

Making the Connections: Growing and Supporting New Organizations: Intermediaries

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The Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) of the US Department of Labor (DOL), recognizing the need for more effective linkages between the supply and demand sides of workforce development, is testing a new organizational strategy – intermediary organizations – that is designed to align and broker multiple services across institutional and funding sources in order to improve employment outcomes for youth with disabilities. This paper provides information to assist states and communities that are involved in developing these intermediaries to conduct their work.

ODEP defines an intermediary as an entity that “convenes leadership and brokers relationships with multiple partners across multiple funding streams; brings together workforce development systems, vocational rehabilitation providers, businesses, labor unions, educational institutions, social service organizations, faith based organizations, transportation entities, health providers, and other Federal, State, and community resources which youth with disabilities need to transition to employment successfully.” All three of the newly funded ODEP youth grant programs are organized around the principle of the use of intermediaries.

The Stubborn Dilemma

There continues to be a stubborn dilemma facing youth with disabilities. That is, in spite of supportive legislation and identified effective practices, these youth continue to experience high unemployment as well as insufficient opportunities to obtain competitive employment with the potential of career growth. This paper explores strategies that policy makers at the state and local level can use to grow and support intermediary organizations – those provider organizations with the skills and resources needed to alter this stubborn dilemma.

Certainly, some youth with disabilities have attained successful careers. Of these, some have benefited from well-delivered special education transition services, while others have received timely and appropriately delivered youth employment services; many of these successes reflect both circumstances. Yet, these successes are not the norm.

Consider the following facts:

- Special education students are more than twice as likely as their peers in general education to drop out of high school;
- Youth with disabilities are half as likely as their peers without disabilities to participate in postsecondary education;

- Current special education students can expect to face much higher adult unemployment rates than their peers without disabilities;
- The adjudication rate of youth with disabilities is four times higher than for youth without disabilities;
- The pregnancy rate for youth with disabilities is much higher than the national average: among females with learning disabilities, for example, 50% will be pregnant within three years of school exit;
- Young adults with disabilities are three times likelier to live in poverty as adults than their peers without disabilities;
- For youth with significant disabilities the picture is even more grim: less than one out of 10 will attain integrated employment; five out of 10 will experience indefinitely long waits for post-school employment services; and most of these individuals will earn less than \$2.40 per hour in sheltered workshop settings.

In spite of well-intended legislation (e.g., Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), Rehabilitation Act (RA), the Workforce Investment Act (WIA), and their predecessors) to address this situation, the statistics have changed little over the past 25 years. Just as troubling, these facts persist in spite of the existence of educational and career development interventions known to make a positive difference in the lives of youth with disabilities. Work-based learning experiences, preferably connected to curriculum content; student-centered individualized education programs that drive instruction; family involvement in and support of education and career development activities; and linkages to individually determined support services have all been proven, by both practice and research, to lead to the education and employment success of youth with disabilities. This is the case regardless of the nature of the disability or the degree of accommodation and support needed. In other words, we know what is needed and we know how to do it. And yet, post-school employment success and economic independence continue to be exasperatingly elusive for most youth with disabilities.

To what can we attribute this disconnection between, on one hand, legislative intent, stated public policies, and effective educational and career development practices, and, on the other, relentlessly disappointing educational and employment outcomes?

A Partial Answer: A Plethora of Disconnects

Too many examples of success exist to attribute the lack of progress to any inherent unemployability of youth with disabilities. Further, because these successes have generally been achieved without extraordinary fiscal expense, the lack of progress cannot be attributed to a simple lack of money and resources. Rather, critical disconnections exist between and among community institutions; the goal of improving educational and employment outcomes for youth with disabilities would be better served by focusing on the strategic and coordinated use of the resources currently available within a state's education and workforce development systems.

A commonly agreed upon definition of what is meant by the term "workforce development system" is still evolving. This is not particularly surprising. The term was seldom used until the beginning of the 1990s, prior to the development of WIA. In the late 1980s several states initiated agency consolidations based upon their own assessment of the overlap and duplication

among various state and federal government programs. The federal government responded by giving governors broader powers to oversee the growth of the workforce development system within each state.

Yet, today a broad array of entities at the national, state, and local levels exist with diverse responsibilities for planning, funding, administering, and operating programs to assist individuals with and without disabilities to obtain education, training, job placement, and support services. Table I-A illustrates the range of such institutions and organizations that are a part of the workforce development system of which the state government has the responsibility for defining powers and responsibilities as well as key non-profit organizations that are involved in the delivery of workforce programs. Table I-B provides information about federal programs that are a part of the workforce development system.

Building and Supporting the Right Type of Organizations: Intermediaries

Over the past decade a new type of organization has emerged, building on the most promising practices of connecting job seekers and job providers. The American Assembly at Columbia University, with support from several major foundations, conducted an early 2003 Assembly on the issue of building and growing intermediaries. The Assembly identified three key goals of workforce intermediaries:

- 1. To bring workers into the American mainstream.** Success for these organizations means that workers are employed in jobs that offer the promise of financial stability.
- 2. To increase business efficiency and productivity.** Organizations are equally concerned with serving employers' needs and helping businesses become increasingly productive. They realize that business and worker success are interdependent.
- 3. To enhance regional competitiveness.** These groups understand that the health of regional economies affects the ability to advance workers and strengthen business. In addition, the Assembly identified common characteristics of workforce intermediaries.

These organizations:

- pursue a dual customer approach by simultaneously serving businesses looking for qualified workers and serving job-seekers and workers interested in advancing their careers;
- organize multiple partners and funding streams around common goals, bringing together business, labor unions, educational institutions, social service agencies, and other providers to design and implement programs and policies to improve labor market outcomes;
- provide or broker labor market services that go beyond recruitment and referral by understanding the special needs – and gaining the trust – of firms and industries;
- reduce turnover and increase economic mobility for workers by assuring continued support and opportunities to upgrade skills;
- achieve results with innovative approaches and solutions to workforce problems;
- improve outcomes for firms and their workers by catalyzing improvements in public systems and business employment practices.

The number of such efforts has risen from a handful in the early 1990s to several hundred today. Although they approach their tasks in different ways, successful intermediary organizations bring together key partners and functions to advance careers for all workers (recognizing the special needs of low-skilled, low-wage workers), increase business productivity, and improve regional competitiveness (The American Assembly, 2003).

An example of an intermediary is the national School to Work Intermediary Network launched in the mid 1990s with membership from several communities around the country. The Intermediary Network recognizes the need to include schools as active partners since so many youth needs are school-based. The Intermediary Network has defined youth-focused intermediaries as "...staffed organizations that connect schools and other youth preparation organizations with workplaces and other community resources so that young people can combine learning with doing and become better prepared for postsecondary learning and careers." The activities of intermediaries, according to the Intermediary Network, fall under four general areas: 1) convening local leadership; 2) brokering and providing services to youth, institutions, and workplace partners; 3) ensuring quality and impact of local efforts, and 4) promoting policies to sustain effective practices (The Intermediary Guidebook, 2001).

A Focus on the Needs of the Customers

Education and workforce development organizations provide services within a variety of settings, including a complex maze of 1) differing institutional missions, each with distinctive funding parameters and fiscal incentives; 2) multiple funding streams with substantial variations in the expected outcomes; 3) traditions, and 4) capacities of the institutions and staff. Ultimately, however, all organizations within the workforce development system have in common the customers of their services: youth and adults seeking employment, and employers seeking capable workers. A substantial body of information documents what each group needs; with careful study and action, this information can direct efforts in the workforce development field toward organizing and facilitating better linkages between these two customer groups.

The complete paper also identifies the needs of both the youth and the workplace customer, and provides examples of strategies to help intermediaries meet those needs.

*To download the complete document, go to:
<http://www.nhworks.org/intermediary.pdf>*