

Cross-Agency Professional Development in Delaware that inspires and leads to positive impacts for YOUTH



Here are 3 questions for all policy and decision-makers within education and human services: (1) Are we recruiting the right people for their jobs? (2) To what extent do we provide opportunities for professional growth and development that are relevant, timely, accessible, and personally meaningful? (3) Can we demonstrate that our professional development strategies lead to desired outcomes for transitioning youth and young adults?

Critical Need

One of the key predictors of successful adult outcomes for youth with disabilities is ensuring that youth experience authentic work-based learning and paid employment (Test, Mazzotti, Mustian, Fowler, Kortering, & Kohler, 2009). This demands that all professionals involved in each youth's life have the skills and attributes to build business partnerships, conduct appropriate assessments, and ensure critical supports to all involved (Hemmeter, Donovan, Cobb, & Asbury, 2015; Tilson & Simonsen, 2013).

Collaborative Approach

The Delaware Department of Education (DE DOE), Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR), and Division of Developmental Disabilities Services (DDDS) recognized this powerful predictor, but were mindful that few educators and even adult service providers have received adequate training and practical on-the-ground experiences needed to make this happen. These key partners also believed that training

of staff should be as “person-centered” as our approach is to the youth and adults our agencies serve!

In 2005 these State agencies collaborated to establish an intensive 3-day job development training program that has been delivered twice-yearly for the past 10 years. To date, more than 800 transition educators, adult service providers, vocational rehabilitation counselors, and school/agency administrators have committed to joining together to learn the latest techniques in (1) implementing the discovery process; (2) establishing strong relationships within the business community; (3) helping youth build job search skills, and for those whose support needs are more significant: developing and negotiating customized employment proposals; and (4) providing workplace supports and consultation to both the youth and their employers. We also focus on strategies for communication, collaboration, marketing, time/energy management, and the value of shared learning, problem-solving and networking across agencies and across disciplines.

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Unique Features of the Training

The response from participants through standard post-session evaluations and follow-up discussions has been consistently and overwhelmingly favorable; respondents report increased competence, confidence and comfort levels in creating opportunities for youth to experience “real work in real settings.” One hallmark feature of the training program is that participants must apply for the course, have a recommendation from a supervisor, and identify one youth whom they are currently supporting that presents unique challenges. As part of the application, each prospective trainee must complete and submit a positive personal profile (Tilson & Cuzzo Stern, 2001) on this student. In essence, the participants bring to the course real-life case studies. Another important feature of the training is a series of field assignments where participants must apply techniques learned in the classroom sessions and then share their experiences and outcomes with their peers.

Diversity of Populations Served

Training participants work with youth across the disability landscape, from youth with significant support needs, to high incidence students; youth who have been incarcerated, live in foster homes, and have substance abuse issues. Increasingly, we are seeing training participants who work in the mental health field, as more youth are being diagnosed with serious psychiatric diagnoses. Participants (and trainers alike) are realizing firsthand that while the youth we serve may be categorized and served in schools and agencies by their disability – there are creative strategies that cut across these categories. Most importantly, they are learning that we are all resources to one another. The result has

been increased collaboration among school and agency personnel, cutting across school districts and disability labels – and the Delaware Department of Education, Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, and the Division of Developmental Disabilities Services are hearing from participants that the course is having a significant impact on their ability to help their students and young adults find authentic community-based work experiences and, for many, to secure and retain meaningful paid employment.

Ongoing Commitment from the Partners

It should be noted that in 2015 the key partners formed a statewide cross-agency training workgroup to ensure that professional development is clearly on the radar at all times; that we continue to modify, refine, and incorporate innovative features in our professional development efforts. We are currently looking at creative ways to deliver training through a combination of methods: face-to-face; online courses, skype conferencing, mentorships, as well as imbedding short training components as standing agenda items in organizational meetings – and emphasizing the importance of day-to-day support and feedback from supervisors. Most recently, we have begun to develop “train the trainer” opportunities for highly effective staff; recognizing these are the rising leaders in our field. Key to our success: involving the front-line professionals themselves (and other stakeholders, particularly youth and their families) by consistently and frequently soliciting their feedback and ideas. Ultimately, the “end users” – the transitioning youth and employers – are, as they should be-- the evaluators of our effectiveness!

Hemmeter, J., Donovan, M., Cobb, J., & Asbury, T. (2015). Long term earnings and disability program participation outcomes of the Bridges transition program. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*, 42, 1-15.

Test, D., Mazzotti, V., Mustian, A., Fowler, C., Kortering, L., & Kohler, P. (2009). Evidence-based secondary transition predictors for improving post-school outcomes for students with disabilities. *Career Development for Exceptional Individuals*, 32, 160-181.

Tilson, G. & Cuzzo Stern, L. (2001). *Positive Personal Profile*. Rockville, MD: TransCen.

Tilson, G., & Simonsen, M. (2013). The personnel factor: Exploring the personal attributes of highly successful employment specialists who work with transition-age youth. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*. 38, 125-137.