RESEARCHBRIEF

A Statewide Community Conversation about Post-School Employment for Kentucky Youth with the Most Significant Disabilities

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Background

Young adults with disabilities face multiple challenges in obtaining successful post-school employment outcomes. This situation has remained relatively unchanged despite nearly 25 years of federal attention to the issue, including mandated transition services and a series of additional significant legislative responses. Recent research by Carter, Austin, and Trainor (2012) highlighted the severity of the situation, showing that "just 26% of recent graduates with severe disabilities were working for pay in their community up to 2 years after leaving high school" and 43% of those who were employed "held jobs in which most other workers had disabilities" (Carter et al., 2016, p. 398). These findings are consistent with earlier research. For example, in the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 report, Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Garza, and Levine (2005) reported that among former students with disabilities, 70% had engaged in paid employment since leaving high school, but only 40% remained employed at the time of follow-up interview. This was compared to a 63% employment rate among their peers without disabilities.

These outcomes are mirrored in data analyzed for the KY Department of Education by the Kentucky Post-Secondary Outcomes Center (KyPSO), in the University of Kentucky's Human Development Institute (HDI). The KyPSO Center collects data annually on post-school outcomes for Kentucky students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). KyPSO data suggest that among former KY students with significant intellectual (moderate and severe intellectual) disabilities who left school after the 2013-2014 school year,

only 11.1% engaged in competitive employment, just 2.6% enrolled in higher education, and 58.6% reported being not engaged in any post-school activities. Among former students with multiple disabilities, only 16.8% engaged in competitive employment, 6.3% in higher education, and 47.4% were not-engaged in any activity.

2013-2014 Kentucky Cohort	Students with multiple disabilities	Students with significant intellectual disabilities
Engaged in competitive employment	16.8%	11.1%
Engaged in higher education	6.3%	2.6%
Not engaged in any post-school activities	47.4%	58.6%

Fig. 1: Post-School Outcomes for Students with Significant Intellectual Disabilities and Multiple Disabilities

These employment outcomes have important long-term consequences. Employment is referred to as a "linchpin indicator", because of its central relationship to other life outcomes, including long-term social, health, and economic indicators. Having a job is itself linked to a higher quality of life, a sense of self-worth and greater levels of self-determination (Antosh et al., 2013), and is a key factor in breaking the cycle of poverty for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (Nye-Lengerman & Nord, 2016).

KentuckyWorks

KentuckyWorks is a five-year systems change grant project designed to directly impact post-school outcomes for youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities in Kentucky. KentuckyWorks is a collaborative, multi-partner project, including HDI (the University of Kentucky's University Center for Excellence in Developmental

Disabilities Research, Education, and Training), the KY Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR), the KY Department of Education, the KY Division of Developmental and Intellectual Disabilities, KY Protection & Advocacy, KY Office for the Blind, the Commonwealth Council on Developmental Disabilities, the KY Office of Autism, and the KY Autism Training Center. The project's aim is to impact youth outcomes within each of the state's 174 school districts, and the target population is defined as all KY transition-age students with disabilities with the IDEA classifications of Moderate or Severe Intellectual Disability, Autism, and Multiple Disabilities (in other words, youth with the most significant disabilities), with a special focus on students aged 18-21. The goal is to increase positive post-school outcomes (integrated employment, participation in post-secondary education, or both) for students with the most significant disabilities in the state by 20 percentage points over the five years of this grant. To achieve this goal, the KentuckyWorks project has four specific objectives:

Objective 1	Establish a state-level employment work group	
Objective 2	Develop and conduct sustained professional development (PD) with our partnering agencies	KentuckyWorks
Objective 3	Develop and disseminate information resources to families and students as well as practitioners and employers	
Objective 4	Annually track and continually review the outcomes data related to post-school outcomes for students with significant disabilities to ensure	

Fig. 2: KentuckyWorks Objectives

Community Conversations

Among the approaches adopted to reach the KentuckyWorks project's goals is conducting a series of "community conversations". Community conversations are an asset-based approach for generating and informing efforts to improve employment outcomes for young people with disabilities. Carter et al. (2016) described community conversations as a particularly promising approach to changing the opportunities and supports of young people with intellectual and developmental disabilities to contribute in the workplace. This is because community conversations go beyond current approaches that may serve to maintain the status quo. Specifically, Carter, Blustein, Rowan, and Harvey (2014; cited in Carter et al., 2016) noted three limitations or concerns with contemporary efforts to improve post-secondary employment outcomes. First, these efforts may focus too narrowly on formal systems of services and supports designed for people with disabilities, while neglecting "simultaneous investments in partnerships with employers, civic groups, community leaders, families, and others residing in a community" (Carter et al., 2016, p. 399). Second, these efforts focus too heavily on identifying existing barriers to employment and the absence of resources necessary for change, while failing to recognize the assets that are available within the community that could expand local employment opportunities. And third, there is often too much focus on external ideas, such as those drawn

from the professional literature, other locations, or from model demonstration projects, that may be effective elsewhere, but that do not recognize the potential for new ideas and local strategies that may be more effective in the context of the community of focus (Carter et al., 2016).

As an alternative approach, community conversations are structured community events that are designed to promote collaborative local discussion on ways to develop job opportunities and identify strategies "that reflect the priorities, culture, and available resources of a local community" (Carter et al., 2016, p. 399). These conversations are developed by a local planning team that invites a cross-section of community members to participate in a series of small-group conversations designed to encourage the exchange of ideas, generate solutions, and foster relationships (Carter et al., 2016). The small group discussions are followed by a discussion by the entire group, from which themes and strategies may emerge and be identified. According to Murphy (2009), community conversations differ from a general group discussion in that they follow the practice of deep listening, wherein participants are allowed to express themselves and the group listens to the participant without providing immediate comment. Contributions are summarized and affirmed but not debated (Murphy, 2009).

As one means of addressing the low employment outcomes of Kentucky youth with significant intellectual or developmental disabilities, KentuckyWorks is hosting a series of local and state community conversations. In an effort to get a broader input from all stakeholders early on in the project, a statewide community conversation was held. The statewide community conversation was built on existing partnerships among state agencies. It is important to note that partnerships with stakeholders are essential to achieving common goals (Murphy, 2009). Partners assisted in recruitment of participants through identification of stakeholders and subsequent snowball sampling. The purpose of this article is to present the results of the statewide community conversation that was convened in Frankfort, KY as part of a statewide summit held on February 28th, 2017.

KentuckyWorks Statewide Community Conversation

A total of 81 people representing 23 Kentucky counties participated in this KentuckyWorks community conversation. The majority of the participants identified themselves as educators (44.9%). Other respondents included state representatives (27.5%) agency providers (24.6%), family members (8.7%), community organization members (7.2%), individuals with a disabilty (2.9%), employers (2.9%), a faith community member (1.4%), and several other participants who identified other roles (7.2%). (Note: total percentage exceeds

100% because 12 respondents identified themselves with multiple roles).

The participants were assembled in small groups around tables in a large conference room, each with a table host who was responsible for note taking. Dr. Erik Carter served as moderator and explained the process to the participants. In their small groups, the participants discussed several topics, including: (a) Strengthening School and Transition Services, (b) Improving Community Attitudes and Partnerships, (c) Finding and Supporting Employers, (d) Raising Family Expectations, (e) Preparing Youth for the World of Work, and (f) Aiming Providers Toward Competitive Employment. The discussions were timed, with each receiving several minutes of discussion designed to identify: (a) What are we doing well that we should keep doing? and (b) What should be done better or differently? This process was followed by a whole-group discussion. Themes and strategies that emerged in the small-group discussions were shared and the participants identified with the larger group the best or most promising ideas they had heard. At the conclusion of the community conversation, the notes on the whole-group discussion, as well as the table hosts' notes on each of the small group conversations, were collected for analysis and summary. The textual data from the table notes and group discussion were thematically analyzed.

Best Ideas

Analysis of the "best ideas" discussed during the whole-group discussion revealed several themes. The greatest number of "best ideas" fell under the topics of preparing students in school and organizational and systematic change. Key themes included that planning should begin earlier in students' school careers, and that ILPs (Individual Learning Plans) should be made more useful for students and should include post-secondary career and educational planning at an earlier age across the state. Needed organizational and systematic changes involved the way individuals with disabilities are perceived, and suggestions were made regarding reducing stigma, and increasing sensitivity to the other challenges that families face. In terms of awareness and promotional messaging, participants suggested that more positive messages and success stories about hiring people with disabilities be shared with families, businesses, and local Chambers of Commerce. Regarding support to educators, it was suggested that teachers be given materials to help build soft skills into core requirements and that districts be provided with funding to implement programs to aid transition. Concerning support and education for families, best ideas included raising teacher expectations and encouraging teachers to engage more frequently in positive conversations with students and parents.

Fig. 3: Best Idea Themes

Topic 1: Strengthening School and Transition Services

In the discussion of each topic, participants identified both things that are going well and also areas where improvement was needed. In terms of strengthening school and transition services, things that were identified as strengthening the process included that the curriculum was going in the right direction, the inclusion of post-secondary goals in the ILP/IEP, and effective programs and legislation, including College and Career Readiness, Employment First legislation, the HDI-VR Community Work Transition Program, Project SEARCH, career centers, student funding for higher education, and the state Office of Vocational Rehabilitation.

In terms of areas for improvement, to strengthen school and transition services, participants suggested that students and families do not know where to go for resources, services, or information, and that more guidance is needed. The participants also suggested that students should receive peer mentoring, and that information should be passed more effectively from district personnel down to the individual student and family level.

Regarding supports for teachers, the participants suggested that there should be fuller integration, that teachers should be trained in developing age-appropriate goals, and that education be more explicitly tied to career planning through the teaching of job skills. The participants recommended that ILP meetings should be held year-round, and should be more interactive and positive, with more opportunities for input from students and parents. Parents should be communicated with earlier than they currently are, and service providers should be brought on board sooner.

Needed changes in the school system involved better communication and engagement with parents, and more focus on planning for job readiness. It was proposed that schools provide parents with resources and education as well as being open to the exchange of ideas. Online Education Ventures were suggested as one way to help build life skills and soft skills into the curriculum and shift focus to post-school life. Project SEARCH and other programs could be utilized to engage local employers. Participants indicated that exploration needs to start earlier, records need to be kept for each student with their grades and work experience, and it was suggested that an occupational therapy specialist be brought in to help with transiton. Also, students who require communication assessment, assistive technology, and supports should be identified earlier and before leaving shool.

Changes suggested with respect to OVR included more consistent involvement of OVR counselors in the transition process, providing transition services to the high incidence population, the development of parent-to-parent peer support opportunities through VR, and more service providers or community resources to supplement VR services.

Other needed organizational and systems changes identified dealt with generally creating a growth mindset and changing attitudes across systems. Specific ideas included engaging community partners and the Chamber of Commerce; reducing technology barriers; more transition-related training for teachers, and having teachers work with a variety of service providers; better aligning service agencies so all are on the same page and providing the same level of service; providing transition services and assistance with services to students in the Juvenile Justice System or foster care; and starting the transition process earlier.

Topic 2. Preparing Youth for the World of Work

Things that were identified as going well in the area of preparing youth for the world of work included the Community Work Transition and Transition Opportunity (TOP) Programs, the PATH Program, soft skills training, transition fairs, paid internships or job shadowing experiences, and several programs at higher education institutions.

Participants identified many areas where improvement in preparing youth for the world of work was needed, including: increasing access to employers through transition fairs and more opportunities for apprenticeships, internships, or job shadowing programs; educating parents and teachers about misconceptions about working and disability benefits, and the availability of resources and programs to connect students to employers; policy changes, to include agency input on new regulations, streamlining and individualizing services, creating "work ready" communities where people with disabilities are "priority" for hiring in the same way military veterans are;

providing incentives for employers; and providing more funding to help adults with disabilities.

School-level changes thate were seen as needed included more transition-related training for educators, more guidance counselors in the schools, and bringing into the schools community members and resources involved with employment. Transportation was also identified as a continuing challenge.

Topic 3. Aiming Providers toward Competitive Employment

In aiming providers toward competitive employment, the comments focused solely on ways to improve the process. Ideas included streamlining supported employment and best practices across the state; better preparing individuals to apply, interview, get, and keep employment; and changing attitudes about supported employment. Regional and programmatic differences in supported employment should be diminished so that supported employment practices and policies are consistent across the state. The importance of supported employment was clearly emphasized, as a means of both helping people to become, and also to remain, employed, as well as preparing students for employment.

Topic 4. Raising Family Expectations

Participants outlined many ways to raise family expectations. Among ideas discussed were educating parents about financial planning and the impact of wages on benefits; mentoring parents peer-to-peer; providing them with resources such as DVDs, web videos, and KYworks.org; and getting them involved at school. Also introduced was the idea of involving youth with their long-term planning, starting planning earlier, and teaching self-advocacy. Ideas surrounding education were discussed as well, including providing a toolkit to help teachers with meetings, improving special education leadership, involving school counselors and VR, and developing employment portfolios for each student. It was also noted that families in rural areas need support, as employment and support opportunities are more limited.

Topic 5. Improving Community Attitudes and Partnerships

In improving community attitudes and partnerships, participants provided several ideas about changing attitudes through a positive focus and peer-to-peer sharing of experiences, including using social media marketing and educating communities, and organizing workforce coalitions. Another common theme was skill development for individuals, or "getting the ground underneath them," by getting out into the community with support and learning soft skills. Families continue to be an integral part of the equation, and educating them through their peers and medical professionals was

suggested. Lawmakers should also be involved.

Topic 6. Finding and Supporting Employers

Regarding finding and supporting employers, participants developed several ideas for improvement. Communication with employers and businesses was a main theme. Participants suggested providing employers with data on retention, videos, success stories, and communication from transition specialists who can focus on the positives when hiring individuals with disabilities. On the community level it was recommended that there be community conversations or meetings with everyone involved, including youth, respected members of the community, and the Chamber of Commerce. It was proposed that policies and the tax credit paperwork be changed. At the school level participants recommended that employment specialists be brought in, that IEPs be student-directed, that students learn to self-advocate, and that they be given the opportunity to tour businesses to learn about employment.

Summary and Conclusion

Community Conversation is a powerful tool to bring about cohesion among varied stakeholder groups around an issue (Murphy, 2009). In order for community conversation to be successful, varied stakeholder representation at each table is necessary. This requires organizers to have a strong understanding of participant roles when organizing the event. In addition, a skilled facilitator must ensure that the group practices deep listening and adheres to the process (no debate or comment, only affirm or summarize). Finally, a follow up plan that provides a mechanism for follow up is needed, so that the community conversation can be used as a tool to initiate ongoing progress, not as a final step. The statewide community conversation described in this article helped the KentuckyWorks team to identify steps that can be taken to a wider context within the state. To that end, KentuckyWorks has formed advisory subgroups, including family/advocacy and policy work teams. These teams are currently working on policies that promote integrated community employment, including Employment First principles, and sharing resources and training materials systematically across formal and informal community networks.

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