Exploration

There has been a steady supply of empirical research that underscores the positive impact that early work experiences can have on success in secondary and post-secondary education.

Students who participate in work-based learning show an increase in completion of related

coursework, as well as an increase in attendance and graduation rates (Colley & Jamison, 1998). In addition, these work-related experiences can serve to help the young person explore and identify workplace support options that they will need as they transition into paid employment. The programs that we interviewed offered various models and approaches for youth workforce development, but all emphasized the belief that workplace experience can be an important way for the young person to learn. Valuable workplace experience can be both paid and unpaid opportunities that may include job shadows, internships, apprenticeships and other on site job training activities.

Youth with disabilities who have difficulties in school may be hesitant to explore career options. The programs stressed how important work can be for youth: employment offers young people the opportunity to demonstrate their potential outside of school, since the workplace often requires skills that can't be observed in other settings. Studies show that work-based learning experiences, especially paid work integrated into a school curriculum, lead to improved post school employment outcomes for all youth with disabilities, regardless of primary disability label or required level of support (Benz, Yovanoff, & Doren, 1997). Job shadowing, unpaid work experiences, internships, or paid work-based learning offer a safe environment in which youth can learn valuable skills, while also providing the opportunity to familiarize employers with the assets that youth with disabilities bring to the workplace as employees (Luecking, R., & Mooney, M. 2002).

Programs identified the following practices that contribute to successful workforce development for youth with disabilities:

- collaboration among service providers and natural supports in order to provide seamless services without duplicating efforts;
- scheduling meetings and other forms of regular contact to establish a working relationship with youth; and

- checking in with young people on a regular and ongoing basis, even if they have successfully secured employment.

Checking in regularly with youth allows the provider to catch any issues before they arise. Often youth will be hesitant to mention if there is a problem until it has hit a crisis point. Successful programs incorporate visiting the job site and getting to know the other natural supports at the work site before there is a crisis.

Workforce development for youth with disabilities should include career and work exploration, as well as activities that connect employment activities to support services. However, despite the demonstrated value of work-based learning experiences for youth with disabilities, participation in these activities remains low (Luecking, R., & Mooney, M. 2002). Often, youth with disabilities do not have the same access as other young people to high quality programs that provide those work-based learning activities that will help them decide which careers they may be interested in and may want to pursue.

The interviewed programs also noted how important it is that youth be engaged in the workforce development process so that they are able to understand the required skills to be successful in the workplace. Both the programs and the literature stressed the importance of incorporating opportunities for youth to learn and practice skills prior to employment. Social skills were emphasized because they are often overlooked, but may be the most necessary for youth to be successful in multiple areas of life.

Skill Development:

A young lady who was extremely shy and had very few peer relationships at school was referred to the employment program. She tended to spend a lot of time by herself and would consistently walk with her head down to avoid making eye contact. She started working in the back of a bakery, but the bakery was so small that it was not long before she ventured out front to ring people up and talk with the regular customers. The bakery provided a safe environment for her to learn new skills and build her confidence.

Across the U.S., workforce development programs for youth with disabilities involve a variety of organizations that include a wide range of youth service providers. The National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth (NCWD/Youth) consider youth service practitioners as the following:

Staff who work directly with youth through the workforce development system, for the purpose of preparing them for work and the workplace, including intake workers, case managers, job developers, job coaches, teachers, trainers, transition coordinators, counselors (in schools, post-secondary institutions, or vocational rehabilitation offices), youth development group leaders, and independent living specialist.

Youth service providers are often the first contact the young person has with the workforce development system and play an important role in connecting youth with the workplace readiness skills, opportunities and support that they need. NCWD/Youth uses the *Guideposts for Success* to outline elements that must be present for youth to successfully transition to adulthood. The *Guideposts* identify specific needs for all youth, youth with disabilities, and youth in foster care.

This framework includes five programmatic components that are essential to a successful transition:

- school-based preparatory experiences
- career preparation and work-based learning experiences
- youth development and leadership
- connecting activities
- family involvement and supports

Interviewed programs identified situations when youth were engaged in workforce development after they had graduated from high school as especially challenging. The typical lack of transition planning from school to work often makes it difficult to get access to assessments and evaluations that would have provided useful information in working with the

youth. Those programs that collaborate with schools expressed the desire to be involved in Pupil Evaluation Teams and person-centered planning meetings to support the youth.

Employer Engagement

In a 2005 survey of Maine business owners, only 12 percent of employers reported currently employing a person with a physical or mental disability, (Planning Decisions Inc., 2007).

Effective youth service practitioners must stay abreast of the local labor market, the evolving developmental needs and culture of today's youth, and the research and literature that point toward advances in practice (NCWD 2004). The programs found it extremely helpful to collaborate with local employers to discover the skills employers were looking for in young people. The programs were then able to incorporate skill building activities into their youth leadership groups to better prepare the youth for the workplace.

The service provider must focus on the needs of the future job seeker, while also attending to the needs and expectations of employers. This workforce development approach, called the dual-customer model, is distinguished from the "single-customer" model in that both the employers and job seekers are seen as important customers (Annie. E Casey Foundation, 2000). The needs and concerns of both customers must be considered for the program to be successful. The dual customer model is successful for young people because it provides outreach, recruitment, and post-employment services to develop the formal and informal support networks necessary for youth to sustain participation in the labor market. For employers this approach emphasizes the business issue of employees receiving the occupational and technical skills training tailored to the needs of specific sectors and customized to a particular employer's needs (Annie E. Casey, 2000). This model attempts to integrate workforce development, human services, and economic development. This model is also very similar to the programmatic activities the interviewees reported in engaging both youth and local employers.

To support service providers, NCWD has also developed a resource focused on working with employers called the *Guideposts for Employer Success*. The *Guideposts for Employer Success* are focused on systems and practice suggestions for engaging and supporting employers; these guideposts were developed with the purpose of helping workforce development policy makers and program providers reduce identified barriers to successful employment for youth. There are two categories within the framework: the first focuses on what system designers (state and local) need to do to build effective policies and systems; the second component identifies what individual education and training programs – community rehabilitation centers, secondary and post secondary institutions, apprenticeship programs, and One-Stop Centers – need to do to engage and support employers in providing workforce development opportunities for youth with disabilities. <http://www.ncwd-youth.info/guideposts/employers>

Staff Competencies

NCWD /Youth, in collaboration with the Office of Disability Employment Policy, has identified ten competencies of effective youth service practitioners as the centerpiece of an effective workforce development system.

The competencies are:

- knowledge of the field
- communication with youth
- assessment and individualized planning
- relationship to family and community
- workforce preparation
- career exploration
- relationships with employers and between employer and employee
- connection to resources
- program design and delivery and administrative skills

Youth service competencies are necessary, but effective practitioners are also able to use strategies from workforce development and youth development in their approach. In fact, the field of workforce development for youth with disabilities is broadening to include the knowledge and practice from all these disciplines. Youth development programs provide activities that promote self-determination and leadership skills that have been found to be important for youth in obtaining and maintaining successful employment.

Knowledge Base for Practitioners

It is especially important for practitioners to have an understanding of the relationships needed to support young people, the community and local business environment they are working in, and the educational tools they will need at their disposal.

The literature review provided an overview of the competencies that service providers need to do their work effectively. The providers that we interviewed emphasized roles that they felt were especially important. The terms “beginner’s mind” and “empty head” were used to describe how important it is for workers to leave their personal judgments and assumptions behind when they meet with youth and families. Also emphasized was the importance of developing relationships with family, personal supports, employers, and the youth to coordinate services. A relationship with all supports in a young person’s life is critical when service providers are engaging all parties to support the youth in reaching his/her goals.

The interviewees have all been working in the same communities for a number of years and have a solid understanding of the resources available to them. The dual customer model discussed previously calls for practitioners to be aware of and attentive to the needs of both the employer and the young person; knowledge of community resources is foundational to this approach. The providers often serve as a resource broker for youth and families who need other services besides workforce development. Programs noted that there are times when the

focus of the practitioner needs to be on safety or other immediate needs, but that employment should not be put aside for any extended period because all youth will need to participate in the labor market someday to become self-sufficient.

A variety of assessments are used in education, youth leadership, and workforce development. An awareness and general understanding of the different assessments that are used can be very helpful. The interviewees use assessments available through the school, as well as, their own to develop a plan to best support a youth. While it is helpful to have information from previous assessments, it is also important for providers to conduct their own assessments to understand the “whole person.” The assessment should involve the evaluation of a young person’s interests, goals and preferences and must be carried out on an ongoing basis to accommodate natural changes over time. Providers should be able to complete a thorough job analysis, which can be accomplished by shadowing at the potential placement and creating a detailed analysis of the employment site. This process will provide the opportunity to build a relationship with the employer and also to gather the information needed to make the best match for a young person with a disability. The assessment process can help build the reciprocal relationship between youth and practitioner; it is also an activity that can help youth develop the skills they need to assess themselves and their own progress toward their goals.

Adolescent Brain Development

A general understanding of adolescent development is useful when working with youth and when engaging in both youth development and workforce development activities. In 2002 a study revealed that adolescence is as critical a stage for development as the first few years of life. During adolescence, the prefrontal cortex is still developing and its maturation may be very experience-dependent, meaning that the brain may be especially susceptible to “experiential input” during adolescence (Blakemore & Choudhury, 2006, p.307). It is important for

practitioners to be able to capitalize on the adolescent’s focus on “experiential input” when designing and implementing work-related experiences for youth with disabilities.

Understanding adolescent brain development is not just useful for service providers, but also youth themselves could benefit from learning about what is happening in their brains. Walsh (2004) notes that just knowing what teens are going through can be a very helpful step toward establishing healthy relationships and improving communication between adults and adolescents. He asserts that the new research can show adults how to guide the teens in their lives as they develop; he also urges adults to experiment with solutions when trying to help a teen. Walsh (2006) advises physicians to educate teens and families about what is occurring throughout adolescent development, stating, “Kids need and deserve demonstrations of love from the adults who care about them, including their doctors” (p. 4). One program developed a youth leadership and workforce development curriculum that they used with local schools. The curriculum contained a module on adolescent brain development and in their evaluations, youth participants noted the adolescent brain development section as one of their favorite components. All interviewees spoke about the importance of understanding normal adolescent development and how trauma or insufficient access to developmental opportunities can impact brain development.

All young people need relationships and connections in their lives. The literature review on workforce development for youth with disabilities, as well as the interviews of successful programs in Maine, all point to relationships with caring people forming the foundation of effective workforce development experiences and, indeed, successful living. Stressing the importance of adult supports in the lives of young people, Galinsky notes that “separation and connection go hand in hand”, and although teens may push the adults in their life away, they still need and want them to be actively involved in their lives (Spinks, 2002, p. 3). In the PBS

documentary, *Inside the Teenage Brain*, Galinsky states that “it is the people in kid’s lives that make a big difference” (Spinks, 2002).

Summary of Observations

Youth Development & Engagement

- There are recommended practices in engaging youth with disabilities in workforce development activities. However, it is very important that programs and service providers have the flexibility to adapt their services to meet the needs of each individual youth.
- Building self-determination skills, such as goal-setting, problem-solving, decision making, self-advocacy and self-management, should be included in plans for all youth with disabilities.
- It is important to provide regular opportunities for youth to exercise leadership and build their self-esteem by leading meetings or taking part in committees.
- Person-centered planning is a well established framework that ensures that youth are active participants in developing their plans and career goals.

Caring Adults

- It is very important for youth to have a strong connection to caring adults, both paid (professional practitioners) and unpaid. If relationships with caring adults don't exist, practitioners should make an intentional effort to support youth in identifying and creating these relationships.
- Person-centered planning teams provide an effective platform for identifying the caring adults in a young person's life and engaging those supportive adults in helping the youth reach and maintain his/her employment goals.

Work- Based Learning & Career Exploration

- There is significant value for youth in participating in work-based learning experiences, both paid and unpaid, so that youth are able to make informed choices about their career.

- Education and developmental activities related to future employment should start by 13-14 years of age.

Employer Engagement

- When practitioners work collaboratively with employers, they are able to understand the types of skills employers are seeking in prospective employees, and are then able to better prepare youth to meet or exceed the employer's expectations.
- The Dual Customer Model is a successful approach to meeting the needs and concerns of both the employer and job seeker. The employer is able to ensure that a young person understands and is trained for a particular work site and business need; the young person is able to receive a meaningful work-related experience that expands his/her career horizons.

Service Provider Competencies

- Collaboration among youth serving agencies is critical to an effective work-related experience for youth. It is essential that practitioners overcome the barriers to sharing information among programs, continue regular communication across all of agencies; and coordinate the supports that a young person receives.
- For effective coordination of services, it is important for providers to establish a relationship with the caring adults and supports in a young person's life, putting aside personal judgments to focus on building a relationship that will support the youth in his or her employment goals.
- Providers are most effective when they have a solid understanding of the community resources that are available to meet the needs of youth and their families. In addition, in order to develop activities that best meet the needs of each youth, it is necessary for practitioners to have a thorough understanding of the assessment tools used in education, youth leadership and workforce development programs.

Other

- Establishing a system of documenting program and outcome data is imperative to demonstrate impact and positive outcomes for youth and employers.
- Integrating current research into program design is critical. When developing a workforce development program for youth with disabilities, seeking out best practices and tested strategies can provide a proven path for goals and activities. Programs based in research suggest validity and soundness to students, families, schools, communities, and potential funders.

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Appendix

Organizations

National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth – <http://www.ncwd-youth>

National Center for Learning Disabilities – <http://www.nclld.org>

National Center on Secondary Education and Transition – <http://www.ncset.org/>

National Resource Center on Youth Development – <http://www.nydic.org>

Tools

First Jobs Academy Enhanced Management Training: Curriculum for Employers of Child Welfare Involved Youth. Attached

Guideposts for Success Framework – <http://www.ncwd-youth.info/guideposts>

PCP Staff Training: Framework for Accomplishment –
<http://www.qualitymall.org/products/prod2.asp?prodid=39>

Transition to Independence process (TIP) System – <http://tip.fmhi.usf.edu/>

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