

Information *Brief*

Addressing Trends and Developments in Secondary Education
and Transition



National Center on Secondary Education and Transition

Creating Opportunities for Youth
With Disabilities to Achieve
Successful Futures

A partnership of —

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Addressing the Transition Needs of Youth with Disabilities through the WIA System

By Richard G. Luecking, Kelli Crane, and Marianne Mooney

Introduction

Interagency collaboration has been repeatedly cited as one of the most important strategies in helping youth with disabilities move successfully from school into employment and adult life. However, often the primary focus of the collaboration and planning between school personnel and community service providers has been on disability-specific services and not on other, more generically available programs and services.

The passage of the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) of 1998 offers new options and opportunities for youth in transition. WIA has challenged communities to create opportunities for *all* youth that moved beyond traditional vocational rehabilitation and related services. WIA represents expanded opportunities to prepare youth with disabilities for the transition to employment by assuring both **access to and participation in** WIA-funded youth and adult services. These services may benefit youth with disabilities as they plan for and make the transition from school to work.

Accessing the WIA System

WIA replaced the Job Training and Partnership Act as the country's chief employment and training legislation. As such it brings a new emphasis and extensive reform to the delivery of employment and training systems by consolidating separate and disconnected services organized according to categories of service recipients. Among other activities, it funds a range of training, career development, and job placement services for diverse customers in convenient locations, called One-Stop centers. WIA also provides funding for programs specifically focused on youth.

WIA contains specific provisions that support the participation of youth with disabilities. Non-discriminatory provisions, for example, require that WIA-funded programs offer services to people with disabilities that are fully integrated with services extended to other nondisabled customers. Further, WIA requires that programs not impose eligibility requirements that screen out individuals or a class (individuals with disabilities) for any program or service offered. In addition, WIA provides assurances that partnering entities in One-Stop centers include disability programs, like state vocational rehabilitation agencies. Also, recognizing that there has been historically difficult access to these types of services, specific demonstration grants have been awarded to selected One-Stop centers around the country to make their operations physically and programmatically accessible to people with disabilities.

Special educators and transition practitioners have the opportunity to expand their effectiveness by using the resources of the One-Stop centers and WIA youth programs to assist youth in their career development (For suggestions on how to access and use One-Stop centers and WIA youth programs, see action steps listed on page 3). The WIA

system offers several potential advantages for youth with disabilities, no matter what their stage of career development. Some of these advantages are outlined in **Table 1**. As Table 1 indicates, WIA offers resources that can boost the options available as youth, families, educators, and community service providers plan for transition. In fact, WIA programs themselves are important collaborators in interagency efforts to assist youth with disabilities.

The advantages offered by WIA will not be established

without the careful and active participation of professionals knowledgeable of the circumstances of youth with disabilities. It is for this reason that individuals or agencies serving youth with disabilities might consider becoming actively involved and associated with WIA programs. Not only will their participation benefit the transition outcomes for youth with disabilities, but also the WIA system itself.

Table 1: Transition Enhancements Offered through WIA Programs

<p>Additional and convenient sources of career development information</p> <p>Among the core services available through One-Stop centers are labor market information, information on the area's economy and employers, Internet access to career development information, resume development, and a host of other services that may provide useful adjuncts to youth, families, educators, and others involved in transition planning.</p>	<p>Reduction of stigma</p> <p>The intended coordinated service approach of WIA reduces the need for categorical labels in workforce development systems, and the emphasis on universal access means that disclosure of disability is dependent on individual preference.</p>
<p>Expanded opportunities for work-based learning and jobs</p> <p>Through youth programs and other services of the workforce development system, youth with disabilities have the option of participating in a host of activities that are designed to give them exposure to work experiences that can be key adjuncts to, or integral parts of, their academic curriculum.</p>	<p>Individualized assessment that builds on the concept of self-determination and individual empowerment</p> <p>There is increasing recognition in special education and disability programs of the value of self-determination for people with disabilities. This notion is a cornerstone principle of the new workforce investment system.</p>
<p>Access to mentoring and other youth services</p> <p>With renewed emphasis on inclusion and individualized assessments for all youth, the WIA-sponsored youth program models expand resources for youth with disabilities in transition, for whom many of these services may be critical for successful adult outcomes.</p>	<p>Coordinated involvement of vocational rehabilitation</p> <p>Vocational rehabilitation continues to exist as a separate program under WIA with its own federal funding source, but it is one of the integral components of the WIA system. Vocational rehabilitation services are available at least to some degree via the One-Stop centers, often through co-location. This arrangement provides potentially more convenient access to this and other services from One-Stop partners as youth plan for transition to adult life.</p>
<p>Access to generic career development and employment training services</p> <p>Many of the career development and training services offered to One-Stop customers have the potential of providing services previously unavailable to customers with disabilities due to the of lack of accommodations, lack of expertise in disability, and/or excessive reliance on disability-specific services.</p>	<p>Convenient and continuous access to specific vocational and adult service programs</p> <p>Since many One-Stop centers will include disability service providers as partners, there will be opportunities to link youth to these services not only at the time of their transition from school, but at any time in their adult life.</p>
<p>Indefinite, lifelong, access to career development assistance</p> <p>Core services of the One-Stop centers are available to any individual over 18 at any time in his or her career. This opportunity allows youth to return for career and job search assistance without waiting for eligibility determination or designated program referrals.</p>	<p>Customized job training and career support services</p> <p>WIA contains certain provisions for individualized training accounts that enable customers to identify and pursue specific job training of their own choosing. Although this is not a widely available option and specific user prerequisites apply, for some young adults, these individualized training services may offer access to, and ways to pay for, specific job preparation unavailable elsewhere.</p>

Wider Benefits to WIA Systems by Effectively Serving Youth with Disabilities

It is fair to assume that WIA programs are serving a percentage of youth with disabilities with Individual Education Programs (IEPs) without being aware of their status as special education recipients. This is especially the case for youth with “hidden” disabilities, such as learning and emotional disabilities. IEP teams should fully address this concern by improving the sharing of information between schools and WIA service providers.

Failure to identify, accommodate, and respond to the unique social, emotional, intellectual, and career development needs of these youth will most likely result in poor adult outcomes. Thus, the ability to identify, assess, and address previously unidentified disabilities will enhance the overall effectiveness of WIA-sponsored youth services. Implementing program services for youth that include individualized planning, a range of available supports and accommodations, and universal access will likely benefit all youth—those with identified disabilities, those with disabilities that are not apparent, and those with no discernable disability but who have “at risk” characteristics.

Since a critical feature of WIA is the emphasis on universal access, designing WIA service models that make them accessible to all young people will likely challenge workforce development systems, given the wide variety and range of accommodations needed by people with disabilities. Where this notion of universal access has been applied in schools, the workplace, and in public environments, there is often wider benefit for non-disabled people who enjoy the resultant access. Ultimately, this means that WIA programs need the assistance and collaboration of special educators and other disability experts.

Action Steps for Full Access for Youth in Transition

Access to WIA youth employment programs will require the expertise of transition staff knowledgeable about youth with disabilities. This expertise must be made available to One-Stop centers and other WIA program staff. Several actions that special educators, transition specialists, and adult community service personnel can consider include:

- Visiting the local One-Stop center: Take youth to the One-Stop center and begin identifying the core, intensive, and training services that they may access in keeping with their age and need for employment preparation and development;

- Visiting other WIA-funded youth programs and learn what they have to offer: Refer youth with disabilities to these programs as appropriate to their transition planning in their IEPs;
- Becoming on-site partners at One-Stop centers;
- Organizing staff development programs for One-Stop centers, Youth Opportunities centers, and other WIA programs;
- Providing training so that all staff involved develop the capacity to serve youth with disabilities;
- Working to eliminate programs within WIA service systems that emphasize special “disability only” youth development and employment services so that youth with disabilities can participate in those available to all youth;
- Inviting One-Stop personnel and WIA youth services staff to participate on IEP teams;
- Providing connections to employers and other community resources who have successfully included youth with disabilities in their operations;
- Identifying and correcting any architectural barriers, acquiring or modifying equipment and devices for disability accommodations, providing modified test formats and training materials, and providing qualified readers and interpreters when necessary;
- Pursuing membership on local workforce investment boards that govern WIA programs; and
- Pursuing membership on local Youth Councils that are required to provide advice and direction to WIA-funded youth programs.

Legal requirements notwithstanding, WIA programs will be more likely to successfully serve all eligible youth by adopting the notion that *any youth* may need learning and other accommodations, regardless of a clear disability label. Special educators and transition specialists are in a position to promote the knowledge and skills that will make this possible.

Conclusion

The WIA system, through the One-Stop centers and youth services, expands considerably the resources available to youth with disabilities as they transition into adult employment. It also offers the promise of a more inclusive system that is less dependent on “special” services for people with disabilities. Therefore, the involvement of youth with disabilities in this system only improves their potential of achieving meaningful and productive adult employment. Those involved in transition planning for youth with disabilities can also access the additional service alternatives that WIA programs offer.

Conclusion, cont.

The concepts of universal access and individualized service have been benchmarks of disability legislation for at least two decades. The fact that these concepts are so heavily embedded in WIA suggests a new common ground for transition initiatives targeted for youth with disabilities and generic workforce development activities. The involvement of youth with disabilities in WIA programs further promotes cross-agency, cross-program, and cross-disciplinary models that can lead to improved levels of service coordination and collaboration, and ultimately, improved transitions for all youth.

Resources

U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Youth Opportunities;

http://www.doleta.gov/youth_services

One-Stop; <http://www.onestops.info/>

Disability Online; <http://wdsc.doleta.gov/disability/>

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